

A DOOMSDAY BROTHERS NOVEL

TEMPT ME WITH DARKNESS



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SHAYLA BLACK

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TEMPT ME WITH DARKNESS

Doomsday Brethren

Written by Shayla Black

This is an original work of fiction, crafted exclusively by Shayla Black.

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PRAISE FOR TEMPT ME WITH DARKNESS

“A hot, exciting romance filled with intriguing characters and a great storyline. I can’t wait for more in this imaginative series!”

—*New York Times* bestselling author Lara Adrian

“Deliciously wicked and sexy hot... . Shayla Black keeps me turning the pages!”

—*New York Times* bestselling author Gena Showalter

“A unique, powerful blend of the paranormal... A world not to be missed.”

- *New York Times* bestselling author Lora Leigh

“Compelling, unique, a paranormal romance with ‘epic’ written all over it!”

- *New York Times* bestselling author Jaci Burton

“This orgasmic paranormal...will keep Black’s fans panting for the next installment.”

- Publisher’s Weekly

“Action-packed with dark secrets and an ever-evolving plot. I am extremely eager to find out what happens next...”

- Fresh Fiction

“Intense drama, sexy magical warriors, and heartbreaking romance... Absolutely perfect.”

- ParaNormal Romance Reviews

“Page-turning magical suspense... The world-building is incredibly complex, and with Black’s innate ability to wring emotion from every pore of her characters, not only suspends disbelief but leaves readers clamoring for more.”

- Fallen Angel Reviews

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have so, so many people to thank. Without them all, none of this book—or series—would have come together to make this story I’m so incredibly proud of.

To Kim Whalen, I appreciate you for not giving up on this series and trying to secure my rights *again*. You delivered the Christmas miracle come true!

Thank you also to Christian Bentulan for hearing me when I rambled about what I wanted for this cover and this series look. Somehow, you understood exactly what I want and nailed it!

I would be remiss if I didn’t give lots of hugs and thanks to my beta reading cheerleaders: SH, EK, NH, and LK. I appreciate your enthusiasm, your willingness to read in chunks, and not griping about the files I sent at all weird hours. Thanks especially to NH for answering my questions about tons of crazy things as I wrote.

I must also thank my UK friend Vicky C. for reading this to ensure my “across the pond” vernacular wasn’t wrong. I’m so grateful you saved me from a faux pas or two.

Of course I give all my gratitude to Rachel Connolly for the formatting and the graphics, not to mention the million other things I can’t even enumerate here while I gnashed my teeth and agonized over this book.

I must definitely thank my amazing family, William and Mallory. You always love and support, yet somehow put up with me when I get deep in deadline mania, as I did with this book.

This series would never have been launched in 2008 without Lee. Our lunches meant the world to me. You are near and dear to my heart, and so much of what made it to the page in

this book and in the planning of this series came because of your willing ear and encouragement.

Last, this series is for all those who never gave up on reading the complete adventures of the Doomsday Brethren. It's also for the readers who haven't discovered this rich, dangerous world of love, friendship, fated mates, passion, and forever. Thank you all for taking this journey with me!

PREFACE

I'm so grateful to *finally* be re-releasing the Doomsday Brethren. When I released the last new title in this series in 2012, it was with a heavy heart that I set aside my dream of finishing. But it had become abundantly clear that I couldn't do it the way I wanted to when the series was built on a foundation established by an editor and publisher who hadn't shared my vision. I realized then that, in order to tell this story properly—the way I really wanted to—I would have to hope said publisher would revert their rights to me...something rare with New York publishing.

But armed with a plan that took eight years, two attorneys, my agent, and a mountain of correspondence, I prevailed.

Thank God.

Now I need to address two groups of people. First, if you've never heard of this series or had no idea I wrote paranormal romance—surprise! That was part of my above plan, so I'm glad it worked. I look forward to surprising you again and again if you take my hand and go on this Doomsday Brethren journey with me. I'm so excited to have you along.

To the second group of readers, you deserve both a special explanation and extra thanks. Yes, it killed me to stop writing the series. I hated cutting you off and letting you down, which was a *huge* motivator for the drastic actions I took to regain the rights to this series. I hoped and prayed I'd be coming back for you—and that you would be excited to finish this journey with me. Here we are! It took a while, but I wasn't giving up. I

hope you won't give up on me. The enthusiasm some of you have already expressed warms my heart more than you know.

Many of you have asked whether you need to read the new versions. A few have expressed your insistence that you won't be "buying the same book twice." That's, of course, your choice. But...you'll be missing out.

I will be rewriting the whole series. Without the people who never embraced my creative choices holding my leash, I will be leaning into and blowing out this entire tale the way I wanted. For instance, in *Tempt Me with Darkness*, I've added over 15,000 words and added two completely new scenes. I've embedded lots of Easter eggs. I've rewritten everything to first person, present tense, as well as made tweaks to the overall storytelling that I think make for a better, richer experience. And I will be finishing the series. In fact, as the series progresses, I'll be diverging in important and notable spots. This is my chance to craft these books the way I want, and I plan to take FULL advantage of that! I hope you'll come with me...

Hugs and happy reading!

Shayla

ABOUT *TEMPT ME WITH DARKNESS*

I hate her as much as I can't live without her.

Marrok

I've been cursed, and I'm out for vengeance. I'll do anything to end my damnation, including kidnap an innocent with telling violet eyes.

For fifteen hundred years I've been an immortal recluse. Suddenly, I'm tortured by filthy dreams that leave me craving my captive. Worse, once I lay rough hands on her soft skin, I demand things from her I shouldn't. I feel things beyond the hatred that has consumed me.

Protectiveness.

Possessiveness.

And a hunger more demanding than any vengeance.

Olivia

The second I meet Marrok, my heart stutters. My world stops. I'm drawn to the brash stranger, until...

He abducts me.

He vows to slake fifteen centuries of lust on me.

He commands me to uncurse him—or he'll kill me.

We should never have met. We're enemies. Fate makes us lovers. Magic decrees us mates, unlocking secrets and unleashing a dark, paranormal power determined to burn down the world. Unless we band together, we're doomed.

- Abduction
- Band of Brothers
- Cursed hero
- Enemies to lovers
- Fated mates
- Immortal

- Magic
- Revenge
- Sexual healing
- Virgin

Trigger warnings:

- Description of sexual assault (act and aftermath) (Not FMC)
- Touching as a precursor of sexual assault (Not FMC)
- Dubious consent
- Terrifying villain
- Super □ scenes
- Undead deaths
- Genital torture (Not MMC)
- Plot twists you didn't see coming

CHAPTER
ONE

Present Day

Outskirts of London

October 24

Marrok

My nightmare has returned.

Beside a picturesque pond, a woman with hair like a raven's wing beckons me with a graceful sweep of her fingers and a come-hither smile. My breath catches. Never have I encountered this beauty. Never have I seen her face.

But for half an eternity, her violet eyes have haunted me.

One glance, and I burn.

London rises behind her, now towering with glass-and-chrome blights on the skyline that loom above its classic architecture. But the city holds not my attention. She does, all naked and gleaming, mist caressing her like the mystical fog of legend.

Her glossy hair cascades over her shoulders, contrasting with her winter-pale skin. Her inky curls shroud all but fleeting glimpses of her tempting rosy nipples. My rapt gaze follows the curve of her waist to her hourglass hips before fixating on the tender cunt glistening between her thighs.

She is alluring, a seductress.

She taunts me with the satisfaction she has denied me for centuries. She makes me crave what I dare not want.

Her stunning eyes and the telltale birthmark between her lush breasts make hiding from me impossible. I know her. Intimately. It matters not that she no longer possesses the platinum tresses into which I shoved my hands as I thrust into her body an eon ago. Or that her delicate face now entices me with high cheekbones, a pert nose, and pillowy pink lips. She cannot fool me.

After searching for over a millennium for the Le Fey bitch who destroyed my life to satisfy her whim and soothe her ego, I have found her.

“Morgana...”

My hatred does naught to cool my lust. 'Tis a bitter pill. A glimpse of her, and my blood catches fire. My cock stiffens. My heart roars.

If I am fool enough to touch her, she will be my demise.

Why has she suddenly appeared, seeking to pass herself off as another? No doubt her reasons suit Morgana alone. Whatever she seeks, I cannot be weak. I will not capitulate. I refuse to follow the she-devil to sin.

Once was one time too many.

But when I summon the fortitude to look away, her pull is stronger than my will. She's never been more captivating. 'Tis not merely her spellbinding face or her seductive body, but something more compelling. Something Morgana has never shown.

Vulnerability.

Her uncertain expression, her timid smile, her trembling pose... All call to the knight in me, just as the despair in her eyes rouses the protector.

I must resist.

At my rebuff, her fragility evaporates, replaced by a smirk that slithers across her face. Morgana is aware of my many struggles, and they delight her.

I fume with unchecked rage when she crooks her finger, luring me closer. The curl of her lips challenges me to walk away.

I can do neither.

Morgana bewitches me far more than she did during our wind-drenched night of passion. For the mistake of succumbing to temptation and swiving her senseless, I have paid dearly.

With the last fifteen centuries.

Today, society possesses clinical terms for my obsession. I care not. Getting the treacherous witch to release me from this endless hell... Naught else matters.

But with another curl of her fingers, she summons me, her eyes dark with longing. A fresh rush of desire slams me.

Want is a luxury; this woman I *need*. The feeling is as new as a baby's first breath...and as welcome as the plague.

'Tis also likely another of Morgana's tricks.

With a delicate wave, she produces the ornate book that means the difference between my life and death, clutching it as she begins to back away.

Nay!

I launch myself at her. We fall to the ground in a tangle of arms and legs, of harsh breaths and pent-up passion. The book tumbles beside me, its maddening lock still shut tight.

As I grasp for the tome, she latches slender arms around my neck and trails kisses like fire up my neck, arching beneath me seductively. She sings me. My clothes melt away. More of her sorcery at play?

"Love me," she whispers in my ear.

Despite the fact I know there is no loving this woman, her plea spikes my fever.

I burn to conquer her. I pine to possess her. I perish to own her.

I cannot give in.

“Release me,” I demand.

“Never.” She clings, writhing against the erection I am unable to banish.

God’s blood, my body is ablaze. I cling to restraint, refusing to ignore her treachery and succumb to temptation.

But I want to.

I fist her hair and press my face to hers. “Open the book!”

She looks hurt. “Don’t you want me?”

“I do.” Denying the truth is a waste of time and breath.

Under me, she wriggles again, silently begging me to fuck her. Lightning chases across my skin as I pry her thighs wider and grind against her. “If you tempt me thus, you will take all I give you. As much as I give you.”

“Anything you desire.”

Her answer makes me sweat. I lift her thighs into the crooks of my arms and bury my face in her soft neck. I should not give in...but her scent makes me dizzy. This ache for her makes me weak.

I am lost.

Beyond caring, I poise myself at her entrance. I swore never to touch this witch again—a promise I have never questioned—but resisting is impossible. I *must* be inside her now.

“Everything you desire,” she whispers.

Even knowing I’m dooming myself to eternal hell, I thrust forward.

But Morgana dissipates and re-forms just beyond my reach, once again clutching the hellish book.

As I lurch up to snatch it, she waves her pale hand and unlocks the volume. The cover falls open, revealing a flash of its pages. Her smug smile returns as she begins to fade away.

“Release me, damn you!”

But I'm shouting at fog. She—and the book—are gone.

As ever, I am cursed.

Desolation slashes me. My soul bleeds, yet my anguish makes little sense. Loss of the book, aye. But I could never mourn Morgana. I would, in fact, spit on her grave a thousand times if she had one.

"I am the key," she whispers with the breeze. "Find me."

'Tis the last thing I want. Her lure has grown too strong. But if I refuse, my torment will never end. So to London I must go and defeat the seductive witch once and for all.

A rattling noise rends my quiet. I jackknife up, panting and wrapping one hand around my battle sword as I scan my surroundings. White walls, bed carved by my hand. I am not in a mist-draped clearing, but in my cottage, in my room, tangled in my rumpled sheets. No Morgana in sight.

'Twas but a dream.

Or was it a message?

Though centuries have passed, Morgana once enjoyed taunting me in sleep. This episode warns me that she's returned to the mortal realm as an ethereal brunette. Though she is intent upon stealing back her tome, I must let her touch it. Who else can unlock the book? Or did she use her sorcery to reach through my dream and abscond with it?

I whip around, but the leather-bound tool of my never-ending torment still rests on my bedside table. Unfortunately, the heavy, etched bronze lock affixed to each cover and secured over the pages remains tightly sealed.

Grumbling, I rise. If Morgana is the key, I must find her in her new disguise. Shadow and torment her I will until she grants me what I crave most in life.

Death.

Another impatient rap against the front window startles me. Since I have not welcomed a visitor for over a decade, any guest now is likely to be an enemy.

I slide the accursed book into the safe hidden beneath the floorboards under my bed, then grasp my sword and stalk down the hall. Anticipation of impending battle surges. Morning light seeps through my window, illuminating dust motes and casting a human shadow across the gleaming wooden floor.

If someone has come to steal the book from me, I will greet them with carnage and bloodshed.

CHAPTER
TWO

I creep forward, weapon in hand. But the shadow disappears, replaced by a faint crunch of footsteps outside...

“Freak of nature!” a man shouts, punctuated by another knock. “I know you’re in there.”

I recognize that voice.

God’s balls. This menace? Why now?

Heaving an annoyed sigh, I yank open the door. A nightmare nearly as bad as the one I endured in sleep stands in the portal. Golden hair spiked above sleek brows and mischievous blue eyes, coupled with a glittery Hollywood smile, belies the gifted wizard’s immense power.

Bram Rion, Merlin’s only grandson and magickind’s most indulged pot-stirrer. Now I shall never have peace.

“*Me*, a freak of nature?” I grunt. “Coming from you, that is rich.”

“If today is your day to conduct beheadings, count me out.” He gestures to my sword with a cavalier wink that has charmed magickind and enabled him to navigate cutthroat magical council politics for centuries.

Scowling, I prop my sword against a nearby wall. “’Tis not, but for you, I will make an exception.”

“Funny. Are you going to invite me past the magic circle guarding your place, or must I continue to stand on the mat?”

“If I do not?” I’m heartily tempted to leave him outside to rot. True, the coxcomb has amused me once or twice, but he’s magical. I dare not trust him.

“Then you’ll miss the juicy gossip.”

I care not for whispers and rumors, but Bram will not leave until he spills his secret. The sooner I suffer his company, the sooner I can find Morgana in her new guise, then force, coerce, or bully her into unlocking that blasted book and setting me free.

“Enter.”

Bram saunters inside and shuts the door. “You look like hell. Did you sleep in yesterday’s trousers?”

I glance down at my wrinkled khakis. “Did you come all this way to be my mum?”

He shrugs. “Do you need one?”

Grumbling, I stomp down the hall, then snatch a fresh T-shirt and jeans from a drawer. “What the devil do you want? Say it and be gone.”

Bram hesitates, looking as if he’s reluctant to break bad news. I have no patience for his foot-dragging.

I trek across the hall to my bathroom. He follows, directly on my heels. Since being in the same room with anyone magical gives me hives, and having Bram around is like a permanent case of leprosy, I slam the door in his face.

After donning fresh clothes, I brush my teeth and slide my comb through my dark hair. Ancient eyes stare back at me, filled with misery, anger, and thwarted lust. I *do* look like hell.

“You’re not happy I’ve come. I promise only something gravely important would bring me to the Creepified Forest,” Bram ventures.

“Important to magickind.” Not necessarily important to me.

“Since I’m the only friend you have—”

“We are *not* friends.”

“All right, then. I am the only living being who knows of your immortality and still speaks to you.”

“I am not interested. I must hunt.”

“The local market too civilized for your Dark Ages upbringing?”

Grinding my teeth, I wrench open the door and glare at Bram. “Is magickind so starved for a comedian that you suffice?”

“What I’ve come to say affects you, too.”

He will only pester me until I relent. I sigh. “Why?”

He doesn’t speak right away. I cannot recall ever seeing *the* Bram Rion, magickind’s golden boy, nervous. “I’ve had a vision.”

“Have you not a magical healer for that?”

He ignores my dig. “When it comes true, you’ll be in danger.”

“In case you have forgotten, I cannot be killed.”

“But you can be tortured within an inch of your life.”

’Tis true, but... “I involve myself in nothing, least of all magical affairs.”

“I’m well aware.” As I shoulder past Bram and head for the kitchen, he grabs my arm. “Have you ever heard of the Book of Doomsday?”

“Nay.”

“Also called the Doomsday Diary.”

“Still nay.”

Suddenly, I feel a tightening under my forehead, then between my temples. Bloody hell, the bastard is trying to sneak into my thoughts. I jerk from his hold and slam a mental door between us.

Bram rears back in surprise. Clearly, most humans cannot block him. But I have not survived half of forever without learning some parlor tricks.

“Never have I heard of the book by either name. Do not ever attempt to invade my head again, or I will slice you in two.”

“It would be amusing for you to try, human.” The wizard snorts. “Are you certain you’ve never seen the book? It’s small and red with gilt inlays. Ornate and centuries old.”

That sounds eerily like Morgana’s tome. I shove the thought away, lest Bram read it.

Too late.

His blue eyes brighten. “You *do* know something.”

I say naught, either with my mouth or my expression.

He huffs impatiently. “The Book of Doomsday is integral to magickind’s lore. Since my grandfather’s nemesis created the book, I hoped you might know about it.”

“Merlin meddled too often in King Arthur’s affairs, so he riled many at the Round Table and beyond. I know not of which enemy you speak.”

“Yes, you do. Morgana *was* your lover.”

“She sated my lust once. Hardly the same thing.”

“Semantics. She’s the reason you’re immortal. She cursed you with that book, didn’t she?”

By hell’s fire, how could Bram know that?

“Shove off.” I stomp to the door, open it, and gesture with a wave. “And be gone.”

“Not until I share the future with you.”

More like magical propaganda. “Keep your visions to yourself, you droning codpiece.”

As always, Bram does as he pleases, gripping my arm and waving his hand in front of me.

A vision appears. And I fall into it, unable to back away...

CHAPTER
THREE

N ighttime. A darkened home, once sprawling and lovely, now charred and in ruin. A small crowd walks toward it, clad in gray robes trimmed in deep red.

Intrigued against my will, I peer closer, then rear back when I realize two among them are dragging victims, with ropes about their necks and wrists, behind them. The air of excitement among the berobed is palpable.

“Why are they dressed like friars?”

“Definitely not clergy,” Bram drawls. “They’re Anarki.”

I flinch. Despite my isolation, I know well the terror and destruction they provoked during their reign. But the cabal was put down more than two centuries ago. How is this a vision of the future?

Inside the manor, a lone figure in robes waits in a mostly empty room, surrounded by a circle of flickering candles. He hovers over the still form of a naked man who, if human, would appear roughly thirty.

I should not ask, I know. But... “Who lies there?”

“Mathias d’Arc.”

His name makes me jolt. Mathias is the magical equivalent of Caligula, Vlad Dracula, and Hitler rolled into one. Cruel, clever, hedonistic, rapacious. Brilliantly evil. During his rise to power centuries past, Mathias proved himself a wizard of great power and no conscience. He sought to enslave magickind. Any he could not, he killed.

“Say you he has returned?”

“Watch,” Bram demands.

As the group enters the shadowy room, they form a circle outside the candles and stare down at Mathias, who lies still as death.

At his head, the robed wizard raises his arms. “We, the Deprived, have waited centuries for this night. The Privileged will hear our thunder and feel only terror as we take back all they’ve denied us. Until the Social Order prohibiting those with ‘undesirable’ traits and bloodlines from being equal is dissolved, they will know nothing but war, pain, and death.”

The Anarki send up a collective cheer.

Once the room quiets again, the wizard resumes speaking. “We, Mathias’s faithful, have awaited our savior. Tonight, our patience will be rewarded.”

From a distant part of the house, a clock chimes low and loud: *gong, gong, gong...* Twelve times. The room holds its collective breath until the last ring peals.

The moment silence falls, Mathias’s eyes open wide.

The candles flicker. His followers gasp.

The ceremony leader kneels, head bowed. “You have returned, our liege!”

“My faithful Anarki...” Mathias’s voice sounds thin and strained. “You have pulled me from death and returned me to the mortal realm because you believe in me.”

“We never waver,” the first replied.

“Excellent. Did those fools I fought pass to their nextlife?”

“They were wounded during the final battle. Most died within days of your sleep.”

“Your name?”

“Zain Denzell.”

“Ah, your father served me well.” Mathias strains until he manages to sit up. “Have you brought all I need?”

Zain nods, stepping outside the circle and wending through the crowd until he finds the figures dragged into the room—the middle-aged man and adolescent blonde clad in a thin, dirt-streaked nightgown. He unwinds the ropes from around their necks with a wave of his hand, then gives them a vicious shove toward Mathias.

Both sprawl at his feet, unconscious.

“Lovely.” Mathias grins. “MacKinnetts?”

“Indeed,” Zain confirms. “The Councilman’s untransitioned daughter and his brother. You must be starved.”

Mathias nods, eyeing the young girl with the pale ringlets. “Take her to my chamber. I intend to take my time with her.”

Zain snaps his fingers, and a robed servant jumps, clasp ing his hand around her wrist like a manacle before dragging her away.

I hold my breath as I watch the horror unfold. I need not ask about the girl’s fate. I know. After centuries of battle, I am rarely stunned by butchery, but the cruelty Mathias has planned for her sickens me. Despite having the body of a woman, she is still a child.

Mathias faces the prostrate old man and touches his palm to the center of his chest.

Seconds later, the man wakes, blinking. He scrambles back with a gasp. “You!”

“Me,” Mathias mocks.

MacKinnett’s eyes widen in horror. “W-when? How?”

As two Anarki grab hold of the sputtering old man, Mathias merely smiles.

“Shall we hold him down?” asks one, his voice shaking with enthusiasm to serve.

“Indeed.” Slowly, Mathias rises, refusing the helpful hands extended his way. “The time has come to show the Privileged that their rule has ended.”

“No. No! Please...” The older man resists.

Until Mathias grips his throat.

“Shut up! Were I not so starved for energy, I would draw out your punishment and make an example of you so that your kind understands what awaits if they resist. But your anger and fear will power me enough to focus hours of my attention on your lovely niece. Her young, ripe body will provide me far more energy. Delicious.”

“Please, no,” MacKinnett babbles. “Auropha is just a girl. Sweet, with her whole life ahead of her. She knows nothing of peril or pain—”

“Then I’d best see to her education.”

Mathias peers at the Councilman’s brother, splaying his hand across the man’s chest with a feral grin.

Immediately, MacKinnett screams, blood oozing from his pores and seeping through his pale shirt. No matter how he kicks, he cannot dislodge Mathias. MacKinnett turns chalky, then gray, before his eyes roll into the back of his head. As he stills, Mathias releases the man, who crumples to the ground in a heap.

Dead.

With a wave, Zain removes the older man’s shirt. An angry red mark, once known far and wide as Mathias’s brand, spreads across his entire chest like a series of infected boils.

“You chose well,” Mathias praises Zain. “Now I will adjourn upstairs. The girl’s fear and fight will restore my power.”

“You understand what he intends?” Bram asks me, cutting into the vision.

“To rape the girl, then kill her as he did her uncle.”

“Rape? That’s a gentle description for what he’ll do to Auropha MacKinnett. She is barely fifteen, and he will spread her out, stake her down, siphon her energy through her terror as he shaves her and brands her, then violates—”

“Stop. He intends to restore himself with her agony. The more she suffers, the stronger he will become. I lived through

Mathias's first ascent. I saw the bodies.”

“And after he's done, a death like her uncle's would be a kindness. What Auropha will endure will take much longer and be far more hellish.”

I scan the berobed followers standing about. “Will no one help her?”

“Who? The Deprived of magickind are ‘punishing’ her for the great sin of being born Privileged. So after Mathias uses her to reenergize his magic and make an example of her, a new reign of terror will begin.”

Automatically, I reach for my sword. Though I emerged from the Dark Ages, I have never condoned the rape or torture of innocents. Mathias must be stopped. But when I try to surge into the vision, Bram pulls me back.

“You can't help. This hasn't happened yet. Watch. There's more.”

“The MacKinnett girl is a spitfire,” Zain says to Mathias. “She will resist—and give you a great deal of energy.”

“Excellent. Once I'm done, send the dead to their family. It's time for the Privileged to know their worst nightmare has returned. After we overtake magickind, we will seize the rest of the world.”

“I will see to it.”

“And the other matter?”

Zain frowns. “We're still looking.”

“I must have Morgana Le Fay's book. With it, my ability would be limitless.”

Never will I surrender it to anyone, most especially him.

“The Anarki will do whatever it takes,” Zain vows.

Finally, Bram waves his hand again. The vision turns black. My cottage comes into focus. Bram releases me.

I glare his way. “You say this has not yet come to pass?”

“Not yet, but soon.”

“How do you know it will?”

“I don’t have many visions. I can’t control them. But I’ve never been wrong in my life.”

CHAPTER
FOUR

God's blood. "Have you warned the MacKinnetts?"
"I've tried." Bram shrugs. "They don't believe me. Fools."

Are they stubborn? Or is his vision a ruse? Magickind's golden boy is not above using his abilities to fool me into doing his bidding...

I switch tactics. "Why do you imagine I care about any of this?"

"Besides the fact you wanted to champion Auropha? Mathias will soon be beating down your door, looking for the Doomsday Diary."

"Which you think I possess?"

"Which I *know* you possess. No other relic—human or magical—would give him even half that much power. With it, he merely needs to write his destructive wishes on a blank page. That will bring about any catastrophe he wants—even doomsday itself."

Perhaps Bram is telling the truth, but he's an ambitious knave. He is more than capable of creating the horrific scene to manipulate me into relinquishing the book so he can use it for his own ends. Besides, Mathias would first have to unlock the tome for it to be of any use. Despite the breadth and expanse of his magic, that may be even beyond him.

"Finding and safeguarding the book is imperative," Bram prompts. "Help me."

“Cast a spell to ensure Mathias and the Anarki can do no harm.”

“Magic doesn’t work like that. Mathias is born of a powerful bloodline with a strong tendency to madness. As you saw, he gorges on others’ pain, terror, and degradation. If he returns... Most who worked to fell him during his last ascent have passed to their nextlife, so we can only guess at his magical defenses. I have no idea how we would fight them. Please. Give me the book before it’s too late.”

Trust Bram with my only means of becoming mortal again? Never. I subscribe not to the theory that my enemy’s enemy is my friend. And as Merlin’s grandson, Bram’s bloodline is packed with powerfully magical genes. I have no intention of trusting him—or anyone—with that book.

I grab the manipulative wizard by his stiff Ralph Lauren collar and shove him against the wall. “Speak no more of the book to me, or you will feel my blade in your belly.”

Bram says naught until I release my hold. He’s clearly undeterred as he straightens his shirt. “I’ll take that as a no. Pity. A lot of people will die. But then, you see death as a blessing, don’t you?”

“Even if the book were within my grasp, why would I give it to you?”

“Because it will save you pain. Mathias *will* come for you once he realizes you possess it.” Bram crosses into my living area, sinking into an overstuffed chair and propping his booted feet on my table.

“Make yourself at home.” I scowl.

He ignores me. “You know I’m right.”

“Bollocks.”

“Play dumb, then.” Bram flashes a brittle smile. “I have another reason for coming. There’s someone I want you to meet.”

Socializing is never something I desire and the last thing I have time for with Morgana returned from exile. “Nay.”

“She’s the owner of a new art gallery, A Touch of Magic.” After swinging his feet to the ground, he leans forward, bracing his elbows on his knees. “It’s very fresh and recently opened—”

“Are you deaf? I say nay. But since you have come, I require a ride to London.”

“You? Facing civilization? Willingly?”

“I seek a woman.”

“Do tell.” He sends me a sly grin. “Planning to test the limits of your curse again?”

How does Bram know of *that*? “Shut your mouth before I shut it for you.”

“The last woman you took to your bed disappeared for two days. That was...what? A decade ago?”

Longer. “Not another word.”

“I hear your stamina astounds humans and even puts magical men to shame. But you’re never quite...satisfied, are you?”

I refuse to tell Bram that I cannot orgasm. No matter how many women I fuck or how many climaxes I give, I have not achieved my own release in fifteen long centuries. Of course my mood is terrible. And admitting that to anyone, especially this wizard, would only give him something new with which to torment me.

“Piss off, you flea-bitten lout.”

Bram merely laughs, then goes on as if I spoke not. “When you meet the gallery’s owner, perhaps you should try your luck again. Olivia Gray already loves your carvings, and she is quite lovely. Her magical signature will be...interesting.”

“She is one of your kind?” I shake my head. “’Tis one woman in particular I seek.”

“Intriguing. You actually know one? How? You haven’t left this place in years. Did you finally join this century and download a dating app?”

As Bram claps my shoulder again, I feel him trying to steal into my thoughts. I wrench away, lifting my sword with a menacing whoosh. “Cease your infernal invasion!”

Bram holds up both hands. “A thousand apologies. Tell me about this woman. Maybe I can help.”

The only help he will ever give me is a push into hell. “I know her face, but not the name she now uses.”

“Old flame?”

Old flame, old enemy. “Take me to London.”

“I’ll take you wherever you want.” Bram grins. “After you meet Olivia. I promised her an introduction.”

“Antagonizing me amuses you. I will not abide.” My dream, the omen that might set me free, has finally arrived. Morgana is somewhere in London. I must make the witch release me from this curse.

“That’s my best and final offer.” Bram shrugs, totally unapologetic. “Unless you want to hand over the book?”

Gripping my sword tighter, I arch a brow.

“Guess not,” he quips. “In that case, I hope you enjoy meeting Ms. Gray. I showed her a few pictures of the pieces you’ve carved in the past. She’s quite impressed. I’ve arranged a meeting for you two this morning. Won’t take long. Then the rest of the day is yours.” Bram prattles into my stony silence. “Come now, you must have pieces to sell.”

Aye. In the past three months, I’ve carved some of my best work. A three-foot rendering of King Arthur and his enemy Mordred locked in mortal combat, Merlin and Morgana each hovering behind their champions, spinning magic to aid their victory, sits in the corner.

Crossing the floor to the sculpture, I stare at the angles of Morgana’s wooden likeness. Fear, fury, and desire tighten my gut. How could I have been so foolish as to tangle with that magical bitch?

Soon, my torment will end. Today, I will hunt her down and demand answers, even if I have to wring them from her

pretty neck. True, I have no notion where to begin my search, but I will not give up until I find her.

I sigh. “Fifteen minutes. No more.”

“Smashing. But until you give me the Doomsday Diary”—
Bram grins—“I’m your new best friend.”

CHAPTER
FIVE

Bram parks not far off Oxford Street. The moment he stops the car, I bolt from the hated automobile's too-tight confines. Warriors do not travel in motorized death traps, by God.

We trek through the gloom of London's gray morning to a narrow shop. Out front, a purple and gilt sign proclaims the establishment A Touch of Magic. With a cynical grunt, I scan the merchandise through the picture window. A clay rendering of Pegasus inhabits most of the display space. The sculpture has decent symmetry and detail, but it lacks life and movement. Little wonder it has not sold.

As Bram opens the door, an electronic chime heralds our arrival. Two steps in, a wave of musky incense slams my senses. The strains of a passionate ballad surge through me. More confusing and confounding? My skin burns with an awareness I understand not.

As I wander the corners of the store, a woman's presence lingers—an enticing mix of light perfume and her natural vanilla-musk scent tells me thus. The clatter of beads in an open doorway at the back has me whipping around.

A curvaceous woman emerges, carrying an armful of boxes. I catch a glimpse of wild dark curls brushing her spine and a fragile profile before she turns away to deposit her load on the counter along the back wall, the sleeves of her white peasant blouse swishing. The stays of the ornate corset that encircles her waist hug her enticing curves.

Lust grips me by the throat. The dangerous desire reaches down to jerk my cock as she unpacks her boxes, swaying in time with the Celtic tune piping through the room.

“Olivia?” Bram calls above the music.

She turns to the wizard with a smile. Her face batters me like an invisible fist. Delicate cheeks, a slightly pointed chin, and bloody-haunting eyes. Recognition jolts my every nerve.

The woman from this morning’s dream.

Morgana.

“Bram, thanks for coming by.” Her distinctly American voice rings in my head as she mutes the music. “I know you’re busy. Did you get my message last week?”

“I did. Sorry. I’ve heard nothing more about your father. I’ll keep asking. No news from the investigator?”

“Just an address for a crazy man who claims he’s nearly five hundred years old. But I moved here to find my dad. I’m not giving up.”

“I brought someone for you to meet.”

I step out of shadows and into the woman’s line of vision. The welcome on her face falters. She covers her lush mouth with delicate fingers, but it’s too late to smother her gasp. She stares back through unmistakably violet eyes. “Is that...?”

“I told you I’d deliver.” Bram shoves me toward her. “Meet Marrok.”

Normally, I would snarl at the wizard for touching me. Now I am fixated on “Olivia.”

I did not think it possible she could forge herself into a temptress as beautiful as the one in my dream, but I underestimated my opponent. That alone makes her deadly, to say nothing of the power she has surely honed during centuries past. She looks so young, barely twenty. Though her youth is an illusion, I feel ancient.

A smile plays at Bram’s mouth. “This is Olivia Gray, the owner of this fine establishment.”

She bites her lip nervously. No matter how artless her hesitation looks, 'tis calculated, no doubt. Still, the gesture drags my stare to her pouty mouth. Desire thickens my blood. I burn to kiss her.

“Nice to meet you.” She reluctantly extends her hand.

I stare, wanting nothing less than to touch her—and nothing more. Sweat films my skin.

How she must be laughing.

But the centuries have taught me to play her game.

As I send her my most intimidating stare, I fold my hand in hers. It works...until electricity shoots through my palm, up my arm, and rocks me to my soul. In that instant, my body betrays me. My cock turns rigid. With a single touch, she bewitches me, precisely like my dream...

Only stronger.

Olivia's eyes widen like she feels the pull, too.

“Ms. Gray.”

She jerks free, unconsciously rubbing her palms together as if she can wipe away the effect of my touch. “I-it's nice to meet you. Bram told me all about you. Well, your talent. The way he describes your work is impressive.”

“You think so?” Morgana never cared about my carving, only my reputation on the battlefield and in the bedroom. This pretense infuriates me. What game does the witch play?

“Very much.”

“Where is that piece you brought?” Bram asks me.

I was so focused on exiting the terrifying automobile that I forgot it. “In your car.”

Bram's gaze bounces between me and Olivia, then back again.

“Well, then. I'll collect it. You two...get acquainted.”

CHAPTER
SIX

Olivia

In the shop's silence, the door chime jangles with Bram's departure. I start at the sound. But that isn't what has my heart thudding.

I can't take my eyes off Marrok.

Oh. My. God. He's hot. Beyond hot, actually. Like rip-off-my-panties-and-beg hot. I can't stop staring in wordless awe. His shaggy mane of inky hair and his neatly trimmed goatee frame a compelling face. Every inch of his six-foot-many body is a work of art. His inked, muscle-packed arms and his torso strain every seam of his black T-shirt deliciously. He doesn't just look good, though. He has a presence so powerful that I'm almost afraid to breathe. His inscrutable gray eyes ringed by their dark fringe of lashes suck me in deeper. Everything about him haunts me.

Especially since, mere hours ago, I had the most erotic dream of my life—about him.

And holy cow, he's staring at me as if he knows it. As if he's aware of exactly what I look like naked, wet, and desperate for his touch.

The longer he stares, the more flushed I feel. The achier and more aware I am of all the places that make me female. I know, without him even laying a finger on me, that he could sate me totally and utterly.

Not that he's interested. Men, especially prime specimens like Marrok, are never attracted to me.

I'm not beautiful. Unusual or striking is how people usually describe me. My black hair, super pale skin, and odd violet eyes make me look like an extra from a Halloween spectacular. I even dress weirdly, according to my mom, like a cross between a bohemian and a ren-fair reject. And I'm plump. Put all that together, and it's little wonder my track record with the opposite sex is nonexistent.

Still, Marrok continues to stare. Nonstop. His mouth twists in a mysterious expression I wouldn't call a smile. Something about the way he looks at me makes me feel as if he knows my every thought and enjoys making me nervous.

Our silence stretches on. It doesn't help that he flusters me so badly I can barely form words. Around him, I feel like a tongue-tied idiot.

His opinion doesn't matter. Forget this morning's dream. He's an artist. You own a fledgling gallery. He has product to consign. Work it out...

My inner voice is pesky, but it's right. A Touch of Magic has been my dream since I was a moody teenager. It was my mental beacon of hope every time my cold, overprotective mother burst through the door of our latest hovel and demanded I pack up to move again. I'm an adult now, and I want roots. A place to flourish and live. And I want that home in London.

Despite the fact I'd never been to the UK, the minute I stepped off the plane from the States, I felt as if I'd come home. I'm not leaving. Plus, I've sunk every dime into my gallery. So if I want to keep the doors open, I have to stop mooning over the hot hunk and negotiate.

"Nice to meet you, Marrok... I didn't catch your last name." I tremble as I stick out my hand.

He glances at my outstretched fingers but doesn't take them. "Marrok of Cadbury."

What kind of name is that? His alias as an artist? Something he invented because he hates whatever he was born with? Because he thought it sounded cool? Whatever.

I lower my hand and force a smile. “Olivia Gray. I’m interested in carrying your carvings. You have talent that deserves attention. I could help you—while making you a tidy sum.”

He raises a dark, disquieting brow. “Money interests me not.”

“Prestige, then? Recognition. Like I said—”

“I do not seek recognition.” He steps closer, blocking me in behind the shop’s counter, and towers over me. If his aim is to intimidate me with his size...score. One of his biceps looks as thick as my thigh.

But what he’s making me feel isn’t fear.

I’ve never been so aware of a man. Of my nipples being hard under my blouse. Of my pussy being wet beneath my skirt. It’s hard to even look at him without wanting to melt against his wide chest.

But we’re here for business, so I square my shoulders. “You must want something in exchange for your work. Tell me, and I’ll—”

“You know what I want.” His rough voice sounds dangerous. Demanding. Like a warning.

Thrill spreads through my body. My reaction is as confusing as he is. “I don’t.”

After refusing to shake my hand, Marrok breaches my personal space, clamping his thick fingers around my hips. His woodsy, wild scent envelops me. Desire jolts me like I’ve been lashed by a live wire. His touch is hot. Unsettling. And sexual.

“Look at me,” Marrok insists.

When did I start staring at the iron wall of his chest? Why am I not telling him to back away?

As I blink up, my head snaps back. His stormy eyes capture my stare. And his expression makes one thing very clear.

My lust isn't one-sided.

I go weak in the knees. Yeah, I always thought that was a silly cliché. But no. It's the perfect description for being confronted by a man who's the embodiment of my seductive fantasies watching me as if he's plotting ways to get me naked and under him.

He's so close. My head tells me I should be afraid. Or at least annoyed. But I'm not. I feel only swoony desire—the kind that curls behind my clit and forces me to swallow back a moan.

“Marrok?”

“Aye.” His fingers tighten.

He hauls me closer. Our bodies brush. More heat crashes through me. Is he...? Yes, hard as hell.

Oh, god.

I raise a shaking hand—to ward him off? To touch him in return? I'm not even sure. But when I settle my palm over his chest, he's like living, breathing stone. His heart hammers. A wave of dizziness hits me. My knees threaten to go out from under me. I grab his shoulder to stay upright.

He sidles even closer. Our chests brush. His warm breaths heat my tingling lips. My heart gallops. My skin sizzles.

I've never felt anything like this.

His grip tightens, fingers digging into my fleshy curves. Suddenly, I'm embarrassingly aware of every cheeseburger I've wolfed down for a quick dinner, every scone I've devoured to feel like a true Brit, and all the workouts I've missed because I've been busy getting my gallery off the ground. Since Marrok is super fit, he's probably the kind of guy who loves a good thigh gap. Me and my thick legs are doomed to disappoint him.

You would be so pretty if you just lost weight...

I shove my mother's critical voice out of my head and drag in a steady breath. "Stop."

"Stop what?"

"Touching me." *Confusing me.* "Don't."

His mouth flattens to a dangerous slash. After a slight hesitation, he releases me and steps back.

His spell over my senses lifts, but I still can't breathe. I'm weirdly cold without his touch. I feel incomplete. And exhausted, as if the man stole all my energy the moment he let go.

My imagination is in overdrive. I must be tired, since I didn't go back to sleep after my erotic dream of him by the pond. Unfortunately, all attempts to satisfy myself before work were fruitless. Now I'm just torqued up. Looking at him only makes me ache for him more.

"We're discussing business." I banish my inner, trembling virgin and go for no-nonsense professional. "I'm offering to sell your work and give you half the profits. That does *not* give you the right to put your hands on me."

Crossing his arms over his massive chest, Marrok dissects me with his stare. "Touching you was a mistake."

Of course he thinks that. Now that he's had his hands on my hips and knows the extra pounds I'm hiding under this skirt, I hold a lot less appeal.

But the me that loves fantasy of all kinds regrets that I didn't have my way with this hot hunk at least once before he changed his mind...

Get your head out of your panties, girl. "Then we agree? You'll provide me your work, and I'll give you half the profits?"

The door chime sounds again. I whirl to find Bram strolling toward us, burlap bag in hand. "Found the carving. Looked all over the car, forgetting we stashed it in the boot."

Marrok doesn't respond. Neither do I. I should inspect the carving and see if it's up to the standard of his earlier work.

But I can't take my eyes off him. He's staring right back, blazing fire at me. He exudes anger and something else—lust? I'm not sure. Whatever he's feeling, it's harsh and powerful.

But why does he look so...bleak?

"Is something wrong?" Bram asks.

I clear my throat. "Marrok? My offer?"

He leans in, his thick fingers curling around the counter on either side of my hips, caging me in. My heart skips more than a beat as he bends until our faces are inches apart. "I would rather bed down with the devil. I trust him more."

With disdain darkening his glare, Marrok pushes away, storms across the shop, and flings the door open wide. The chime dings, but the sound is drowned out by the frame crashing against the wall. I jump, gasping as he disappears as fast as his black boots will take him.

I'm more crushed than I should be.

Worse, I don't understand what the hell just happened. Has he been shafted by a gallery owner before? Maybe his massive ego can't tolerate the fact that I rebuffed him. Or maybe he resents that, even for a moment, he found me arousing.

"That's bloody odd." Bram scowls. "What did you two argue about?"

"I don't know. Nothing."

He hands me the carving. "Take this. I'll chat with him."

I open my mouth to tell Bram not to bother. If Marrok isn't interested, he isn't interested. Then I look at the whittled wood in my hand. A fawn. It's so lifelike, I'm stunned. Its soulful eyes melt me. At any moment, I'm sure its legs will wobble as it learns to walk.

Marrok's talent...wow. And this is just a tiny slice.

I close my mouth.

The man might be a rude, unhinged asshole...but his work will thrill anyone who loves art. It doesn't matter if he doesn't like me. I'm used to artists' quirks. I'll work tirelessly until I

earn his trust. I don't have a choice. I need his carvings on my shelves...or my business will go under. Then how will I remain in the UK so I can pay the detective to find my father? Once I discover what motivates Marrok, I'll work with him—no matter how difficult.

“Perfect.” I paste on a smile for Bram. “I want to see him again, as soon as possible.”

CHAPTER
SEVEN

Marrok

“**W**hat the hell is the matter with you?” Bram barks, suddenly at my heels.

Ignoring all the passersby, I turn on him, ready to unleash my wrath. I hate that civilized society demands I leave my sword behind. Bloody inconvenient when I need to skewer a devious wizard. “You knew. You fucking *knew*.”

“That Olivia is a Le Fay? I did.”

“Not just any Le Fay, Morgana in a different wrapping. You tricked me.” And every moment I stood near her, I burned to touch her. My desire raged, far stronger than the night I fucked her in the meadow. Stronger than in this morning’s dream. Stronger than anything I have ever felt.

I hovered inches above that witch’s mouth and thought of naught but kissing her senseless before lifting her skirt, freeing my cock, plunging deep inside her, and staying until she cried out that she belongs to me.

Impossible fantasy. Foolish lust. I cannot give in to her.

“I don’t know that she is Morgana,” Bram insists. “She predates me, so other than painted likenesses, I’ve no idea what she looked like. And Olivia doesn’t have a full magical signature yet, so I can only see her bloodline.”

“Magical signature?”

“It’s...like her aura but specific to her magic. Well, the magic she’ll have once she transitions. Every witch or wizard has one, and they’re visible to anyone magical. Olivia’s is almost nonexistent. Since she isn’t yet twenty-five—the age a witch comes into her power—I’m not surprised. Until then, there’s not much to glean about her, except her lineage.”

Or she’s Morgana craftily masking herself. “Pry into her mind as you did mine. Learn her true identity.”

“With a casual touch, I can only read her passing thoughts. So unless she happens to be thinking that she isn’t Morgana, that exercise is pointless. I’m only able to read her mind thoroughly if our contact is...deeper.”

I like not where this is going. “Meaning?”

Bram clears his throat. “The deeper the touch, the deeper I can delve into her mind. So if I was fucking her...”

He could discern her life story.

I have known enough wizards through the centuries to know that is not a common skill.

Letting Bram tumble the deceitful witch for information should appeal, but the very notion of Bram’s hands on her makes me violent. I hate her with every breath in my body... yet Morgana in her new form fires my blood like no other.

Why?

I grab his shirt in my fists with a growl. “You will *not* lay a finger on her.”

“I hadn’t planned to. Lovely girl...but we’re merely friends. Besides, if I mated with her, I might lose my Privileged status.”

Frowning, I release him. “Because she is untransitioned?”

“Because she is Le Fay. A couple of hundred years ago, the last known descendant of her bloodline supported Mathias.”

“So the entire clan was deemed undesirable?” And marrying into such a family would be political suicide for a

wizard who prides himself on his pedigree and his Council seat.

“Not precisely, but I wouldn’t want to gamble on the Council’s reaction to such a mating. They have long memories. However, since I haven’t been remotely compelled to Call—um, propose, in human terms—to Olivia...”

“I know the ritual.” Centuries ago, the last time I employed magickind’s help in ending my curse, I witnessed a mating. “Wizards require an instinct to Call?”

“We don’t *need* one. Whether you mean the vows or not, they’re binding. But wizards instinctively know their mates—” He shakes his head. “We’re getting off track. This is about Olivia. There’s nothing between us.”

I let out a sigh of relief I regret the instant my breath leaves my lips. The woman, other than to free me from this curse, matters not. “Have you never shaken hands with her? When you met, perhaps? Could you discern nothing more of her?”

“Our incidental contact reaffirmed everything she’s told me. She’s twenty-three, from the States, is looking for her absent father, and...” Bram cocks his head. “After the way you behaved with her, I’m not certain I trust you with the rest.”

I grip his shirt again. “Tell me.”

Bram raises a brow. “That tone may have worked in the Dark Ages, but—”

“When I lose patience, I get violent.”

He sighs. “Olivia is convinced she’s unattractive.”

Now I have no doubt the woman’s persona is a ruse. Morgana could make most any man crave her. “Olivia” should feel the same since her beauty is incomparable, far exceeding even Morgana’s.

“I know that look. You don’t believe me.” Bram sounds annoyed as he shoves my fists away and tries brushing the wrinkles from his shirt.

“I do not believe *her*.”

“You think she’s fooling me? I admit I would know far more about her if I had...ahem, probed her, but I usually reserve prying into a woman’s mind for reading her fantasies and learning precisely how to unravel her body. Helpful trick, that.” Bram flashes his signature grin. “I spent a great deal of time developing the skill.”

I care naught about his magical bedroom games. “Stay out of Morgana’s head or you will answer to me.”

“Marrok, I don’t think she *is* Morgana. Why would her signature be so weak? My grandfather’s writings say everyone could see her coming from miles away—literally. All molten purple and iridescent.”

“Regardless, by your own admission, the last time you saw *any* Le Fay alive and walking was hundreds of years ago.”

Bram nodded, conceding the point. “But her son took human lovers by the hundreds who bore children. It’s possible —”

“But equally probable that she disguises herself. There have long been rumors that Morgana could shape-shift. Perhaps she made herself into a young witch and muted her signature.”

“Normally, I would say that’s not possible, especially since my grandfather exiled her. But we *are* talking about Morgana. *If* she’s back and trying to lure you into her life again, she can only want one thing...”

CHAPTER
EIGHT

Bram means the Book of Doomsday. It was once Morgana's greatest source of power. When Merlin banished her centuries ago, the book mysteriously locked itself.

It remains latched tight to this day.

"After all, the Doomsday Diary has extraordinary powers," Bram ventures.

I neither confirm nor deny his statement, but the wizard speaks true. Over the past centuries, I have been unable to open, shred, deface, or destroy the book. No matter what I do, the little volume regenerates within moments, humming with power again. How can an object retain so much magic so long after its mistress has supposedly left this earthly realm?

Bram's face hardens. "I know you have it. Save yourself the coming agony and give it to me. I will protect it."

"Piss off." My long strides eat up the pavement.

Bram follows. "I want to help. Not that I think you'll ever ask for it."

"Wise man."

He jumps in front of me, forcing me to stop or collide with the bastard. "Move."

He ignores me. "The book should be guarded by magickind. If it falls into the wrong hands, it could mean the destruction of every witch, wizard, and youngling. You don't have the ability to protect it."

Fifteen centuries as the book's guardian says otherwise. I need it—and the Le Fay witch to unlock it—in order to end my eternal curse. Once I have, I might consider giving it to Bram...right after a blue moon on the twelfth of never when hell freezes over.

“If Morgana reacquires the Doomsday Diary, she'll embark on centuries of suffering and torture. But if my vision comes true, and Mathias manages to steal it—”

“More of the same?”

“With an excess of rape. At least consider it. Please,” he mutters.

I grunt and follow him to his vehicle, reluctantly sliding into the sports car and clenching my fists. God's balls, I hate these contraptions. Where is a fine steed when I have need to travel from point A to point B? Since Bram's driving would give even the stoutest warrior a heart attack, I buckle my seat belt.

He raises a golden brow. “You can't die. Why bother?”

“You do not drive a great deal, do you?”

“No,” Bram admits wryly. “I prefer teleporting.”

“It shows.”

He tosses back his golden head and laughs. “Two jokes from you in one day. I might pass out from the shock.”

“Unfortunately, you will recover.”

After the engine roars to life, the strains of a harsh alternative rock song shake the interior. A raspy-voiced male grinds out a suggestive chorus that makes me wince as Bram drives away from the curb in not just any car, but a red Ferrari 296 GTB. Nothing subtle about magic's golden boy.

“'Tis a very elaborate vehicle for someone who loathes driving.”

“When I must, why not do it in style?”

“You can appear and disappear at your leisure. Why own a car?”

“When I need to take a certain taciturn immortal to London, does he want me teleporting him?”

“By God’s blood, nay!”

Bram grins. “Besides, humans get agitated when we pop in and out. Not a great way to keep magickind a secret...”

“Can you turn down that racket?” I gesture to the sleek car stereo.

He scowls. “The music rocks.”

“It makes my head pound. How can you think with that shouting rattling about your ears?”

“You’re such an old man.” Bram turns the volume down—a little.

At a red light, he levels me with a stare of such gravity I’m instantly on alert. “Mathias’s resurrection is coming. We must take action. The MacKinnetts are certain I’m manufacturing Mathias’s return for my own political gain and that being Privileged means no one would dare harm them.”

Such arrogance is mind-boggling. “Do they not care about the girl, Auropha?”

“Oh, they care very much. Upon her transition, she is to mate with Tynan O’Shea. The very advantageous alliance will unite the offspring of two Councilmen and cement a powerful voting block.” His tone sounds less than thrilled.

Arranged marriages are hardly a new concept. In Camelot, most of wealth married for money and power. I should hardly be surprised that magickind is the same. “Will this voting block work against your interests?”

“It may make passing necessary resolutions more difficult.” Gunning the sleek vehicle, Bram screeches away from the green light. “Let’s focus on the book. Our most important task is to protect it. Magickind, perhaps even mankind, is at stake.”

Of course Bram throws in my race, too, hoping to give me a personal stake—and a reason to care—about his crusade. Tricky sod...

“The possibility of Mathias returning is troubling. However, if ’tis information about the book you seek, ‘Ms. Gray’ will know far more than anyone. But be careful. Morgana’s magic is not to be trifled with. Then again, could the same not be said of yours?”

“I can’t thwart a millennia-old power alone, and I’d rather not tangle with Morgana. My grandfather’s dealings with her would predispose her to dislike me. And as his writings point out, she is one scary bitch.”

So Merlin’s pedigreed grandson fears Morgana, too? ’Tis hardly a comfort. Would that I had never lain with that she-devil...

“But, as I said, I don’t think Olivia is Morgana. What the hell happened between you two earlier? I walked in, and the tension... A knife couldn’t have cut that. Why did you insult her and storm out.”

“Temporary insanity. I will fix the situation.” If I want to end my curse, then I have no choice. “In case she *is* Morgana, I need some means of neutralizing her. I cannot risk her hexing me again. As much as I abhor immortality, spending the rest of eternity as a toad or something equally loathsome appeals even less.”

Watching the traffic intently, Bram taps the steering wheel with his thumb in time to another head-banging alternative tune. “My grandfather left a few trinkets in my possession, one in particular he designed just for her. Something with a *laggagh* stone. You can make use of it.”

Sometimes, magickind may as well speak Latin. “What mean you?”

“I’m not as good with the old language as I should be. Short attention span for dull subjects.” He sighs. “According to Merlin’s notes, the *laggagh* stone will weaken her. The minute it touches her, the gem will block her magic and slowly absorb her energy. But there are side effects.”

“Unpleasant for her?” I hope.

“Decidedly.”

“I want it.” Why should I care if I cause Morgana pain after the fifteen centuries of hell she has wreaked upon me?

Bram slants me a harsh stare. “Be careful. If I’m wrong and Olivia is, in fact, Morgana, even with the bracelet she will be a dangerous adversary. And since she cursed you with the diary, I have no doubt you’ll refuse to hand it over until you’ve exhausted all hope of ending her charming little hex.”

“I never said I have the book.”

Bram shoots me a tight smile and shoves something into my hand. “Pretend you don’t, then. If you change your mind or realize—smartly, I might add—that you need my help, toss this in the air and call my name.”

I stare at the object in my palm. “This is a rock. Are you mad?”

“Don’t wait long,” he warns. “We’re running out of time.”

CHAPTER
NINE

Olivia

Cursing, I struggle with the keys that lock A Touch of Magic's front door. My whole day—hell, my whole life—feels like one tribulation after another.

I jam my cell phone against my ear. "I'm fine, Bram. Just tired. I woke up at four this morning and couldn't go back to sleep." Thanks to my unexplained erotic dream of Marrok.

That's still freaking me out.

Exhaustion and a weird ache plague me, too. I've been dragging ass since Marrok slammed out of my shop.

What's wrong with me? Anxiety? Let down? Damn it, I need sleep, caffeine—something.

"Still worried about your father?"

"Yeah. It's like he disappeared into thin air."

My whole life, my mother swore he was killed in a car crash before I was born. Then, a handful of weeks after my college graduation, Barbara Gray committed suicide. No goodbye. No note. Nothing. Suddenly, I was not only trying to figure out life, but I was completely alone. Even if Mom and I weren't close, losing my only family was terrifying.

Before our landlord shoved me out, I sorted through Mom's personal effects. Among her belongings, I found a letter my father sent, postmarked from London nearly twenty

years ago—well after I was born. It was still unopened. Mom apparently hadn't cared what Richard Gray wrote. Not surprising. If there had been a way to isolate me, she never hesitated to take it.

You have a roof over your head, young lady, because I do my duty. Do yours. Stop trying to make friends, and start making better grades. Clean your room. Don't touch me.

By contrast, my father begged us to come to London because he wanted to be a family. He wanted to know me. *Me!* To him, I wasn't a burden. Or an obligation. He wanted to love me, and he vowed to protect me.

He never said from what.

After reading that letter, I was so angry at my mom—for lying, for leaving without a word, for never loving me. Worse, I can't vent to her. To anyone. I can't even ask why.

After I settled Mom's affairs, I began looking for my father. Online searches only turned up distant maternal cousins. Since nothing held me to the States, I used the last of Mom's money to move to London so I could find my dad. Maybe that will fill the constant, gnawing void inside me.

But even armed with my father's name and last known address—not to mention my detective's skills—I've found no clue to my dad's whereabouts.

Is whatever sent Mom running from my father the reason I can't find him now?

"I've got that last long-shot lead to follow up on," I remind Bram. "If it doesn't pan out, I'll have to think of another tactic."

Especially since business hasn't been great. A Touch of Magic is my dream and my greatest achievement. But without an influx of customers and cash, I won't have the money to keep both my doors open and the detective on my case. And if I go broke, I'll have to decide—stay here or go back to the States?

Go back to what?

Yes, my flat is ridiculously small, and other than Bram, I haven't met anyone. I'm not looking forward to the upcoming winter. Plus, the food...ugh. Don't Brits believe in good enchiladas? On the other hand, their history, their sense of permanence, is everything.

"You'll find him. Don't give up," Bram encourages.

"As long as there's a chance, I can't."

"That's the spirit. You tenacious American girls never fail to impress."

Thanks to my nomadic childhood, I've never had many friends. But my rapport with Bram is surprisingly easy. Since flirting is like breathing for him, he's probably a fukboi. I don't take his smiles or his charm seriously. Or any man's.

Except for the broodingly sexy hunk of hot man I met this morning.

Broodingly sexy? I shouldn't romanticize Marrok. He was rude. He behaved like an asshole.

But until he insulted me, I swore he wanted me. Just being near him sent desire careening through me, rushing to every quivering finger and trembling toe. The more female parts of me? I blush even thinking about how he affected those. After mere seconds of his hands on me, I lit up like the Christmas tree in Rockefeller Plaza. Pathetic.

"But I actually called about Marrok," Bram says as if he can read my mind.

"Oh?"

"You'll hear from him soon. He feels ghastly about the row you had earlier."

"Good. I'd planned on finding him, anyway." And keeping my libido out of the conversation. "He's temperamental, but his talent...wow."

"Indeed. He's a bit odd, but give him a chance."

I jerk on the door handle, but the key still refuses to turn. Some days, I swear the old lock takes an active dislike to me.

The sudden stutter-beep in my ear hardly improves my mood.

“I’ve got to go. My battery is dying, and I can’t get the damn door shut.”

After we agree to touch base in a few days, I hang up. I try turning the key again. Jammed.

“Damn it!” I push a strand of dark hair from my eyes. “Obstinate door.”

“Does cursing it help?”

Startled, I whirl at the unexpected, deep voice. Though the shadows shroud most of his face, my sudden head-to-toe hum tells me who hovers behind me. So does the patch of moonlight glimmering across his stormy eyes. There’s a harshness to his expression...

Reflexively, I swallow and step away, my heart lurching. “Marrok.”

“Olivia.”

Just the way his lips caress my name... Desire flares. My body pings. Suddenly, the fatigue I’ve been fighting all afternoon evaporates.

“You startled me.” My voice sounds somewhere between breathy and accusing. Fitting since I’m not sure whether to be aroused or afraid.

What is he doing here?

“Not for the first time, I think.” He edges closer until moonlight bathes him in silvery tones. “I startled you this morning as well. I apologize.”

His olive branch should make me feel better. I want it to.

Before I can reply, Marrok plucks the keys from my grip. With a flick of his wrist, he secures the door, testing it with a tug. I can’t take my eyes off his massive shoulders or the rippling of his wide back.

What would he feel like under my hands as he thrusts deep inside me?

Whoa. That question is out of left field. And inappropriate as hell. Even if he makes me ache, we're supposed to be having a professional interaction. My brain doesn't belong in my panties.

He deposits my keys in my hand. He rattles me. I swear he knows it, just like I don't think he's in any hurry to change that. Or am I so nervous I'm seeing things?

"Apology accepted." I do my best to sound composed. "You in a better mood than this morning?"

He gives me a self-deprecating smile, complete with a flash of white teeth. "I prefer solitude. Meeting new people sometimes brings out the worst in me."

"I'm introverted, too. Talking to strangers sometimes flusters me."

He nods. "If my carvings still interest you, I have reconsidered your offer."

I let out a sigh of relief. Marrok sets me on edge while he lights my fire, but he's the best shot I have of keeping my shop afloat. After interning at an art gallery a couple of summers during college, I have experience dealing with temperamental artists. I'll handle whatever Mr. Tall, Dark, and Unnerving throws my way.

"So I'm no longer on par with the devil?" I tease.

He has the good grace to look sheepish. "Nay."

Nay? What's with the archaic speak? Is that his shtick?

"Fine. We can talk." I glance at my watch and ignore my rumbling stomach. "I have time for a cup of coffee."

"I want to show you my entire collection, work no one has ever seen." His whisper sounds low, intimate. Inviting.

A flurry of new tingles spread through me. I squelch them and focus on business. "All right. Where?"

"My home." Just then, a cab screeches to a halt at the nearby curb. Marrok opens the door and gestures me inside. "I

hired a taxi, hoping you would agree. Will you come with me?"

CHAPTER
TEN

He wants me to get in a car with him?

What do I know about this guy? Sure, he's Bram's friend, but following a virtual stranger to his place, especially one who grabbed and insulted me just this morning... Is that smart? On the other hand, he apologized. That counts for something, right?

Are you rationalizing because he's hot? Because you're attracted to him? Because in your dreams you know the feel of his big hands spreading your naked thighs...

The taxi door gapes open. I stare into the shadowy back seat, bite my lip, and try to think.

If Marrok wants to hurt me, would he really lure me to his place with the taxi driver as a witness? Odds are he lives in a crowded flat with a handful of other starving artists. Not exactly a threat. Besides, how can we do business if we have zero trust?

"Okay." I climb into the taxi and scoot to the far edge, wrinkling my nose at the stench of stale smoke and sweat pervading the interior.

Marrok slides in beside me, taking up three-quarters of the back seat. His presence absorbs the rest. His scent—wood, earth, and male—replaces the unpleasant odor.

I don't even know why I lean closer and inhale him. A sudden buzz lifts my energy more than my morning Starbucks run. God, I could breathe him in forever.

When I open my eyes, he's staring down at me, his gray eyes glowing. With anger? Bitterness? Lust? I can't tell.

The taxi speeds off.

He blinks and wipes his expression clean. "How long have you lived in London?"

"Six months. Almost seven now. You?"

"Seems like forever."

His smile should set me at ease. Instead, I'm somehow more nervous.

"I'm glad you wanted to talk." I press on. "I'm convinced your work would be the star of my gallery."

"Wait until you have seen my full collection."

"I'm sure I'll love everything. You're incredibly talented."

He shrugs away my remark—not like an artist fishing for more compliments. There's something more. Is Marrok dismissing my opinion because he's so secure in his abilities? Or...

"Are you already displaying elsewhere?"

"Nay. Why would you choose something as difficult as opening an art gallery, rather than working for another?"

"Because I love art. I want to spread it far and wide. When art is well done, it takes you to another place and evokes fresh emotions. When your life sucks, it allows you to escape into a whole new world. I mean, is there any woman who's looked at Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* and hasn't imagined herself rising out of the sea, reborn into something spectacular? Or looked at Renoir's *Bal au Moulin de la Galette, Montmartre* and couldn't picture themselves laughing and dancing with the beautiful crowd, being free and alive? Art is cleansing to the soul. Working for someone else..." I wrinkle my nose. "I've done that. I got fired. I'm not good at taking direction or biting my tongue. I'd rather have a quaint place that sells amazing pieces to people who crave beauty. Like your fawn. It's stunning."

“You moved here to find your father?” he asks abruptly. “I overheard your conversation with Bram.”

Since I might display his work, Marrok asking for my philosophy about art makes sense. He doesn't need to know about my father. I refuse to vomit up my daddy issues for a stranger.

“Something like that. Tell me about you.”

He doesn't. “Do you live alone?”

That question takes me aback. Is he fishing to find out if I'm single? I haven't felt a “hey, baby” vibe from him since this morning when he put his hands on me. But the way he watches me, hanging on my every word... I'm not sure what else to think.

I glance out the window, and I'm startled to see countryside. We've left London? “Um...how much farther?”

“Close now.”

“I assumed you lived in a flat in the city.”

He shakes his head. “I require peace.”

Yeah, he mentioned preferring solitude, but... “You're going pretty far out to get it. Why here?”

“Long story.”

That's another question he's dodged. I try to quash my uneasiness and focus on business. “I meant what I said earlier. Your work would be a hit in my shop. You'll bring people joy. I'm glad you've changed your mind.”

“After we have talked, I feel certain I will be, as well.”

Marrok says what I want to hear...but I can't shake the feeling we're carrying on two different conversations.

“I've been pleased with the other pieces I carry. What do you think?”

“I should not say.”

Because he's so much better? He's right, but his answer stops just shy of egotism. I'm annoyed, both by his arrogance

and my attraction to him.

Silence stretches between us as the taxi speeds on, leaving behind the residential streetlights of the suburbs. When we pass the last of the cozy homes, my anxiety starts screaming.

“Where the hell are we going?”

“Almost there.”

That’s what he said ten minutes ago.

Out the window, the night fog creeps in. Through the dark, I feel Marrok staring. There’s a vibe in the car—something ominous I don’t understand.

I reach into my purse and grip my Mace. “On second thought, it’s getting late. I don’t think—”

“Stop.” Marrok tells the driver.

The cab screeches to a halt at the mouth of a narrow dirt road lined by ancient sycamores that stretch endlessly on either side into a seemingly unbreachable forest. Is he kidding? We’re in the middle of nowhere.

Marrok pays the driver, exits the taxi, and raises an impatient brow at me. The drum of disquiet thrums in my chest. Follow this guy to God knows where?

Honestly, what *do* I know about him?

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

“Out you go,” the driver barks, flashing stained teeth in the rearview mirror.

“Take my hand.” Marrok extends his, palm up.

I don’t move.

The cabbie huffs. “I’ve got other fares.”

“Give me a second!” I glare at the driver.

But what am I deliberating? The fare isn’t unreasonable... but it’s more cash than I’ve got. I shouldn’t run up my credit cards. And bottom line, I need Marrok’s art. If I want to see his collection in person, I have to shake my misgivings and get brave. Besides, he’s odd, not an axe murderer or rapist.

Right?

Marrok leans in, his stare delving into my soul and melting away my worries. “Come with me.”

If he wanted to hurt me, would he really look at me like *that*?

I place my palm in his.

Fire, hot and lightning fast, zaps my fingers and zips straight to my chest. My heart stutters, then slams. The sensation is so intense, I stumble from the cab.

The moment I’m on my feet, Marrok jerks away, his fist clenching.

I don't get this guy. First, he comes on strong. Then he insults me. When he returns, he apologizes...but he still won't give me a straight answer. Now his eyes are hot with the lust I know he felt when we met. And he seems angry.

What the hell is going on?

I'm still reeling when the taxi speeds off in a cloud of dust, leaving me alone with a man I barely know, without a way back to the city.

"Where are we? Where are you taking me?" I demand.

He marches down the dirt path, not waiting to see if I'll follow. Then again, now that the taxi is gone, I don't have much choice.

"To my home."

By the glow of the waxing moon, I fall in behind Marrok.

The surrounding forest thickens, full of towering trees and blazing fall leaves. This place is too remote. Too still. Too quiet. With every step, I feel swallowed up. Foreboding gnaws my belly. "I don't see any houses out here."

"I live in the forest."

Where no one will hear me scream. Oh, god. What if he's not another odd artist after all? What if I misread him, and he's the sort of madman who will chop me into little pieces?

Premonition, the gut instinct I've ignored too often, tells me that my life is about to change forever.

I'm not ready.

"I'm not comfortable with this. Take me home."

He doesn't even spare me a glance. "I have no car."

"*What?* How do you expect me to get back to the city?"

"Bram will be 'round."

"When?"

"Soon."

That makes me feel a little better. Surely if Marrok expects his friend to turn up, he can't have anything terribly chilling planned.

Five silent minutes later, we break through a clearing. A small cottage appears. Its sloped roof and wooden embellishments bear Tudor-style markings. On a porch overlooked by charming, beveled windows rests a rocking chair illuminated by a small light. The rocker's lines are lovingly carved. The arms have been engraved to look like branches growing up into the plethora of ivy etched into the headrest. Every notch in the wood demonstrates another facet of Marrok's talent.

Regardless of how strange he is or how much he throws me off balance, he'll make us both a fortune.

Almost giddy, I rush up the steps and trail my fingers across the back of the chair. "Beautiful! You did this, right?"

He shrugs. "'Tis but a chair, placed thus for watching the sun rise."

I can picture him, thoughtful as he sips coffee and watches the sun burst over the horizon, its golden light pouring over the angled strength of his face.

Marrok wraps his fingers about my elbow. "Follow me inside. See the rest of my carvings."

Tingles swarm me again as he unlocks the door and pulls me over the threshold.

I stumble inside—and find myself stunned mute. Marrok wasn't lying. Though his cottage is a rustic shell with bare oak floors and naked walls, his carvings make the place gasp-worthy. They're everywhere—hundreds of them. The wooden masterpieces fill every corner of my vision. I'm speechless.

His talent is beyond anything I imagined.

A hawk prepares for flight here. A mare and her colt play in a meadow there. From the smallest creatures, like a bouncing kitten, to a five-foot rearing centaur, his amazing art covers the floor—every shelf, every surface—and completely astounds me.

Even his furniture, with its exquisite legs and lines, is made with the skill of a master craftsman. Bookcases, some trimmed with flowing scrolls and arches, others with straight Mission-style lines, are stunning. More wooden chairs, all with breathtaking etchings, constructed in every style from Renaissance to modern—truly beautiful.

He has the hands of a master...and the heart of a poet.

I'm so moved, my eyes water. "This is unbelievable. Every piece... They're so real. I've never seen talent so—"

"Enough!" He slams the door, hate burning from his stare. "Drop the bloody pretense. We are alone now, and I tire of your game, Morgana."

CHAPTER
TWELVE

“Who? I-I’m not Morgana. Remember? My name is Olivia.”

“Do you think me daft? I know who you truly are.”

“Clearly, you don’t. I don’t know anyone named Morgana.” I back toward the door. “I’m leaving. I’ll walk to London.”

“You will not!” He grabs my wrists and shackles them together with one of his huge hands at the small of my back.

Despite the fact I’m terrified, my skin leaps to tingling life—like it does every time Marrok touches me.

I don’t understand. Why is my body betraying me?

“I had a dream this morn. Of you. Naked. Teasing me. Inviting me into your body, then unlocking the accursed book before you stole it and disappeared. Cease the pretense!”

The dream. *My* dream. He had it, too?

That doesn’t seem possible.

But Marrok described everything almost perfectly, except *he* seduced *me*—with his glittering eyes, with his hard body, with the unspoken temptation of his lust. I smiled for him. I ached for him, torn between protecting the odd red book and succumbing to Marrok. When he tumbled me to my back, desire won out. I begged him to love me. I promised him everything he desired.

He only cared about the book.

How does he know so much about my dream...unless he had it, too?

Everything weird just got weirder.

Panicked, I try to lurch from his grip. He clutches my blouse in his fist and yanks, ripping it to the top of my underbust corset. He exposes the lacy cups of my bra. His blazing stare roams every visible inch of my skin. Thorough. Intent. Possessive.

I should be afraid. Terror should be galvanizing me to fight him off.

Fear isn't what crashes to the pit of my stomach.

What he's doing, what I'm feeling—both are wrong on so many levels. I have to stop him and get free.

“Let go, you bastard!”

Marrok does the opposite, wrapping his free hand around my throat. Then he maneuvers me against the door. “Not until you give me what I want.”

My heart revs. The ache coiling between my legs is mind-boggling, humiliating...and undeniable. My body behaves as if it belongs solely to Marrok.

I don't understand.

His rough exhalations fall across my lips as he fixes his stare on my cleavage. Excitement lumps in my throat. I can't speak. My breaths feel trapped in my chest, victims of the unbearable sizzle his touch sparks.

The lust I saw on his face earlier has returned.

With a vengeance.

I lower my lashes to skim the front of his jeans. Yep. He's definitely aroused.

“Does it amuse you to know my body reacts to you?”

“No.” But I'm flustered and excited against my will. Why does he want me?

That doesn't matter. Neither does this crazy attraction. I have to GTFO of here—before he does something unhinged. Or I do something stupid...like give in.

Shifting my weight to one foot, I watch his dark face. His stare never leaves my breasts. Hell, he never blinks.

My head tells me he's predatory and dangerous. That any minute, he's going to attack me and force himself on me.

My body completely disagrees. My nipples pucker. My pussy aches. My will to resist evaporates.

I ignore my inappropriate responses and silently count to three. Then I ram my knee straight toward Marrok's balls.

He's faster, catching my thigh in his grip and swinging it over his hip while lifting my skirt out of his way.

Suddenly, he's between my legs, and I'm open wide to him. Vulnerable. He doesn't hesitate to press his denim-covered erection against my pussy, covered only by damp panties.

I gasp. His heat scorches me. Without any conscious thought, my eyes slide shut in surrender.

When I grip his shoulders, he groans, his low rumble igniting every nerve ending between my legs. Need burns. The more he touches me, the more I crave.

“Aye,” he breathes in my ear.

I shudder—and lose the last of my free will.

“Marrok...”

He plants his forearm against the door, plastering his chest to mine. Of their own accord, my hips jerk in desperate invitation. I'm embarrassingly wet.

This isn't happening. It can't be.

But it is. And his every touch feels sublime. My thoughts grow hazy. My body sings, especially when Marrok nudges my clit with a tortured groan.

Lightning tears through me. My eyes flash open. Our stares collide. I can't breathe. I'm drowning in need. It makes no sense. I should be looking for a weapon, not wondering how fast I can lose my clothes for this man.

Frantically, I glance around.

He takes hold of my chin and forces me to meet his stare. "I remember you, Morgana. Your tricks. Your teasing. Every bit of your body." He wrenches open the front clasp of my bra, all but exposing my breasts. "Including that strawberry birthmark."

Shock reverberates inside me as he stares at the discoloration I've possessed all my life. How did he know exactly where it is and what it looks like? From the dream?

His words are like a bucket of ice. "I'm not Morgana, I swear."

His gaze sweeps my face, then sears a furious path over my half-exposed breasts. "Stop lying."

Rage dominates his expression...but he's panting. He's harder than ever. His heart thuds against mine.

Suddenly, he tears himself away with a curse. His spell over me lifts.

With shaking hands, I right my bra and tug together the edges of my ruined blouse. "How did you know about...?"

"Play not the innocent. I touched your body, witch. More than fifteen hundred years ago, aye, but I recall every inch of you."

More than fifteen hundred years ago? As in...what, the fifth or sixth century?

Oh, my god. He's delusional.

And you're insanely hot for him. What does that say about you?

"I've told you. I'm not Morgana. I-I'm only twenty-three. Are you into past lives?"

He scoffs. “You and your accursed Book of Doomsday made certain there is no death for me. You ensured I would live this hellish existence forever.”

“I don’t know about any doomsday book. You have me confused with this Morgana person. We might have the same birthmark, but—”

“Because of you, I lost my knighthood.” His eyes darken with wrath. “King Arthur banished me for touching you. Still, your greed for revenge was not satisfied until you cursed me with immortality and never-ending solitude.”

He thinks he’s...immortal? Then again, isn’t that the “logical” conclusion for anyone who believes he’s been alive for fifteen centuries? But he’s also convinced he was one of King Arthur’s knights, and that I’m Morgana? As in Le Fay, Arthur’s evil half sister? And that, after becoming his lover, I somehow cursed him so he couldn’t die?

Not even in my most fertile imaginings could I conjure up anything that crazy.

Too bad my phone is dead. I need to call emergency services. Or poll social media about how to calm a madman.

“No.” My voice trembles.

“Aye. And what was my great sin? Insulting your vanity because I moved to another’s bed before *you* had your fill of my cock.”

“Maybe I resemble this woman, but I never met you before this morning. I don’t know anything—”

“Not another word.” His fingers curl around my nape like fiery clamps before he hauls me closer.

All my fear and confusion? Replaced by desire as soon as he touches me. Why?

“Marrok—”

“You know how to release me from this blasted curse. Do it.”

When he digs into his pocket, I don't wait to see what he's pulling out. I wrench free and turn, twisting the handle.

It doesn't budge.

He's locked the old-fashioned door. The key is gone.

Before I can search for another exit, Marrok traps me, his enormous chest covering my back. He tangles his fingers in my hair, and he rocks his hard cock against my ass.

His hot breaths against my ear make me shiver. "How you must be cackling at the proof I want you. But this time, *I* will have the control."

He grabs my arm and clasps a medieval-looking bracelet around my wrist, securing it with a tiny silver padlock. Then he steps back with a smug smile full of vengeful triumph.

I eye the jewelry. "What is this?"

"Amethysts the color of your eyes set in pure silver. Merlin made it for you. So long as you wear it, you cannot perform magic, and you will weaken. I have locked it snug around your wrist. There it will remain until you agree to uncurse me."

Magic? My thoughts race as I blink at the ornate silver bangle lined with huge purple gemstones. Discreetly, I give it a tug. Nope, I'm not getting that off.

A wave of dizziness hits me. I tremble. Exhaustion sets in. I struggle to stay upright.

"Marrok, I'm not this Morgana person," I plead, steadying myself against the door. "Let me go!"

"You will remain with me until you set me free." Then he crosses the room and produces a giant sword. "If you refuse, I will kill you."

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

With that parting shot, he disappears down the hall, leaving me stunned and terrified.

I don't waste any time lurching for the sturdy door at the back of the cottage.

Before I can wrench it open, he returns, blocking my path. Instead of the sword, he's holding something red and square against his massive chest.

The book from our dream.

"Never have you possessed a shred of decency, but find one now. Open this and write the reversal of my curse, so I can finally die."

"You *want* to die?" He's both delusional and suicidal. "Look, I don't know anything about that book. I'm not Morgana. I can't help you. Just call Bram and let me go home."

Fury twists his face. When he looms closer, my head tells me to back away. But my heart pounds, and it's not purely terror revving me up. The invisible connection between us flares through me again, making my pussy pulse in hunger.

"You know *everything* about the book." He shakes it in my face. "You created the infernal thing."

"What? I've never even seen it. I'm *not* Morgana. Get that through your thick head."

"Pretending amnesia? No matter. I memorized your curse before the bloody book locked. Mayhap you will recall writing

these words: *Under midnight's moon you loved me and made my body fly. By sun's harsh light you left me to ache, no matter what I try. Eternity is my curse on you, with nights of endless need. Find the key to free your black heart, or live this hell, no matter how you plead.*"

Holy shit. He made up his own curse. What does that say about the depth of his delusion?

I'm afraid. How will I ever escape his cottage without being carried out in a body bag and featured on a two-minute segment of the news?

"With a few strokes of your quill, you condemned me to an eternity of misery," he growls. "Now open your bloody tome and end it."

Marrok is total straitjacket material. Yet...the closer he comes, heat licks my skin again. My head swims as if I've imbibed too much wine. As if he has a gravitational pull I can't resist. As if my flesh and bones need to be pressed to his to feel complete.

God, now *I'm* losing it. "I'm sorry that Morgana...um, put a nasty curse on you. I'm sure it sucks. But I'm not her. Let me go."

"I cannot." He tosses the book on a nearby table and curls his fingers possessively around my face.

His lips almost touch mine. His eyes smolder. I tingle. From head to toe, I burn. For a lunatic I barely know.

Why? Yes, he's hot, but why is he the first man who's ever aroused me?

What would it feel like to have Marrok deep inside me, concentrating all that fury not into vengeance, but passion?

Bad thought. It goes with the bad man.

I wrest free and shove him away, trying to drag in a breath that doesn't intoxicate me with his scent. "I can see how being alive for an eternity would make you cranky, but seriously, I'm not Morgana."

"Lie not to me, witch."

Since he didn't believe my first denial—or my second—I'm hardly shocked he doesn't buy this one.

Again, I scan my surroundings for a weapon. I remember the Mace in my purse. It's no match for the giant sword he still grips, but I have nothing else.

Easing my hand into the bag still dangling from my shoulder, I grip the can with shaking fingers. Adrenaline surges as I withdraw the aerosol, aim, and spray.

But Marrok is too fast. He ducks and whirls me around, covering my back with his chest. He immobilizes me by banding his thick arm around my waist. His free hand grips my throat, squeezing just enough to make me understand his unspoken threat.

“Don't hurt me,” I choke out as Mace mists the air and burns my eyes.

He rips the can from my fingers and tosses it aside. It clatters against the hardwood floor.

“A modern potion, is it? Have you grown too lazy to make your own?”

I elbow his ribs, but trying to move him is like trying to displace a bus.

The solid stone of his chest slides across my hypersensitive skin. My terror dissolves...and my body stops caring about escape. In fact, the longer I'm in Marrok's arms, the weaker my resistance. I'm the moth to his flame.

My veins sing. Languorous need winds through my bloodstream, a sweetly insidious narcotic pooling in every place that makes me female.

“I swear, I'm *not* Morgana. I'm Olivia Gray. We just met today.”

“Your foolish protestations will neither convince me nor compel me to release you.”

“Then what will? I'm not the woman you want.”

He tightens a steely arm around my middle and wedges his steely cock against me—which proves he isn't small anywhere. "We both know that is untrue. Thanks to you, I cannot be satisfied by any woman. Would it be different with you, Morgana?"

"Since I'm *not* her and I don't have any powers, sex with me will not change your...state."

But would it end this insane desire I feel?

No. Bad. Focus.

I do...until his lips touch the shell of my ear. "I think you toy with me. Your curse proclaims that I left you to ache, no matter what you tried. It would be like you to punish me until I satisfy you once more. Should I?"

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN

His soft growl makes my knees weak. “No.”

“Your protest would be more convincing did you sound less breathy. Mayhap breaking my curse is that simple.” He seizes on my weakness, sliding my hair over one shoulder and pressing his lips to my neck. “I avoided you for a century, until Merlin banished you from this realm. But if fucking you will free me, then I will touch you—whenever, wherever, and however I wish. I will be with you, on you, inside you—”

“Stop!” He doesn’t want *me*, just freedom. No matter how strong the pull I feel, I shouldn’t let him use me. “No means no in any century.”

“It does. But your body says yes. You breathe hard. Your nipples tighten.” He drags a thumb over one sensitive tip.

Tingles detonate through me like a Fourth of July fireworks finale. Before I can stop myself, my head falls back to his chest, and I gasp.

“Are you wet for me, too?”

Soaked. I bite my lip, torn between insisting that he can’t touch me there and begging him to.

Marrok gathers my skirt in one meaty fist and hikes it to my waist.

“Don’t,” I moan.

He ignores me and slides his fingers into my panties. “Your cunt is drenched.”

It is. Even as my eyes slide shut in shame, my body tightens in need. Why can't I stop reacting to him? "Marrok..."

"Are you begging me to let you go? Or to give you what your body craves?"

"I don't know." The truth slips out.

"I do." His thick fingers settle between my folds, then lazily circle my throbbing clit.

My knees buckle. Desire overtakes my brain.

I've never been so aroused in my life.

"After I give you a hard fucking, will you release me, Morgana? Surely, you have grown weary of toying with me. Or does it thrill you to know you affect me more than ever?"

When Marrok talks like that, I should be terrified out of my mind. But I'm not. His fingers on my clit threaten to dismantle me. I'm a shaking, gasping mess.

Damn it, I need to quit melting, banish my urges, and take control.

"Have you naught to say? Or are you too busy gloating because I want you even as I hate you?"

Repeating the fact I'm not Morgana won't get me anywhere. But Marrok's words and the footlong carving of an angel inches from my fingertips give me a new idea.

I'll seduce him. I'll surrender to our baffling connection—just until he lets his guard down. When he's distracted, I'll whack him on the head and escape.

As schemes go, it's hasty and probably insane. But what are my better options? Appealing to his goodwill? His sanity? I have to get free before I succumb to him, before he consumes me, body and soul.

Trying not to think about the fact I'm playing head games with a madman, I draw in a bracing breath, drop my purse, and part the shredded edges of my blouse as I turn in his arms.

The sight catches him off guard. He freezes, except for his rough breaths.

I jockey closer, clandestinely dislodging Marrok's nimble fingers from between my legs. I should be able to think now... except his sizable cock still nudges my belly. His gaze on my nipples feels as tangible as his touch.

He fuses his stare to mine and delves deep until I'm breathless. Until I can't look away.

I shiver at the intimacy. The mystifying connection between us is even stronger.

I've only ramped up the danger.

Even with a sane man, I would be afraid to indulge chemistry this intense, especially since I have no experience with sex. With touch at all. Mom always socially distanced from me, even before that was a thing. Everyone else followed suit.

Marrok wanting me—even for revenge—is a miracle. And a shameful thrill. Weird vibe aside...I love his hands on me.

Would it be so bad if you gave in?

Yes. I'm not desperate enough to toss away my V-card on a guy who doesn't even know me, who only wants to use me.

But I would be using him, too. For experience. For pleasure. For escape.

I throw myself at Marrok and rub against him, feeling giddy when he groans and fists my hair. "Is wanting me so terrible?"

"Do *not* tease me. If you tempt me, witch, I will unleash all my unfulfilled desire on you. Consider that, in fifteen centuries, I learned a thousand ways to fuck you. Nothing will stop me from taking you to my bed, tying you down, and demonstrating each and every one."

Oh, god.

His words zip straight between my legs. I clench and gush as a fresh wave of lust hits me.

I mean to tell him no. I do...but it's as if I can't refuse him.

What the hell is happening? This is more than chemistry.

This feels like fate.

Marrok grips my chin. "Why go through the elaborate charade of arranging a meeting through Bram? You knew where to find me. What game do you play?"

"No game." Well, that's not entirely true. When my fingertips brush the nearby angel, I remember that I have a plan. A semisane one that might get me free.

Once I find the willpower to use it.

He raises a black brow. "From frightened maiden to seductress in the span of a heartbeat? You underestimate me, Morgana. Sorely."

"No. I've just stopped fighting this pull between us."

"Liar."

I blink up at him. "What can I do to make you believe me?"

Marrok grunts as his gaze traces my mouth, then dips lower, burning my nipples before he captures my gaze again.

I'm getting to him.

My fingers tremble as I settle my hand against his inferno of a chest. The need to tear off his thin black T-shirt and press myself against him almost overwhelms me. He stiffens. I'm convinced he feels the same sexual jolt. His heart beats furiously beneath my tingling palm. His erection, even through our clothes, burns me like a brand.

His body is on board, but his harsh stare says his head isn't buying my act.

I have to get more persuasive.

"You feel it, too." I rise on my tiptoes and drag my lips up the solid column of his neck. "Don't you?"

He says nothing, but his sharp inhalation tells me everything.

“If you don’t let me touch you, if you don’t touch me back, this burning need is going to eat me alive,” I whisper. “I’m dying to know how good we can make each other feel.”

He grinds out a curse. His eyes slide shut. “Morgana, cease your torment, and release me from this hell.”

Grab the carving. Hit him now!

But I can’t make myself do it. His anguish, even if it’s in his head, feels so real. It becomes mine. And I hurt for him.

“Marrok, look at me.”

He does. Another spark shoots between us, hot and bright.

“How are you more accursedly beautiful than ever?” His bitter words aren’t a compliment.

Still, I drink them in. Tears sting my eyes.

No one has ever called me beautiful. And his expression says he’s not lying.

That means more to me than it should.

Has he tapped into my loneliness and confusion? Maybe. Probably. He’s crazy, not stupid. Since I wear my emotions on my sleeve, he can probably sense my weakness. Of course he’s acting on it.

What will happen if Marrok treats me with actual tenderness?

He’ll strip my soul bare.

Still, he’s vulnerable, too. I *feel* it. I need to press my advantage before I find myself permanently trapped in Crazy Town. “Touch me. Just one simple touch.”

“Naught about you is simple.” Pain haunts his face. His stare bores into mine.

The intent in his eyes steals my breath. Nerves assault me. I’m captive to him in all ways.

Can he see that?

I don’t have time to think before he leans in, his lips sinking toward mine. But instead of seizing my mouth, his

fingers tighten on me. He presses his cheek against my own.

The embrace is both a shock and a thrill. His five o'clock shadow rasps against my skin. He tugs me closer, exhaling roughly like he's fighting temptation.

I want him. Right or wrong, I'm all up in my feels. I can't deny it.

It's probably stupid, but I settle my palm over his dark bristle, close my eyes, and sink into the moment with him.

He murmurs a sound—of approval?—as he cups my crown with his other hand, fingers tangling in my hair.

The carving of the angel stands inches from my grasp...but now that I'm in Marrok's embrace, I melt against him. Everything about this moment together disarms me.

He strokes my hair. The caress touches my heart. I'm stunned speechless. How can a man so imposing be capable of such longing? Of such tenderness? I feel it in every glide of his fingers, with his every whisper against my ear.

“Marrok?”

“Aye?”

“Kiss me...”

CHAPTER
FIFTEEN

“Kiss you?” He tenses. “Mayhap I should make you wait half an eternity, as I have.”

“Is that what you really want, to keep waiting?”

He curses softly. The moment hangs between us.

Marrok drops his gaze to my mouth. “Nay.”

I hold my breath.

His eyes darken. “God help me.”

He cups my face. I feel his hot breath and determination as he swoops down. I expect a punishing kiss, an angry fight for domination.

Instead, he settles his lips over mine like a whisper. A tease.

Without thought, I surge to my tiptoes and press myself against him.

He fists my hair and tugs in rebuke, determined to control our kiss, to dole it out slowly. He glides across my mouth, then retreats. He nips at my bottom lip, then leaves me waiting. I tremble in anticipation. I’m hungry for him to seize me, desperate to have his taste on my tongue.

Marrok makes me wait, cajoling and seducing. Awakening me. Slowly. So slowly.

I pant and cling, shaking as I tangle my hands in his hair. I lose myself to the scrape of his stubble and the stark lust of his touch. Everything about him is rough...

Except his mouth on mine, making me crave everything he's withholding.

Finally, Marrok urges my lips apart with a groan. The kiss shifts from persuasive to demanding as he takes possession. Need slams into me as if I hit a brick wall at a hundred miles an hour. I tumble into a black hole of sensation there's no escaping.

This feels right. We feel inevitable.

I don't understand why...but I can't deny it.

As he takes my tongue, he saturates my senses. My world skews like a Tilt-O-Whirl. I get greedy for more.

Marrok fists his hand deeper in my hair, pulling me impossibly closer. More dizzying desire crashes over me. Heat flushes from my belly to my toes. The buzz in my brain picks up volume until it's like a ten-thousand-dollar stereo blasting inside a compact.

"Your mouth..." He pants. "So bloody intoxicating."

Me? This man is addicting. He makes me swoon. He holds me like I'm his whole existence. He seizes my mouth as if he's not just determined to have me but obsessed.

After spending my whole life alone and unloved, this feeling—being the focus of a man's uncontrollable desire—is my guilty, secret longing. And Marrok is giving it to me in spades.

Even if I escape and never see him again, as crazy as it sounds, I'll bask in this memory forever.

I ache to surrender. All of me. However he wants me.

But I live in reality, not my secret fantasy. Oh, god. I can't be so lonely that I succumb to some weird Stockholm syndrome.

Focus on escape. Don't let him derail you.

As if Marrok senses my hesitation, he takes possession of my mouth again, deeper than before, claiming every corner and tasting every bit. The kiss muddles my thoughts.

Instead of wrapping my fingers around the wooden angel to use as a weapon, I curl my arms around his neck, grasping the thick column and tunneling my fingers into his inky hair.

With a groan, he grabs my hips and settles me against the hard thrust of his cock while surging even deeper into my mouth.

“Madness,” he growls between kisses. “I cannot taste you enough.”

He doesn't wait for a response before devouring me again. I welcome him, openly, eagerly, until logical thought slips away. Until giving myself to Marrok feels necessary to my soul.

Until I stop fighting and surrender.

He lifts his head and scans my face. *Wonder. Desire. Possessiveness.* “My god. You *do* want me.”

“I can't help it.”

“Nor can I.” His restless hands journey up my waist again, pausing just under my breasts. Anticipation lurches through my body.

“Please...” I whimper.

His stare delves into me as he takes my breast in his hot palm with a groan. “Fuck.”

My dizziness returns in force. I steady myself against him, but it's no use. He swipes my tight nipple with his thumb. I pant. I arch. I beg with my stare. He watches my helpless reaction with rapt fascination.

“Do something.”

“Aye.” Marrok lifts me against his body, slanting his lips possessively over mine, and carries me down the hall.

To his bed.

In the dark, he tumbles me across the mattress that smells of cloves and moss. I reach for him, craving the press of his body on mine, the drive of his cock deep inside me.

His silver eyes glow as if he aches for all that and more.

He kneels on the bed, flipping my skirt out of his way, and settles his body over mine, parting my legs with his own and lying between them as if he belongs there.

He covers me. He scorches me. He seeps into every pore of me as he grips my face and stares into my eyes.

Oh, god. This is really happening.

We're on a collision course. I dreamed of him.

Maybe it's fate.

I writhe, lifting my hips to meet the huge cock he's grinding against me. Pleasure rolls through my body as I meet his next toe-curling kiss. His touch is like drowning in champagne—heady, bubbly, and smooth as it goes down.

I tug at his black T-shirt. “Marrok...”

He inches back and studies me. “Is this another hoax?”

“I need this. Need you.”

“What you make me feel is madness.”

“I don't understand.” In the real world, he would never want plump, head-in-the-clouds me.

Reality is hugely overrated.

Especially when he reaches back to his nape, grabs a fistful of his T-shirt, and yanks it off.

Oh. My. God.

Marrok was intimidating when his shoulders strained the seams of his shirt, but now that he looms above me—a beast of raised veins and battle scars over taut muscles all covered in ink—I gape. Everything about him shouts *warrior*.

My mouth goes dry at the treasure trail of dark hair that disappears into his low-slung jeans. “Marrok...”

I can't keep my hands off him, exploring his stony shoulders and his muscled chest before drifting down, until I'm flirting with the snap at his lean waist. He's hard

everywhere—pecs, arms, abs, and cock—now threatening to bust open his zipper.

Then he growls and covers me with his bare torso, his kiss dominating. He lifts my thighs against his ribs, spreading me wide, and rolls his hips, surging against my clit.

When he breaks away suddenly, he rolls me to my stomach. I protest, but he ignores me, setting impatient fingers at my waist trainer and undoing the laces as if he's worked his way into a woman's corset many, many times. When he's finished, he rolls me over again and shoves both it and the remnants of my torn shirt off.

Cool air and his hot gaze hit me. All that stands between Marrok and my breasts is a clinging scrap of white lace.

He tears it away and flings the strappy wire garment across the room. His hungry stare falls on my nipples.

They bead harder under his scrutiny.

“So tempting...” He skims his knuckles across one.

Tingles skitter to life. My pussy clenches. “Please...”

He palms my breast, caressing, fondling, thumbing the aching point. I gasp. The sound hangs between us as he squeezes the sensitive bud. “I will suck these. Raw. You will beg me to stop. I will not listen.”

His words make my pussy clench. I pulse even harder when he wraps his lips around my nipple. He sucks it ruthlessly rough while his fingers tend to its twin, alternately grazing and tugging, making me wetter and driving me insane. He alternates, back and forth. Back and forth, consuming my breasts—keeping his promise—until every nerve screams. Until my nipples feel tender and swollen. Until they hurt deliciously.

“Marrok...”

“I warned you.” He directs his attention to the other taut tip, dragging it between his teeth before nipping it hard.

He continues with his torment—pinching, biting, sucking—getting more demanding with every pass.

I love it.

My nipples have never been sensitive, at least when I touched them. They, like the rest of my body, seemed to be waiting for Marrok. Every inch of my skin feels blessedly alive.

He inhales my nipple as he grips my hips savagely and presses against me in a purely sexual rhythm. It makes me impatient to lose his jeans and my underwear. I've never hated fabric so much.

Desperate now, I drag my fingers through his hair and tug his mouth to mine. He lays a frenzied kiss on my lips and grinds against my clit. There's no air between us. No distance. I have no beginning, and he has no end.

I love it.

Dizziness spins my world. Fire and euphoria charge my veins. Marrok kisses me like he's dying for me.

It's mutual.

"Mine." His breath rasps hot on my neck.

Desire pitches in my stomach. Vertigo overcomes me. If I wasn't already on my back, the dizzy sensation swamping me would knock me on my ass. "Yes."

The connection between us locks into place. I don't understand why.

But it's undeniable.

"Yield to me," he demands. "Spread your legs and let me fuck you."

"Yes."

The second I consent, he yanks at my skirt, forcing it down my hips. I kick away the garment.

It's barely cleared my legs when he grips my panties in his enormous fists. They shred in his hands, and he tosses the scraps to the floor. He doesn't give me an instant to think before he shoves my thighs wide and thrusts two fingers deep.

A prickle of hot pleasure-pain zips down my senses.
“Marrok!”

“I dreamt of you,” he growls, his stare eating up my body.
“I dreamt of you naked, and I craved you. But this...seeing you now...”

He thumbs my clit as his fingers burn and stretch me. My body seizes with pleasure. I surrender, not even trying to stay sane as he makes my world spin.

“This cunt,” he whispers against my breast before he tongues my tender nipple again. “’Tis not merely touching it I wish to do. I will touch it until you writhe for me. I will consume it until you cry my name. I will fuck it until you scream out who you belong to.”

Him. No one but him.

The small circles he rubs into my needy clit have me whimpering, arching, and spreading myself wider—anything to please him. Anything to end my torment.

The euphoria his fingers lavish on me drowns my thoughts. Pleasure buzzes under my skin. My heart beats with pure, heated need. I chant his name.

“Aye. Mine...” he encourages.

Words I don’t know and don’t understand begin to echo in my brain. The phrases sound random and odd as they zoom through my fevered thoughts. At first a whisper, they grow louder and louder as Marrok drives me closer to orgasm with every thrum of my heart.

“Come for me.”

I can’t resist. I can’t stop it.

Perspiration films my skin. My craving for him swells. Blood pools and boils. Then climax soars into a sweltering bliss as I explode, ecstasy tearing through me like nothing I’ve ever felt. I scream, clutching Marrok as if he alone matters.

As if, from this moment on, I have ceased to be alone in this world.

While I come down from my high, he curses and tears at his jeans, shoving them down and off. He looms above me naked, tall and powerful as a god, packing power everywhere.

The unfamiliar words swirling in my head suddenly take shape. Old-fashioned. Ritualistic. An instinct I don't understand forces me to offer him my hand. He clasps it, our gazes connecting. Marrok falls to the bed, covering me again, settling between my thighs.

"Become a part of me, as I become a part of you," I whisper.

"I look forward to it."

"And ever after, I promise myself to thee. Each day we share, I will be honest, good, and true. If this you seek, heed my Call. From this moment on, there is no other for me but you."

CHAPTER
SIXTEEN

Marrok

I know those words. I've read them in magical texts when I researched Morgana's book. I've heard an impassioned wizard croon them to the female in his arms.

The Mating Call—magic's equivalent to wedding vows.

They are the last words I expected to fall from "Olivia's" lips. Does she understand their significance?

She must. Despite disguising herself as another, with that birthmark and those eyes, the witch cannot hide from me. True, she feels, smells, and tastes not like Morgana. But who else could she be?

More importantly, why does she Call to me? Why lure me to her side for life when she already controls my forever?

"Marrok?"

Her vulnerable expression twists my gut. I should feel naught for her—not pity, not lust, not this mad desire to possess and protect her. This craving clouding my logic is but an illusion. This arousal stiffening my cock will not last.

Then why do I feel compelled to speak words that will bind us for eternity?

Because she rouses you far more than any woman ever has.

Is it possible that, after damning me to centuries alone, Morgana now wants me in her twisted way? Could breaking my curse be as simple as accepting her Call?

'Tis a gamble, but Morgana already holds my destiny in her cruel fist. Staying the course for a millennium and a half has changed naught. If I say nay, I have no chance of escaping this hell.

A compelling argument for playing her game, whatever it is.

Except her soft body under mine crushes my good sense. The scent of her arousal drives me mad. The urge to bury myself in her slick cunt reduces me to my most primal urges.

No good can possibly come from entwining myself with this viper. Yet if I refuse her Call, what new horror will befall me?

The alarming possibilities tip the scales.

My heart jolts wildly as I stare into her eyes and drag the words from memory. “As I become a part of you, you become a part of me. Each day, I will be honest, good, and true. I heed your Call. 'Tis you I seek. From this moment on, there is no other for me but you.”

Relief trembles across her face. Then she smiles—blinding and beautiful. Her expression lights the room like the summer sun after a long, rainy spring. Her joy reaches into my chest and twists everything inside, sparking an answering need to consummate our new bond.

Did my vow somehow compel me to desire her above all others?

You wanted this version of Morgana the moment you stepped into her gallery.

I shove the voice away and focus on my new “wife.” She wanted this. Nothing will stop me from fucking her. She will take every inch of my cock over and over—until I sate fifteen long centuries without satisfaction or she falls limp with exhaustion.

After this night, I will either be mortal again...or Morgana's pawn for the rest of eternity.

"Touch me?" she whispers, uncertainty cracking her voice.

She looks fragile as she bites her lip, her big eyes questioning.

God's balls, even hating Morgana with every fiber of my being, even fearing her new ploy will enslave me, I cannot resist. Never have I felt this gnawing hunger for a woman. My need to claim her only grows the longer she lies naked in my bed.

"Everywhere," I vow, my voice low and rough.

Planting my fists in her hair, I kiss her—her lips, her graceful neck, the swells of her lush tits—losing myself in her female musk. She is heady, like nothing I have ever smelled. Sandalwood tempered with vanilla and a subtle, compelling scent—floral?—I cannot place.

Then she arches. Her perfect nipples seduce me.

I skim my lips down. Her scent is strongest in her cleavage, and I inhale until I feel drunk. I kiss her, my tongue lapping at her perfume.

"Marrok..." she mewls, cupping her breasts as if they are the source of her pang.

Her small hands cannot quite contain her tits. The sight of her trying ups my lust.

Like a man possessed, I suck one of her swollen nipples, tonguing and nipping it, inflaming it until her breath catches and her back twists. She tastes achingly sweet, like the purest sugar.

I give the other my attention. She clutches me in wordless demand and lifts her hips in desperate entreaty. I sink ever further under her spell, inhaling her deeper.

While my head swims, I lap her hard tips, one after the other, drawing each into the heat of my mouth and reveling in her high-pitched whines. Then slowly I drag my teeth up one velvety peak whilst roughing its twin between my thumb and

finger. I repeat the process until both swell anew. Until she hisses in pleasure. Until she unconsciously spreads her legs for me.

Resisting her unspoken invitation is impossible.

I graze my lips across her addictively soft skin, laving the gentle swell of her belly before nibbling at her lush hip. Her round thigh I cannot help but devour.

My first night with Morgana so many moons ago, she ran me down like a parade of war horses, demanding I fuck her over and over until I felt trampled. Never did she betray her passion until climax hit her in a hard rush, giving me almost no time to bask in her surrender.

Now I see pleasure slowly overtake her once more. Goose pimples spread across her skin. Her flush rises. The broken pleas of her whimpers ring through my dark bedchamber. Morgana's obvious weakness to my touch—which she makes no attempt to hide—confuses me.

Another facet of her game...or could her reaction be real?

It matters not. We are mated now. She is mine. And in this moment, she is everything I crave in a woman—honeyed, welcoming, and yielding, with generous tits to worship, wide hips to grip, and a juicy cunt to plunder.

Eager to explore this new Morgana, I drag my thumb over the stiff nub between her legs. She feels wetter than before. She has swollen to a puffy, slick pink. Triumph jolts me as she gasps, her rosy lips falling open. She blinks at me as if I'm her god and I alone can save her.

“Marrok!”

Morgana wishes me to believe she is weak to my touch? No telling why, but I intend to learn how far I can push her.

“Aye?”

“What are you doing to me?” she pants.

This she asks with a straight face, as if she does not understand fucking? As if she has never been touched?

“I would make you feel good,” I murmur, breathing hot on her mound as I slide my fingers over the ivory silk of her inner thighs.

“Marrok!”

I respond by laving my way to her cunt. Her swollen folds are a temptation. I inhale her, hell-bent on driving her to a body-wracking climax. I want to rattle her. I want her to scream for me. I want to tear down her barriers and expose her scheme—whatever it is.

With a growl, I settle my mouth over her, ravenous to learn her taste. The moment her flavor hits my tongue, she intoxicates me.

I will never get enough.

She bucks up to meet my lips. Her small fists grip my sheets as I swipe my tongue over and over her needy clit. Her body tenses, telling me with hard nipples, rosy skin, and a seeping pussy how much she desires me.

I want to own every inch of her.

She swells against my tongue, breathing hard and thrashing. Mere heartbeats pass before her climax approaches. I need to wring it from her. I crave her screams. I want to see her jolt, hear her plead, taste her pleasure.

Next time I will delay her orgasm—and prolong my thrill. There will be nothing sweeter than hearing her beg me for the relief only I can provide...or withhold.

As she cries my name and convulses in bliss, I bask in my absolute command of her body and lick her like a starved man, determined to drag out every hoarse groan and wonder-filled sigh. Reckless exultation seizes me as her screams bounce off my walls.

My impatience to claim her surges. Desire to fill her, to fuck her, to dominate her obliterates my good sense.

I am a fool. Oh, she gives all appearance of surrender, but I know the scheming witch. 'Twas witless to engage in whatever cunning she wages.

Even so...I cannot stop from sliding up her flushed body and sinking between her fleshy thighs. I take her mouth in a kiss thick with urgency and press my stiff cock to her swollen cunt.

Wet. Hot. Silky. Mind-boggling.

Mine.

She gasps, eyes widening as I tease her with a shallow thrust—and encounter something I never expected to find.

CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN

S hock sears me. “You are untouched?”

Morgana possesses the power to regrow her hymen?
'Tis not possible.

But the proof blocking my entrance does not lie.

Has her magic grown to such seemingly impossible feats?
Bloody hell...

Her inky lashes flutter up from her red cheeks. Her violet eyes are dilated, dreamy. She's more beautiful than ever. The woman steals my breath and floods my loins.

The voice in the back of my head reminds me to exercise caution. If I do not, I will succumb to her enchantment and lose more than my mortality.

But I fear 'tis too late for that.

“Y-yes.”

A virgin.

How?

“Marrok.” She swallows, a heart-tugging insecurity all over her face. “Please...”

Not only must I claim her for strategy's sake, but since answering her Mating Call, I find her irresistible. I burn to make her mine.

Danger be damned.

“Hold tight to me.” I tangle our fingers together.

She nods and squeezes my hand, excitement and wonder shining in her eyes.

That expression melts my enmity.

I shove all thought aside, inhale her heady scent, and brace myself.

With a forward push, I tear through her barrier. My groan merges with her gasp as I thrust down. She loses a jagged cry. I ease back, then tunnel down again, repeating the process methodically until she's panting and I'm buried inside her to the hilt.

"There." I brush a stray curl from her cheek. "It is done."

Morgana gives me a shaky nod. "This feels... I can't explain it. Meant to be? Does that sound weird?"

Not as weird as it should. "I understand."

She smiles again, her expression not merely open but inviting me deeper. Need claws up my spine.

I ease out, gritting my teeth at her tightness, groaning at the spine-melting friction. As I push in again, she breathes a sound that's something between a sigh and a whimper. She's perfection. Claiming her has me feeling euphoric.

My reaction makes little sense. Morgana has enjoyed the centuries of torture she's heaped on me. Why am I not inflicting the same? Why do I feel compelled to be tender?

Because magical mate bonds affect humans, too?

That matters not. Nothing does except the possibility that I might become mortal again...*if* I can complete our joining. Because I have been deprived of orgasm since my last days in Camelot, I have doubts.

Where does that leave me?

Morgana arches to meet my next thrust. Gripping her hips, I pick up my pace as I seize her mouth and slide into the velvet glove of her cunt again. Passion rushes up my spine. Pleasure pools in my heavy balls. By god... The urge to release is already overwhelming.

Rapture screams in my head as I drive into her over and over. She tightens and flutters.

So close...

Shifting my angle to graze her pleasure spot, I fill her again. She shudders, gasps. Her legs wrap around me as she tenses and tosses her head back. Her body squeezes me tight as she cries out. My pleasure spirals, taking me up, up, up. *Fuck!* Climax is upon me—closer than any time in the past fifteen torturous centuries. Right...there. I stand at the precipice, at the edge of the cliff, so ready to fall.

There I stay, so high I feel drunk on her. Delirious.

Yet still tethered to my torment.

Wildly, I pump inside her, sliding, falling deeper, reveling in the sensations. My skin feels alive. My lungs work like bellows. My body trembles. Ecstasy is so close; I can taste it. The right touch will send me into endless bliss.

Morgana clings to me, dusting kisses along my jaw and up my neck. Sweat trickles down my back and pours from my temples.

I lunge into her once more. Pleasure threatens to drown me.

I pray for the little death.

But seconds become minutes. Morgana moans, tenses, then comes apart again. I grit my teeth and forge on, thrusting hard, slamming my headboard to the wall, and reaching for the satisfaction just beyond me.

After she digs her nails into my back and climaxes a third time, I roll away with numb legs and a foul curse. Bitter defeat chokes me as I stare at the dark ceiling, panting, my body covered in sweat and my cock hard as a pike.

Denied completion again... God's blood.

She curls up beside me, soft, womanly, and sated. Despite the futility of my need, I want to roll on top of her and fuck her more.

I refuse. She is the salt in a wound that will not heal. She is the cudgel beating my howling soul. She is my destruction.

And I will forever be joined to the maker of my torment, unable to touch another woman, nor to climax with my “wife.” I underestimated Morgana. Pity I did not see this new horror coming.

“Marrok?” she whispers tentatively. “Are you okay?”

Now that I know she has fucked me for eternity? How does she expect me to respond?

I should not give her the satisfaction of my anger; she will only use it against me. But her wide-eyed confusion, even obvious in the moonlight, makes me livid.

“What the bloody hell are you about? Why trap me in this immortal torture? What further amusement could I possibly hold for you?”

She blinks. “What do you mean?”

“Playing the innocent to the end, are you, Morgana? Stop.”

“Morg— You still think I’m her?” she shrieks, yanking the sheets over her bare breasts.

Her outrage seems so real. This new Morgana is full of trickery and too convincing by half. She is fatal to trust.

“Aye. You fool me not. I will defeat you and free myself, witch. Somehow. Someway. This I vow.”

“You took my virginity, believing I was another woman? All that need and passion... You lying snake! I can’t believe I let you...” She backs away with angry tears trembling in her eyes. “Don’t touch me again!”

I wish my touch was a calculated ploy, rather than my weakness to my foolish need. “Act not as if you are the one wronged. We both know better.”

“No, one of us knows you’re a delusional asshole. I felt... connected to you, and you were faking it? Of course you were. You were never going to want me. God, I’m an idiot.”

Does Morgana try to stir my pity and trick me into admitting how desperately I desire her? Never. I will bite off my tongue before admitting I felt the bond between us.

“I won’t make the mistake of letting you touch me again,” she vows. “Get the hell away from me—and stay away! As soon as the sun comes up, I’m leaving.”

Can she? Morgana spoke the Call, and I answered. Though I possess not a drop of magical blood, I suspect those words are binding—for us both. So regardless of her pull, she cannot go, and I cannot let her. Yet somehow, I must guard against falling deeper under her beguiling spell.

I don my clothes in angry jerks. “I care not. I have no use for a witch, especially a treacherous Le Fay.”

I slam the bedroom door behind me. Instantly, I *feel* Morgana on the other side. Her confusion. Her sadness. My anger glories, encouraging me to continue my rampage.

But her absence bludgeons me with a deprivation that’s almost painful.

Christ, the power of this pull between us...

I force myself to prowl my cottage, calling upon my limited knowledge of magical mating bonds. If I am stuck with Morgana for eternity, will she be every bit as bewitched as me? Or am I doomed to obsess over the witch who has given me naught but endless hell?

The questions haunt me as I sink onto the sofa, cradling my head in my hands. I fear I will crave her. Forever. With our mating, she saw to that—and probably takes perverse pleasure even now in crushing me.

The only other possibility is...unfathomable.

This new Morgana surrendered not merely her body to me, but herself. She pleaded for me. She cried out in pleasure. She teared up afterward, exposing her emotions as clearly as words on the page of a book. I read them all. So unlike the Morgana I lay with centuries ago.

What if...she isn't Morgana, but a Le Fay woman named Olivia? What if her birthmark and those violet eyes were passed down generation after generation? What if she is a twenty-three-year-old innocent who just gave herself to me?

Nay. My dream of her was too vivid, too powerful. Who else but Morgana could concoct something so real? Her unpredictable behavior must be a new, more subtle form of warfare she's chosen to wage.

Then battle we will. Peaceful death and release from this hell of her making; I will not stop until I have them. Though I crave revenge, I can never repay Morgana for the pain she has inflicted or for the centuries of loneliness I have endured.

But I will endeavor to do my best.

CHAPTER
EIGHTEEN

The dream of Morgana, in the guise of Olivia, pelts me again.

She stands before me like temptation personified, naked and exquisite. A vivid, erotic vision I suspect Morgana orchestrated for my torture.

But in this dream, instead of disappearing into the swirling mist after she lures me with her exquisite body, she curls her arms around my neck, presses tight to me, and kisses me with wild abandon. I hold her, taste her candied mouth, and drink in her fevered responses. An unshakable lust curls in my belly. Unable to resist, I lay her flat on my bed, seize her hips, and blindly tunnel in, groaning in sheer relief as we join.

My solace is fleeting. As before, Morgana opens the Doomsday Diary and disappears.

I awaken on my couch in a cold sweat. Darkness engulfs me. My cock throbs, stiff and aching. When did I last wake hard and hungry for a female? A few centuries past, at least—after I realized Morgana’s curse was not a riddle but a paradox I can never solve. When I accepted that I would never again have relief.

This unwelcome erection must be *her* doing.

The second she crosses my brain, urgency forces me to my feet. I cannot reach my “wife” fast enough. Of course I must ensure she did not flee. I cannot be free of her torment until she opens that bloody book.

Is that the only reason you seek her?

Silencing the voice in my head, I stop at the threshold of my bedroom. Through the shadow, I see her sleeping in *my* bed where I claimed her.

I sigh in relief before I bury the feeling.

On her side, she lies curled, hair wild around her, her body wrapped in my blanket. Moonlight glimmers off the silvery paths on her face. Tears?

At the sight, something twists in my chest.

I tiptoe to the bedside. Before I can stop myself, I kneel and graze her cheek, as if I can soothe her with a simple touch. As if I should even want to comfort Morgana...

But I do.

My fingers linger on her downy skin. She looks innocent. Delicate with her soft features and girlish lashes. So bloody young.

It's an illusion. She was born a witch in every sense of the word. And I must resist her because Morgana deserves not my pity.

Still, how was she a virgin? And why did she seem so... human?

In her sleep, she sighs. My hard cock jolts with fresh lust at the breathy, needy sound. Then she tussles in my blanket, writhing until she exposes one bare shoulder and the swell of her breasts.

My desire surges.

Gnashing my teeth, I resist my urge to slide between the rumpled sheets and sink deep into her body, rouse her for the thrill of hearing her scream my name again. And again.

Fuck. Where Morgana failed centuries ago, my "wife" has succeeded.

She has ensorcelled me.

Gathering my will requires Herculean effort, but I leave the room and seek sanctuary on the sofa.

I pick up the carving I began days past. The piece hasn't yet taken shape, but I allow my fingers to take me on an instinctual journey.

With my thoughts free, I home in on the woman in my bed. She thwarted me last night, but we are not done sparring. I am a warrior. I am a fighter. I will not stop until I command or cajole the witch to free me. And though she may have gotten the better of me following our "vows," she also unwittingly revealed her weakness.

She melts at my touch.

I intend to use that ruthlessly—again and again—until she gives me what I need.

Olivia

I wake alone, aching and exhausted. I should be grateful the hunky lunatic I stupidly fell into bed with last night gave me some breathing room. But no. I'm hurt that Marrok left me after we...

Best not to think more about what happened. Or about how much you liked it.

He must be laughing. He melted me with barely a touch, and I climaxed for him not once, not twice, but three mind-blowing times. I didn't know I was capable of multiple orgasms. Even my trusty rabbit can't deliver that kind of ecstasy on repeat. But Marrok touched me, and poof! I came like a porn star.

He didn't. At all. Obviously, I didn't do it for him.

I'm so humiliated...but not surprised.

Note to self: next time you have an unexplained need to touch or trust him, don't.

Seriously, what kind of pathetic loser practically begs the man who abducted her to take her V-card? After he shows his

crazy by insisting he's immortal and I'm the witch who cursed him?

It's almost as ridiculous as my plan to lure Marrok close, whack his head with one of his carvings, and escape. All he had to do to thwart me was lift me against his body, carry me to his bed and—

Stop there.

Unfortunately, the memory of his arms cradling me against his powerhouse chest as he sank into me plays over and over, royalty-free, in my head. Worse, still wrapped in sheets that smell faintly of his woodsy musk, I burn for him again.

Maybe because I've never had so much human contact at once. The little unloved girl inside me gorged on his touch. Not smart, but semi-understandable, right? Obviously, one shag with the man can't undo years of my mother's rejection, but he made me feel so special, like the center of his world.

You're going crazy, too. And your libido needs an Ambien.

And what is it with the bond I felt with him after speaking those mysterious words? Why did I even say that stuff? They sounded like medieval wedding vows. And when Marrok answered in kind—how did he know exactly what I ached to hear?—that only intensified our connection.

Yep. I'm definitely going crazy. Time to start the ultimate walk of shame back to London.

Feeling run over by a truck, I groan as I scrape together the strength to sit up in the shadowy room. Now I see everything the darkness obscured last night. And my jaw drops. *Wow...*

His headboard depicts a tale of two lovers romancing one another in the shadow of a hill. It alone must have taken years to carve in such sharp, perfect relief. And the four posts are comprised of wild wolves, howling with their heads tossed back like snarling sentries. They're so lifelike, I swear they would bite me if I touched them.

Talent like Marrok's should be celebrated. He should be adored by the art world. If I could get his work in my fledgling gallery, he could put us both on the map.

But he not only lives in solitude, he prizes it. Probably a good thing since he's convinced he's immortal and cursed.

As I stand, I wince. Everything between my legs is tender. My nipples sting. My skin throbs in agony. A wave of weakness slams into me.

Grimacing with the effort it takes to raise my wrist, I glance at my watch. Even my eyes hurt. 5:42 a.m. Hopefully, he's still sound asleep. I pray that being "immortal" doesn't mean he keeps vampire hours.

As I scoot to the edge of the bed, pain surges again. My legs burn. My stomach churns. The needy clenching between my thighs nearly overpowers all that. But I force myself to keep moving. Now is my best chance to escape.

I stumble out of bed, gasping when cold air hits my skin. My legs threaten to give out. And damn it, I'm naked.

Because Marrok undressed you before he had his wicked way with you, and you put up all the fight of a gnat.

What's done is done. Dwelling on the past won't change it. Yada, yada, yada.

The window in the bedroom looks way too narrow for me to fit my ample ass through. It's demoralizing.

I shuffle across the hardwood floor, each step stabbing needles of agony through my soles. Dizziness muddles my brain. I can't catch my breath.

Locating the bathroom is cause for celebration, even if the short trip exhausts me. I shut the door and mercifully relieve myself...but the room has no window. A sink, yes. A shower, check. A toilet in the adjoining closet. But no means of escape.

If I want out of here, I'll have to tiptoe through the great room and probably past Marrok on my way out. I refuse to try that naked. Thankfully, his navy-blue bathrobe hangs on the back of the door.

More of his addicting scent wafts from the garment. Incredibly yummy. I bet he looks great in it, like he does in everything.

Stupid train of thought.

Gingerly, I rise from the toilet. My thighs are sticky with blood and my own juices. Oh, and we didn't use a freaking condom. Another worry...

I'd love a shower, but that will have to wait. For now, I amble on shaky legs and grab his robe, biting my lip to hold in a cry of pain.

What the hell is the matter with me? I feel as if I've come down with the flu times ten.

Moving slower than an arthritic woman on a rainy day, I don the robe, then creep out of the bathroom and into the open kitchen-living area.

Marrok sleeps on the couch between the front door—which requires a key he's undoubtedly hiding—and the back door. That escape route is my best bet...but I suspect it won't be easy.

As I hobble toward the exit, I scan the place. Despite being isolated, it's decked out with a high-tech security alarm, electricity, running water, and every other modern convenience, right down to an electric shaver and a microwave.

But he owns no television. More discouraging, I see no telephone. Even if I could remember where my purse fell, the battery on my phone is dead. So much for calling for help.

Since Bram has not appeared, I assume he's not coming, and Marrok's assurance otherwise was a lie. God, how could I have so blindly and recklessly followed the big beast here?

Resisting the urge to cry, then sleep for a decade, I press on, side-eyeing Marrok as he dozes, his head cocked at an awkward angle. His face, even in repose, makes my heart sputter and rattle.

As I sneak past him, my fingers itch to touch him one last time. The rest of my body aches for him so badly.

The pain increases with every step I put between us.

Finally, the exit is within reach, and I brace myself. The damn dizziness returns, mingled with more wretched pain. My head... This is like a hangover, the worst possible case of the flu, vertigo, food poisoning, and my period thrown in for good measure. I fall to my knees. When I think of leaving him, I feel like I'm going to hurl.

But I have to get up, get out.

Drawing a fortifying breath, I reach for the doorknob.

My hand never makes it.

CHAPTER
NINETEEN

Marrok

A feminine gasp awakens me in time to see Morgana crumple to the ground by the back door. I dart across the room and kneel beside her. She looks too pale, twenty shades lighter than white. Her breaths are shallow, her body so bloody still. Did I hurt her last night? Was I too rough?

Cease being foolish. Naught about Morgana is delicate.

I shake her. "Witch? What ails you?"

Not a muscle twitches.

"Morgana?"

What game is this? Never was she passive or helpless. A new tactic, mayhap? Does she punish me because I called her not by her preferred name? In eons past, she flew into wraths for far less.

"Olivia? Open your eyes." I brush my fingers across her cheek. "Do you hear me?"

She feels hot. A fever?

Frowning, I lift her into my arms. She nearly burns me.

I cannot imagine what illness has befallen her. Can a witch suffer a nonmagical malady? I know not, but what except sickness could account for her ashen skin radiating heat like the sun?

Or is this a hoax to drag me deeper into her scheme?

“Burning...” she moans. “Need...”

Cradling her, I rise to my feet. She wails again, this sound rife with pain.

I scowl. “Need what?”

Silence.

I stride down the hall. Lord, she weighs less than nine stone. I tip the scales at more than double that. And last night, I settled myself on top of her, pushed inside her, and insisted she take every inch of me...

With a grimace, I lay her on my bed. “Tell me. What do you need?”

“Touch...”

I settle my palm on her forehead. If anything, her temperature has ticked up. If this is a pretense, 'tis her most convincing.

“Me,” she whimpers.

“I must cool you down.”

I race to the kitchen. Ice. Loads of it in a bucket. Some towels soaked in cold water. Aspirin.

Hands full, I return to find her unbelting my dressing gown. Dumping the supplies on the bed, I wrench the knot free and draw off the garment.

“Better?” I ask once she lays bare.

She moans again and arches toward me. The woman is sick, yet the sight of her soft body has me unbearably hard. Aye, that makes me a scoundrel, but the pull I feel to her, especially when she parts her legs and tempts me with her tight cunt, is undeniable.

Doing my utmost to focus, I drape one of the cool, wet cloths across her chest. She lurches from the bed, screeching and tearing at the cool compress as if it scalds her. I urge her

down once more, holding the cloth in place while she thrashes like a wild thing.

The bloody irony of trying to save Morgana... Once, I would gladly have killed her for my freedom. Now, for reasons I cannot fathom, I am determined she will not die.

“Stop!” Her wild violet stare leaps from her pale face. She shoves at the little towel, again baring her taut nipples. “Touch...me.”

She cannot mean that the way it sounds.

I reach for the bucket. “With ice?”

“No!”

She clutches my shirt. “With. Your. Hands.”

The witch wants me to touch her sexually? Whilst she burns with fever? Is this some side-effect of the magical mating words we spoke?

“Lie back.”

I lift the wet towel from her, fetch my fan from the wardrobe, and plug in the whirring device. As it stirs the air, I study the woman. Morgana? Olivia? Whoever she is, her fever spirals out of control. Her desire for sex must be delusion.

The witch who cursed me centuries ago would never fall prey to that sort of weakness.

Again, the possibility crosses my mind, unbidden. Did I kidnap the wrong woman?

Morgana could not have been a virgin. Nor would she ever have shown a hint of vulnerability, especially to me.

God, is this woman truly Olivia Gray, a *different* Le Fay? If aye, she will wish to skewer me, and I would deserve it. But now, I must discern what ails her. She grows paler by the moment, her breaths more agitated, her body increasingly restless.

She rubs her hand across her belly, then slides it lower, her fingers plunging between her spread thighs. Planting her feet

on the mattress, she lifts her hips and parts her wet folds. “Marrok...”

Her breathy plea shoots fire straight to my cock, but I resist. The woman needs rest, not sex.

Mayhap my presence agitates her, and she will improve if I leave her sight?

I slosh water in a cup, then approach, aspirin in hand. We battle until she swallows the tablets and half the water.

Then I pace to the living room, worried as hell, sinking to the sofa to whittle on the carving I began earlier. Still, I cannot take my mind off the woman in my bed.

For the next hour, she refuses food and screams—for me, for my touch, for my cock. I grit my teeth as her shouts become whimpers, then, as afternoon approaches, they dim to broken moans. Then silence, disturbed only by her restless thrashing in the eerie quiet.

For the hundredth time, I creep down the hall and risk a peek at my magical “wife.” She lies as hauntingly still and pale as death.

I race to her side and press my fingers to her carotid. Her pulse is thin and erratic. She scarcely breathes. At the thought of losing her, denial roars.

Who the bloody hell can help her? A doctor? Aspirin did naught, and never have I seen anyone suffering a flu-like fever crave sex.

This must be a magical malady.

Who could I...? Bram. Yes. I will summon the devious wizard and pray the man imparts something useful.

No doubt his help will come at a price.

I dart across the room and yank open a drawer, finding the white pebble the wizard handed me yesterday. I run to the back door, fling it open, and toss the rock in the air. “Bram Rion.”

Seconds later, a pop and a screech fill the air as the stone morphs into a large white bird and flies away.

Less than two minutes later, Bram appears from the misty woods, looking stylish as ever in a midnight blue oxford and pristine black pants.

I have been around magic and suffered its cruelties for centuries. Yet some feats still amaze me. “The rock actually brought you here.”

“Of course. It’s a simple spell. I bewitched my first rock at age four and—” Bram frowns. Then he gawks at me. “You *mated* with her? You exchanged magical vows?”

I still. “How do you know?”

“You have a magical signature. It’s fuzzy but muted with her color.” Bram paces a circle around me. “But this signature... Something isn’t right.”

“Later,” I snarl. “Mor—Olivia”—I sigh, raking a hand through my hair—“whoever she is, she barely lives.”

“What the hell?” Concern tightens Bram’s expression. “Take me to her.”

’Tis possible he can help, but I trust him not. “What will you do?”

He sends me a hard stare. “You called me for a reason.”

Aye, desperation. “Hurt her, and I will kill you.”

I storm into the cottage and down the hall. He rushes behind as I push into my bedchamber and cover her naked form.

She has worsened these few minutes past.

When Bram catches sight of her, he stops cold. “Oh, no.”

“What ails her? Is it magical?”

He approaches the bed, then lays a palm over her forehead before he counts the pulse at her neck. Even if she is ill, watching the varlet touch her whilst naught but a thin sheet covers her nearly has me snarling out a threat.

When she kicks, exposing a lush hip and a womanly thigh, I shove the wizard aside, block his view, and cover her again.

She clasps surprisingly strong fingers around my wrist, but her voice sounds near death. “Need... Touch.”

This again. I close my eyes. Last night, I touched her and reveled in every second of the pleasure. And even if I never find satisfaction, I ache to heap ecstasy on the beauty in my bed. But not whilst she lies at death’s door.

“What ails her is magical, is it not?” I ask Bram as I extract myself from her grip.

“I can’t say.”

“Listen, you spell-casting bastard, ponder later how you can use the fact I have bound myself to Morgana or some Le Fay witch for eternity. Now, you will tell me what the bloody hell sickens her. I refuse to watch her die.”

“My Aunt Millie should see Olivia. Her magic is of the heart. She is an expert in matters of mating and family. She can likely explain this. I’ll also do a bit of research—”

“We have not the time to locate others and browse dusty tomes. Do something!”

“This won’t take long.” Bram files from the room.

I should follow and watch the miscreant, but every instinct tells me not to leave the witch in my bed.

Moments later, a knock resounds through my cottage.

“Invite my aunt in,” Bram yells.

Easy capitulation is unwise. He insists we are friends, but I am not daft. He merely wants the Book of Doomsday. If not for the blasted tome, the wizard would likely leave my feverish mate to die.

Scowling, I race to the door and glare at the older woman standing just outside.

She is fey-looking—small stature, dancing blue eyes, and glowing skin. Her age? She could be anywhere between forty and four thousand. She wears a sedate blue dress with white

flowers that ends just below her knees and a long gray jacket of the same length. Her sensible black shoes and matching bowler hat nearly convince me she is harmless.

“You have an ill mate, dear?” She smiles.

The expression transforms her. Goodness shines from her eyes. She wears serenity like a second skin.

I nod. “Come in.”

Millie crosses the threshold, studying me with a hint of a frown. “Is she in bed?”

“Aye. Follow me.”

I take hold of the witch’s arm and urge her to my “wife’s” side.

In the room now lit by dawn, the older witch glances between us. “You spoke magical mating vows, right?”

“Last night.”

The woman’s blue gaze dances around me again, tracing my figure. “You merged with her. And yet...not wholly.”

Is she asking if I penetrated my mate yet failed to release my seed inside her? “Aye.”

This conversation is horrifying on every level.

“There’s your problem. She is an untransitioned witch, and it is inadvisable for anyone magical who has not yet attained their powers to mate. It creates a dependence that, unfulfilled, is sadly fatal. The fact you’re nonmagical...” Bram’s aunt shakes her head. “Despite how virile you look, she will likely require care beyond your abilities. It’s tragic, but best make her comfortable until... Well...”

I whip my glare to Bram. “Give me the nonmagical translation for your aunt’s prattling. Now.”

He raises a golden brow. “What’s in it for me?”

Mercenary varlet. “I might know something about that book you seek. But if this witch dies...”

“You two are mates. A vow was spoken and answered. Normally, consummating the union seals it and provides the energy exchange necessary to keep someone magical healthy and alive. She gave you her...pleasure, and you did not give her yours in return.”

I seethe. “And your aunt says that Morgana—”

“Her name is Olivia.”

“Olivia, then”—I huff—“will perish because of me?”

“That’s the simple translation, but yes.”

“Because *I* am cursed?” Resisting the ugly curse on the tip of my tongue, I take a menacing step toward Bram. “I will be damned before I stand idly by and let that happen.”

“You don’t have a choice. Magically speaking, Olivia gave you her power. Since you didn’t...return the favor, you failed to combine her energy with your own and give it back. That leaves Olivia with a power deficit, which makes her weaker by the moment.”

“So...you say that, because we are mated, I must bed her often to keep her alive?”

“Yes, and, um...complete the joining, as it were.” He cast a glance at his delicate aunt. “I should also point out that this”—he reaches for the bracelet with the *laggagh* stone about Olivia’s wrist—“saps her further because Merlin created it to drain a witch of Morgana’s immense, centuries-old power. Your mate hasn’t yet attained her magic. She shouldn’t for a couple of years.”

“So...the bracelet is hastening Olivia’s demise?”

“I’m guessing a bit since no one has used it in centuries. But yeah. Do you have the whole picture now?” Bram drops his voice. “Because you haven’t orgasmed inside Olivia, her body perceives that you haven’t given her your vitality, only taken hers. Because you two are mated, she is now dependent on you for her energy. She hasn’t transitioned into a full-fledged witch, so she’ll need even more of your...um, vigor. Without exchanging energy often, she will lose power until she loses her life.”

I lunge at Bram with a growl. “If I fail to spill my seed inside her—something I have not achieved with any woman in fifteen centuries—she will die?”

CHAPTER
TWENTY

“Yes. You are now the battery that powers her existence.”

“Skin-to-skin contact will briefly provide your lovely mate a boost, dear,” Millie adds. “But a rousing romp in the hay to mutual satisfaction will revive her for hours, perhaps days, depending on the pleasurable energy exchanged.”

I stagger against the nearest wall. My mate is doomed.

While I sought Morgana’s downfall for centuries, the thought of this woman’s death fills me with panic. I know her not. We have fucked but once.

And if she is not Morgana, she will pay the ultimate penance for uttering a few words and sharing my bed. Even if she dies not by my hand, I will carry the albatross of guilt for killing her.

Bram leans closer. “No guarantees, mind you, but magical matings have been known to break a curse or two. Maybe, in addition to the sex, some remorse on your part for spurning Morgana centuries ago might help.”

’Tis not me I am concerned for. “Had I known the risk of mating with her... It is expected—even honorable—to kill in battle. But to die from absence of affection seems intolerably cruel. I sought not to do her harm.”

“Don’t give up.”

“I cannot until she takes her dying breath.”

Bram claps me on the back. “Good man. Let’s get this *laggagh* stone off her wrist immediately.”

My niggling doubts resurface. I grab the wizard before he uncuffs her. “You are certain the bracelet harms her?”

If she is Morgana, this alone prevents her from cursing me again.

“Quite,” Millie answers. “For her, the bracelet is a manacle trying to light up all of London using only her energy. It’s draining her system.”

“How do we know she is not Morgana?”

Millie frowns. “Her signature says she is Le Fay—quite the miracle, but—”

“If the woman in your bed was Morgana”—Bram cut in—“she’d still have days, perhaps weeks, of power under her skin. The *laggagh* stone blocks her from performing magic, but a witch of her strength would still be cursing, baiting, and mocking you, not near death.”

And my mate has worn the bracelet for scarcely twelve hours.

If the unconscious woman is Olivia, I have taken her innocence and made a dire mistake destined to cost my mate her life. “No chance she is Morgana reborn?”

The little witch scoffs. “Morgana was in exile even before I was born. She would be hundreds of years beyond the average magical lifespan, so she’s likely moved on to her nextlife. The only way she could return is through exceptionally powerful magic no one has seen in... well, since my Uncle Merlin.”

Millie presses a palm to Olivia’s forehead, then another to her heart. She frowns, then takes my mate’s hand and scans her magical signature with a deepening scowl. “She’s a descendant through Morgana’s son, not Morgana herself. In time, she will prove very powerful. But now, she is a normal, underage witchling.”

Guilt besieges me. “Fuck.”

“Maybe you need each other,” Bram suggests. “A Le Fay descendant might be able to undo your curse.”

Before my recklessness kills her?

Millie lays a soft hand on my arm. “Heart magic is my specialty, not future telling. But this girl... I can feel that she’s destined for importance. For greatness. She must be kept alive at all costs.”

I whirl on Bram. “My curse... You know it has denied me for centuries.”

He nods. “There is, perhaps, another way of keeping Olivia alive.”

“Aye?”

“To sever your connection with her would end her dependence on you.”

“What mean you?”

“Mate breaking,” Millie answers. “It’s rare, because we believe mates are fated. Once a pair mates, their lives become entwined. Since they need each other’s energy and pleasure, their life spans become similar. Mated pairs often have many happy centuries together. A Call is rarely issued without knowing the one they ask is their true love. And Calls are not answered unless—”

“Do you speak of magical...divorce?”

“Precisely.” Bram sighs. “With strings.”

Naturally. “Such as?”

“Mate breaking is long and painful for both parties. Excruciating if the bond is deep. Afterward, Olivia will not remember you. A witch’s mind is wiped clean so she can eventually take another mate and reproduce.”

Nay. I will never allow that.

Millie goes on as if I have not a violent urge to shut her up. “But she will always feel the pain of loss without understanding why. Her grief will linger—unless you meet again. Then her memories could return and endanger her. So if

you break this bond, you must go far away and never come back.”

This sounds horrific on every level. Olivia, being Le Fay, is likely the only person able to help me break this curse. Leaving her is not an option. But I will never allow another man to touch her. Nor will I watch her die.

I scowl. “How would breaking our bond help her?”

“If you separate, she will no longer need your vitality to live. She would come into her power naturally in a year or two. Well, if she survives the mate breaking.”

“*If* she survives?”

“Some don’t. It’s traumatic. Normally with a bond this new, the impact of breaking it would be minimal. Yours hasn’t been fully formed, but Olivia is very weak...”

So a near-certain death unless we discover the key to unlock my curse...or a probable death with a life rife with pain and loss should she manage to survive.

Once again, fucking magic has me in an untenable conundrum.

Unless...

I glare the wizard’s way. “Did you, perchance, manipulate me to obtain that book you want so bloody bad?”

“*You* called *me*. Why the hell would you think I cursed her into some ‘illness’ so I could take it? How could I have known you would magically mate? I occasionally see the future, but you’re giving me far too much credit. Besides, how would Olivia’s ailment get me any closer to the Doomsday Diary?”

’Tis right, he is, and I am grasping at straws. Much as I wish I could blame the cur, the fault is mine. I fucked up.

Before I can tell him thus, a little pop and a puff of white smoke appears. Moments later, a bird circles, whispering in Bram’s ear.

In the next instant, he blanches and bounds for the door. “I must go.”

I follow him down the hall, grabbing his arm. “But—”

“Later.” He shakes me off. “The MacKinnetts were attacked last night. It looks like the work of the Anarki. If that’s the case, my vision has come true. Mathias is back.”

Bram

That afternoon, I return to Marrok’s cottage in the Creepified Forest. I knock and wait long minutes.

Finally, he pries open the door, cradling Olivia’s limp body against his chest, still covered only by his bedsheet. With the press of his strong hands, he tries to still her, but she writhes restlessly, wrapping her legs around him. She laps her tongue up his neck. The man’s entire body is stiff.

“How is she?” But I already know. It’s not good.

“Stable, now that your aunt removed the stone from her wrist.”

“Need you. Inside me,” Olivia moans, nipping at Marrok’s ear.

“Shh.” He strokes her back. “She sleeps mostly. But when she is awake...”

His grimace tells me she’s demanding and insistent.

The Olivia I know would be mortified. But after today’s horrific events, I cannot spare a smile. And Marrok might hate magic and everything Le Fay, but the way he cradles his mate, it’s obvious he’s not immune to their bond.

“Sit.” Marrok steps back to admit me. “You look as if you have been to hell.”

I probably do. No doubt my hair is askew. My face is likely smudged with dirt and caked with sweat. I don’t care. The sightless eyes of the magical men and women I stared into half the morning, slaughtered needlessly and viciously by the

Anarki, haunt me. The missing children disturb me. The fate Auropha MacKinnett may still be suffering twists my gut.

“I have. And it will spread.” I fall into the nearest chair and lower my head into my hands. “Mathias is definitely back.”

Marrok follows, folding his warrior’s body on the sofa and cradling Olivia in his lap. She falls limp against him.

To say more now would merely mean reliving the horror, and Marrok already has his hands full—literally. Besides, I’ll have plenty of time to share the gruesome savagery when I present this development to the Council. “We’re looking for the Anarki hideout in my vision and hope to save Auropha and anyone else they may have captured, but it’s been hours.”

“’Tis grave news, indeed.”

Truer words were never spoken. “Have you decided what you’ll do about Olivia, keep her or break your mate bond?”

“I cannot let her go.” His gaze, full of concern, lingers on her pale, still form.

“You should know...if Olivia lives, Mathias will probably seek her, just as he will seek the book.”

He clutches her tighter. “Nay.”

“Yeah.”

I choose my next words carefully. Saving magickind from Mathias might not be possible unless I get my hands on the book. And until I discover how to steal it or end Marrok’s curse, I can’t touch it.

“The Book of Doomsday could win Mathias any magical war with a few strokes of his pen, but he has probably surmised, as I have, that it’s even more powerful if wielded by a Le Fay.”

Is Marrok aware that he cradles Olivia even more protectively?

“I realize there are no easy answers, and you have a monumental choice to make. But the survival of magickind is

resting on your decision.”

“Mine?”

I am tired of talking. Tired, period. Marrok hates magic—with good reason. He’ll do whatever he wants, never mind all those magical who will die trying to protect their loved ones, the witches Mathias will rape until death, the wizards he will kill for sport, or the younglings who will vanish into the disposable army he’ll use to commit unspeakable atrocities.

“You need to decide if you’re going to break your bond.” I glance at Olivia’s deathly pale face again. “If you do nothing, she won’t live to see the next sun rise.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-ONE

“Well, Bram?” my half sister prompts the moment I enter Goldcroft Manor.

I turn to Sabelle, who is far more interested in magical politics than I like. Magickind is no longer dealing with subtle intrigues and Machiavellian games. We’ve plunged into truly dangerous times. Yet she’s all too willing to jump into treacherous waters headfirst. As always, I stand ready to be my younger sister’s life jacket.

Sabelle recently celebrated her eighty-fourth birthday. Old by human standards...but young in the magical world.

On the other hand, she’s quick, clever, and understands magickind in a way few do. Despite her youth, she provides surprisingly sage advice.

“What did the Council decide about Mathias’s return?”

“Nothing. Too busy squabbling.” I roll my eyes. “Ineffectual idiots. Why did I agree to fill this vacant seat?”

“Because you are the future of the Council. Their time is nearly past. Patience...”

“The Council elders fail to see that if they rescind the Social Order, Mathias will have no cause to hide behind and will be exposed as an evil, murdering power-grabber.” I grit my teeth. “But they fear Privileged backlash if they rescind it even more than they fear Mathias. So they argue between prudence and action. They’ll keep arguing while everyone around them dies.”

She sighs. “You can’t be surprised.”

“They’re so bloody afraid of change!”

“What about Marrok? Will he give you the book?”

“He never admitted to having it, but I’m convinced he does. If I had any notion where he’s hiding the blasted thing, I’d take it. But he won’t part with it willingly until he’s broken his curse. That could take centuries more. Time we don’t have.”

“True, but you can hardly blame the man.”

“I would like to.”

Sabelle sends me a saucy smile. “In his shoes, you’d do the same.”

She’s not wrong, but... “The good of magickind—”

“Means little to a man who has endured centuries of hell because of it. Are you using your brain at all?”

“Whose side are you on?” I scowl.

Sabelle tosses a curtain of golden curls behind her delicate shoulder.

My sister looks like a cross between a faerie and a siren. Little wonder, since she has the blood of each running through her veins. If she ever finds the right man, he’ll stand virtually no chance of resisting her. But the bastard better, unless he has my blessing...or he wants to die.

“What about Ms. Gray? Aunt Millie told me of her... illness.”

“I think Marrok realizes she’s not Morgana. If I’m wrong, she’s as good as in the grave. And the Le Fay line will die, perhaps for good.”

“But they’re mates.”

I shrug. “But he might well be willing to cut out his heart for the chance to destroy Morgana. But that isn’t our problem.”

“Mathias is.” Sabelle sinks into a nearby chair. Cunning and fortitude blend into a determined expression that, as an older brother, scares the hell out of me. “We must do something.”

“Stay out of this, Sabelle.”

“Don’t be absurd. I may look fragile, but, like you, half of my genes come from Merlin’s royal line. I won’t sit about like some helpless princess while the rest of magickind fights. It’s my cause, too. My people.”

I can’t fault her logic. Why can’t she be totally selfish like her mother? Devanna would happily sit back and watch others die for her.

“Sabelle...”

She grabs my hand. As always, her touch soothes me. Thanks to her siren blood and potent magic, she can put her hand on anyone and make them feel whatever she wishes.

I scowl and try to shake free. “Keep your tricks to yourself.”

She squeezes me tighter. “Take a deep breath.”

Hell, there’s no fighting her once she’s made up her mind.

After I comply with her “request,” she soothes me by rubbing a soft thumb across my knuckles. Resisting is a losing battle. Peace settles comfortably under my skin.

Finally, she releases me. “You were saying? Mathias has gathered the Anarki again and is—”

“Wreaking havoc.” Grimness edges into my artificial calm. “If the rest of the Council refuses to act, I have no choice but to find those willing to put their differences aside and fight.”

Sabelle opens her mouth, but three deep gongs interrupt, announcing arriving company. From the sounds of the magical calling card, Lucan MacTavish has arrived.

Saved by the bell.

Mentally, I open a portal into the manor. Moments later, my best friend Lucan appears in my foyer with his mate,

Anka, his large hand clasping her much smaller one. Sabelle and I wander in to meet them.

Lucan sticks out his free hand. “Hello. Greetings to you. Peace be with you and yours. I’ll even add *live long and prosper* if you’ll tell me what the hell is happening.”

Reluctantly, I smile as I take in the well-mated couple. The match is a strong one. From good families, both of them. Powerful, magically compatible, well-educated, well-connected. Anka is the light to Lucan’s darkness, the laughter in his silence. I hope to make such a match someday. First, said witch will have to appear.

Another problem for another time.

I shake my friend’s hand. “Peace be with you and yours. I plan to live long and prosper, thank you. Here’s what’s happening—and none of it is good. The Council received a distress signal from the MacKinnetts in Surrey. The family took no heed of my warning, and I arrived to a bloodbath. All men and most women murdered—branded with a certain symbol we all know. Every child missing—six of them, the youngest just four. The Council member’s untransitioned daughter has vanished. Sound familiar?”

Lucan pales. “Your vision came to pass? Mathias is back?”

I nod grimly. “Who but the Anarki would wield that symbol? Who but Mathias would be behind such atrocities?”

“What can be done to stop them? Will the Council—”

“No. They won’t do anything except flap their jaws and ‘study the situation.’” The four of us drift into the nearby sitting room before I sink into a chair and regard Lucan. “We must take action. It’s time to find witches and wizards willing to work together for the greater good.”

“Magickind banding together, without arguing or infighting?” Lucan rears back skeptically. “You’re fantasizing, friend. That’s been impossible for...what, nearly four centuries?”

Sabelle nods. “Indeed. Where will you find the paragons with the necessary strength and resolve to fight a violent nutter

like Mathias, willing to put aside resentment and strife? The last thing you need is to babysit prats more interested in killing one another.”

Anka nods. “My grandmother used to talk about the old days, when magickind had a sense of community, not jealousy and blind hatred.”

“I never said it would be easy,” I admit. “The rest of the Council still can’t see that their Social Order has backed the Deprived into a corner they’re willing to die—or kill—to escape.”

Lucan casts a quick glance at his petite wife, who nods. “Whatever you need, count me in. Mathias must be stopped. And we know from his last campaign that he’s devious and powerful, so defeating him will require extraordinary ability and a unified front.”

“Now there are two of you willing to defend magickind against him.” Sabelle conjures tea and pours everyone a cup. “Three, if you count me.”

“I don’t.” I glare my sister’s way.

She tsks. “But you are friends. Now you must look at acquaintances, strangers...and enemies. Who will you call upon next?”

“I’ll speak to Simon Northam,” I offer. “I suspect he would welcome such a conversation.”

“The Duke of Hurstgrove?” Lucan clarifies.

“Yes. Oh, quite.” Sabelle smiles pertly. “He shall do. Very nicely.”

Silently, I agree. Best not to let on just yet. Sabelle may smile sweetly now, but as head of our line, I alone have the power to approve or deny any mating she might consider. Unfortunately, rebellion is nearly her middle name. “For the cause, yes. For you, little sister? We shall see.”

Sabelle crosses her arms and glares.

Anka laughs and reaches up to plant a kiss on her husband’s cheek. “Finding the perfect mate is worth the wait.

Believe me.”

Lucan turns to his bonded female, and his hard eyes soften as he lifts her knuckles to his lips. The love between them is tangible. I envy my friend’s good fortune.

“Assuming Hurstgrove is willing to help, that’s merely three of us. Who else could we approach?” Lucan asks. “The Wolvsey twins? They look hearty enough. Good bloodline.”

Sabelle laughs. “You’re kidding, right? Ronan and Raiden are lovers, not fighters. They spend all their time sowing their oats at some human pub called the Witch’s Brew.”

“They’re dishy...” Anka sighs, then giggles at her mate’s scowl. “But no one is more devastatingly handsome than you, my love.”

“Too right,” Lucan quips. “Still, despite their reputation, the twins might be worth a think.”

I nod. “I’ll drop into the pub soon and have a chat. Take their pulse, as it were.”

Lucan sends Anka a mock glare. “If you persuade them to join, keep them away from my mate.”

As Anka laughs again, Sabelle regards me. “Who else? I know that expression. You’re thinking something you’re not saying.”

She’s right, and my choices are bound to be unpopular. “Isdernus Rykard.”

My sister nearly chokes on her tea. “Are you off your trolley?”

Lucan gapes. “My question exactly. With the bad blood between you, that idea is completely mental.”

“He isn’t insane.” At least not entirely.

Sabelle arches a pale brow. “From the time I wore lace on my knickers, I’ve heard nothing about Ice, except that he’s unhinged. And violent. He despises you.”

“It’s mutual.”

“Whenever he’s around, you have the self-control of a rabid animal,” Lucan points out. “That won’t be good for the cause.”

I rub the back of my neck in a guilty gesture. “I’ll deal with it. But Ice is tough, and he has plenty of reason to want Mathias gone forever.”

“Will he welcome your overture?”

“He’s a powerful wizard. If I know one thing about him, he’ll do anything to crush Mathias. And he won’t wait for the Council’s permission. Those facts alone make asking him imperative.”

With a nod, Sabelle concedes my point. “Who else?”

No one speaks for long moments. The clink of Anka setting down her fragile white teacup mingles with the sound of Lucan’s sigh. Sabelle twirls a golden curl around her finger and looks at the carpet. I know what everyone is thinking. It’s unavoidable.

“If matters grow as grim as I fear, there’s no help for it. We must approach Shock Denzell.”

Though I’m sure Anka expected that name, she still gasps and faces me like a tigress, her amber eyes morphing from sweet to confrontational. “No! He’ll do everything possible to kill Lucan.”

Her mate reels her back against his side. “Because I won the hot woman, love. He wound up alone.”

“A fact you taunt him with every time we see him. I feel terrible! Shock will spend the rest of his life without love because I rejected his Call.”

“Don’t feel sorry for the sod. He had to know you would never agree to be his mate. He’s tainted.”

“No. His bloodline isn’t the best, but his background is a matter of birth. It’s hardly his fault.”

“His temper and reputation are.” Steel underscores Lucan’s voice. “Denzells have always been a dark family, and he’s their black sheep.”

Sabelle leans forward and squeezes Anka's hand, then faces Lucan. "Perhaps, but Bram is right. Unless we can wrest the Doomsday Diary from Marrok, we'll be relying on every witch and wizard—friend and foe alike—to come together as one to defeat Mathias."

The enormity of that task isn't lost on anyone.

I nod grimly. "Our nightmare has begun."

CHAPTER
TWENTY-TWO

Marrok

As daylight fades, ominous shadows lengthen through my bedroom window, falling across Olivia's deathly still form.

Everything I have done to save her has been for naught.

In the hours past, I attempted to cool her overheated skin with a cold bath. She thrashed like a wild thing, screaming and writhing until I worried she would harm herself. The moment I settled her back in bed, she scratched four jagged, bloody paths along each of her thighs.

To stop her, I restrained her wrists to my headboard.

Not giving into her anguished protests and squeals of helpless agony is utter hell.

I have mere hours left to figure out how to save her.

She whimpers as she rolls to her side and tries to curl into a fetal position. The gesture does not merely pull at my heartstrings; it wrenches them. Worry consumes me. If I could, I would take this pain for her.

"Olivia?" I croon in her ear.

Clearly, she is not Morgana. Bram's aunt assured me of such, but more compelling are facts. Eons ago, the sorceress failed to grasp that I left her bed not merely because I owed Arthur my fealty, but because I felt naught for her, save

fleeting lust. She cared only that I scorned her first. So why would she expend the magic necessary to become virginal again, then surrender herself to me?

She would not.

Besides, Morgana cackled gleefully whenever she used others as her pawns. Never would she allow herself to be vulnerable before any man for any reason at any time. Olivia has spent the hours since Bram's departure begging me for mercy. For my touch. For my cock.

They cannot be the same woman.

My other clue? The first moment I laid eyes on Olivia, she awakened an ability I thought long dead—the capacity to care, something I have not done in centuries. Something I never did for Morgana.

Aye, the sex Olivia and I shared was scorching. She tempted me closer to satisfaction than any woman since the Dark Ages. But my feeling for her stems from something deeper than a good fucking.

Morgana was beautiful...but vain, demanding, and lazy. By contrast, Olivia seems intrepid, friendly, and genuine.

She moved across an ocean alone, determined to achieve her dreams. She fulfilled the first by opening an art gallery. Now she searches tirelessly for her father so she might know the man. I laud such tenacity. Morgana merely manipulated or bullied others until they did her bidding.

Had I met Olivia under different circumstances, had I known not she is Le Fay, I would have pursued her relentlessly. After all, I have time on my side.

Olivia does not, and I must act—now.

Joining with her, then severing our bond if I fail to climax, is not an option. According to Millie, mate breaking is an hours-long process. The beauty lying naked in my bed has not that long to live.

The possibility of her perishing pains me. I fear asking why.

The mating bond affects you as it does any wizard. The thought of never touching Olivia again is beyond agonizing, right? Bram murmured before he left. *Nor will you tolerate another man's hands on her.*

The coxcomb speaks true. I crave Olivia, and I will kill any man who dares lay a finger on her.

Beside me, she whimpers again. Grimacing, I cradle her cheek. She nuzzles her face into my palm, seeking my touch. Her silent trust warms me—yet scares the piss out of me. I, who have stood alone for centuries, now have someone who depends on me. Someone who matters to me.

Someone Le Fay.

She whimpers once more in her coma-like slumber.

Tamping down panic, I smooth a dark curl away from her hot brow. “Olivia?”

“Need you.” Her voice is faint and dwindling. “Inside me.”

With what may be her last breaths, she begs me to save her. I cannot fail to listen. Mayhap I am foolish, but I will sweat and grind and thrust all night, focus, pray—whatever is necessary to keep her alive.

My curse be damned.

I have not a moment to lose.

Steeling myself, I draw my shirt over my head. With a button and a lowering of my zip, my jeans fall next. I rarely bother with drawers, so the slide of denim down my hips and the removal of my socks leave me bare.

Then I climb into bed with Olivia, sliding my naked skin against hers. She is like embracing an inferno. I quell my instinct to recoil from the heat and pull her closer, against my chest.

“Yes...” she gasps.

Zounds, she is beautiful. I brush my fingers across her cheek, my thumb over her pillowy lower lip. Everything from

the arch of her raven brows to the tips of her purple toenails makes me hungry for sex. For satisfaction.

For her.

Impatience demands I cover her, kiss her, touch her, and work inside her. I resist.

Dwelling on my own need and frustration has denied me completion for more centuries than I care to count. Tonight will be strictly for Olivia.

Arouse her. Build her desire. Feel more than her body. Give yourself to her.

I close my eyes. Our bond has grown since we first exchanged vows. Thin but sturdy, our connection wraps around me as I nudge Olivia onto her back, then settle on top of her, balancing my weight on my elbows.

Her eyes drift half-open. She stares up at me with a heavy-lidded stare. 'Tis a good sign. Olivia has not been this alert in hours.

Our gazes connect. I jolt as she parts her lips and swipes her tongue across them. My cock was already stiff, but at the sight I ache. Every breath I inhale is packed with a riot of luscious scents—vanilla, flowers, sandalwood, and female musk—that arouse me more. Each groan I exhale fills me with anticipation. I am dizzy with want of her. I sweat. I am painfully aware of her soft breasts pressed against me, her gentle belly under me, and her thighs spread wide for me.

I lower my head and brush my lips across her jaw, then down her neck. Her scent gathers here, strong and sublime.

Moaning, I lick her slowly. She is part salty, part sweet. The tang of her sits upon my tongue and makes my mouth water. How did I miss this sensory seduction the first time I was inside her?

Under me, she looses a long, pleading sound that burns my blood in my veins and pumps it straight to my cock as if she holds me in her fist. God, the power this woman has over my desire. Never have I felt its like.

“Marrok...”

“Aye, love?”

She strains against the restraints around her wrists with a cry. “Need you. Inside me.”

I close my eyes. ’Tis the wrong thing to say if she wants me to build our pleasure.

“Soon.” I caress her ribs, then the swells of her breasts, unable to resist.

Her head thrashes from side to side. Her nipples bead. Her back arches. “Now.”

Then Olivia wraps her legs around me and lifts her hips in demand. How am I to say nay to that?

Every muscle tenses. Sweat beads on my back. “Let us not rush. I—”

Olivia slants her mouth across mine and kisses me.

Instantly, her flavor bursts across my tongue. Not minty like toothpaste. Not heavy like coffee. Not sweet with something she’s eaten. Just...Olivia, indefinable and irresistible.

Addicting.

Groaning, I plunge into her mouth in a fevered melding, aching to taste her, plunder her, and master her with unrelenting passion. Olivia tightens her thighs around me and obliterates my caution with her needy mewls and seductive undulations. If ever I have touched a more responsive woman, I do not recall. Or mayhap Olivia makes me forget every other female.

I grasp her hips and pin her still, covering her mouth with my own. I am starved for her, yet every taste does naught to assuage my hunger.

Growling, I take the kiss deeper, sucking in sensation and still demanding more.

When I come up for air, Olivia is flushed. Her hard nipples stab my chest. Her ragged breaths shout that she races to the

brink.

And we have done naught but kiss.

“You want me to fuck you?” I growl in her ear as I slide my hands possessively down her body.

Desire darkens her vivid eyes as she arches at the right moment, filling my palm with her breast, hard tip begging for my attention. I comply, grazing and pinching the sensitive tip. She cries out, pleading without a word.

My restraint slips. I skim my lips up the silky valley between her tits. By hell’s fire, her scent is strong here. Inhaling her makes me harder.

I tongue the soft skin of her cleavage and taste the spice of her desire. It mixes with her sweetness and female strength to beguile me. One taste will never be enough. Nor will a million.

Greedily, I lave her nipple. It leaps to attention against my tongue. A fresh burst of her spice spills into my mouth. Olivia overloads my senses. I am bloody ravenous, dying for more than a mere taste of my mate.

“Yes!” Her plea is weak but unmistakable.

My control evaporates.

“Is your cunt wet for me?” I dip my fingers between her folds.

Drenched. Thrill spikes. I slip my thumb over her swelling clit, back and forth, taking her to the edge...

But in the part of my brain still capable of logic, I know allowing Olivia release will expend too much of her energy whilst she’s at death’s door. I must prepare her well since she has taken my cock but once, and I am desperate to slam deep inside her. But I want to share her pleasure, not wring it from her.

At least for now.

I slide my fingers through her hot furrow. It takes all my will not to thrust my fingers in her clinging cunt and probe her

in all the right spots until she cries out.

“Marrok, please. Don’t...don’t stop. Oh, my god!” she cries. “I need you. Inside me.”

Her body tenses, her legs splay wide. She is moments from ecstasy. I dare not arouse her more. I yearn to. Violently. We are mated, and I should have the privilege of watching her come, to see her face flush with the pleasure I give her and hear her scream my name.

Before I can, I must seal this bond by giving her all the vitality I can expend from my body into hers. I must come inside her.

Somehow.

I am not a man given to prayer, but at this moment, I would gladly get on my knees and beg.

Please God, do not let her die.

Gently, I ease another finger inside Olivia and stretch her wider. She arches off the mattress, whimpering and wet, as she slants her lips over mine in a kiss that bewitches me.

My errant thumb slides over her clit again. She sucks in a tremulous gasp and stiffens. Her sex ripples around my fingers in warning.

Cursing, I pull free and roll on top of her.

Olivia wraps her legs around my hips and scatters wild kisses across my throat that make me shiver. “Hurry.”

When she wriggles beneath me, I shudder, then shove a hand between us, align the head of my cock with her tiny opening and shove into her, thrusting hard. The tight squeeze of her cunt boggles my mind and adds a new layer of torment to my pleasure.

She cries out, her thighs squeezing me like a vise as she tugs at her wrists, still tied to my bed. “Marrok...”

Seeing her restrained and waiting for me ratchets up my arousal. “Aye.”

Olivia writhes under me, dragging her lips under my jaw.

“There... Like that,” I groan. “Put your mouth on me. Aye. Such a good girl.”

As if my praise gives her ideas, she bites the sensitive skin between my neck and shoulder. I thrill that, intentional or not, she seeks to mark me as hers.

I do the same, nipping at her neck as I impale her cunt with a savage thrust, withdraw inch by torturous inch, then drive forward again, slamming my headboard into the wall. Deep. Deeper. So perfect. Fuck. I savor the grasping of her tight passage, wrenching one moan after the other from her.

As I glide over her sensitive spot, Olivia’s breath catches. Again, I shove in and batter the mouth of her womb. She gasps, then bites my lip before melting the assault into a kiss.

I become lost in her, a prisoner to the rush of electric pleasure that races up my cock, straight to my gut. I harden more, though I did not think such possible.

Gritting my teeth, I repeat the process. A slow thrill ride of mind-boggling pleasure begins to unravel me. Another thrust, and the sensations stack on top of each other, staggering me. I begin to sweat and tremble, letting the need build and build. But Olivia flutters against my cock.

“Not yet, love,” I command. “Wait.”

“No,” she pants out. “I need—”

“I said wait. Together. We both need it.”

Clamping my fingers around her restrained wrists, I hold her to the mattress for more thrusts and drugging kisses. Under me, she stiffens and twists. The pulses of her cunt push me to the brink. Need gathers, coiling lower and tighter. I have not been this close to achieving ecstasy in centuries. I must reach it.

Shoving aside the consequences of failure, I surge inside Olivia again. My breath comes hard. So bloody close...but that means naught.

Damn it, this isn’t simply my orgasm at stake; it is Olivia’s life. Our forever.

Fate and magic have forced me into a terrible position. I channel my fury into determination. It mingles with desire as I hammer into her with quick, possessive thrusts, urging us both to the precipice of pleasure.

“Look at me,” I demand thickly.

Olivia opens her heavy lids, looking slumberous and lust drenched. Her violet gaze crashes into me. The connection of our bond surges.

I want to give her everything, and I want to make her *mine* in the most primal way.

Need gnaws away the chains restraining my pleasure. Desire gathers and pools, only deepening as her face flushes with yearning. I sweat as I barge my way into Olivia again, losing myself in a woman as I never have. We share far more than fucking. With every thrust, our connection forges beyond mere sex.

The bond sinks into my chest. It penetrates my soul. It burns every vein and every inch of flesh. It rips away every barrier between us.

“Mine!” I growl before I capture her mouth.

Another plunge inside her, and she imprisons me with her thighs. Her cunt clutches me more tightly. Her kiss destroys centuries of desolation.

Everything in my body converges. I cannot breathe. I cannot stop. I can only grip her wrists, stare into her eyes, and shout my throat raw.

My world explodes.

Every part of me lights up. She burns me. She consumes me. Satisfaction roars through my body as I climax like the pleasure will never end. Like it will shatter me into a million pieces.

Ecstasy overtakes me, and I pour my seed into her in a hot, never-ending stream of bliss.

“Marrok!” Olivia sinks her teeth into my shoulder as she cries out, her cunt clamping on me, prolonging my seemingly

endless orgasm.

When pleasure releases its chokehold on me, I feel spent. My heart rate slows from its wild rush. I find myself boneless and languid as I have not been in over a millennium.

“Fuck,” I pant, slumping against her.

I have given her every bit of vigor I could. I surrendered a part of myself that I have never given another.

Is it enough to save her?

CHAPTER
TWENTY-THREE

My chest tightens as I search Olivia's face. Beneath me, she glows with vitality in the moonlight, not only alive but amazingly alert, as if her hours of life-threatening illness never occurred.

Relief floods me, lifting a crushing weight off my back. I hold her tighter, feeling lighter than I have in centuries.

Millie was right. A rousing romp in the hay to mutual satisfaction solved everything.

But how did I finally manage orgasm?

Magic...or something more complicated?

In a millennium and a half, I have bedded thousands of women. Since running afoul of Morgana, her curse withheld climax every time. Until tonight. Until Olivia. Because I focused on her and her pleasure instead of my own need? Did that release the black heart Morgana accused me of possessing?

Or mayhap our bond overrode the hex. Not only the vows we exchanged, but my growing attachment to Olivia. Indeed, as I hold her against me, our connection swells, twice as thick and dense. 'Tis like a tangible rope tying us together. I have been alive for centuries, but before her I was dead inside.

I would do anything for her. I will fight to protect her. I will kill any who dare touch her.

Did those feelings revoke my curse?

Olivia blinks up at me and frowns, her confusion turning to shock as she unwraps her legs from around me. “Oh, my god! What happened? Get off me.” She jerks against the restraints around her wrists. “And untie me!”

Every instinct I possess as a man, as her mate, urges me to remain buried deep inside her.

“Are you listening? Let me up.”

“Nay.” She is mine. I will not release her.

Olivia gapes, her expression between incredulity and anger. Would it be wrong to tell her she looks lovely, all flushed and freshly fucked?

“Aye,” she mimics. “Get the hell off of me and tell me what’s going on.”

“If you cannot recall, I would be most agreeable to demonstrate again.”

“Just tell me. How did we get...”

“In my bed? You were ill. I feared for you. I brought you here to recover.”

“And you thought I’d ‘recover’ if you tied me to your bed and...”

“Fucked you until you screamed my name?” I nuzzle her neck.

“Stop that.” She shudders, her demand raspy.

“Never.” There will not be a day I will not want to touch my “wife.” “It worked.”

“Did it?” She scowls. “Ugh, my head hurts. Did you drug me? Is that why I was ‘ill’?”

She thinks I poisoned her in some way? “Nay.”

“You didn’t slip me something so you could...” She sends a meaningful glance down at our entwined bodies.

“Think you I hoodwinked you into taking some substance so I could bed you?”

“It sounds crazy to me, too. But why else would I be, um...horizontal with a man I barely know?” She wriggles, then gasps when I press my hard cock inside her again. “Oh, my god...”

“You are naked, under me, and stuffed full of me because you need me.”

“The hell I do!” She twists, biting her lip and trying—unsuccessfully—to hold in a heavy-lidded groan. “As soon as I’m free, I’m calling the police.”

“Hear me well, Olivia. I did not use trickery to seduce you. That is the work of knaves and scoundrels. When we came to this bed, you were very much willing.”

“You’re lying. Y-you slapped that bracelet on me... It must have somehow wiped out my inhibitions?” She glances up at her wrist where naught but my leather strips remain.

“Nay. *You* enticed *me*. ‘I am dying to know how good we can make each other feel.’ Recall saying that?”

“So you would let your guard down, and I could escape. You went on and on about bedding Morgana to break your ‘curse.’ Oh, god, do you hear the words coming out of my mouth? I’m stuck in a freak show!”

“You are not Morgana.”

“At least you figured that out,” she huffs.

“’Twas a simple mistake. You have her eyes and her birthmark.” My gaze strays to the strawberry stain between her tits. “But that is where the resemblance ends. Tonight, you pleased me in every way—a feat more impossible than you know. That had naught to do with Morgana...and everything to do with you, love.”

“I’m not gullible enough to fall for your hot hunk from yestercentury shtick. Believe me, I’m aware of my utter lack of appeal, so just...don’t. Let me up. I want to go home. We can forget this ever happened.”

“Never.” I press a kiss to her mouth. “You understand naught about your appeal, but I will show you—often—how

much I desire you.”

“I’m not signing up for more of your torture. I don’t want it.”

Her racing heartbeat and shallow breaths make a liar out of her, especially when she squirms again and tightens on my cock. I glide deeper into the warm press of her cunt.

“Torture that makes you gasp? Makes your nipples tight? Makes you scream my name?” I grin. “But I will let you up for now so we can talk.”

Since she seems not to remember her illness, I must explain. Once she understands, I will happily spend the night inside her, basking in her cries.

As I ease free from her cunt, Olivia gasps. “You didn’t use a condom? This just keeps getting worse. If I get a disease... Or pregnant. Crap!”

I grip her face and skewer her with my stare. “Hear me well. There will never be barriers between us. Ever.”

“Yeah, because we’re not doing this again. Untie me, damn it!” She jerks against the leather restraining her wrists once more. “You may not care about things like pregnancy and HIV, but I do.”

Pinning her to the mattress, I plunge inside her snug cunt again, straight to the hilt. The sensations are too good to feel bad, especially when she gasps in a sound rife with pleasure. “You were ill, Olivia. I made you well.”

“How? I don’t understand what’s happening.” Her voice shakes.

“Shh.” I press kisses to her neck and ease slowly in and out of her tight cunt. “Tell me the last thing you recall, love.”

Her breaths turn choppy. Her cheeks become rosy. Her eyes slide shut. “This is insane. I remember being...um, in bed with you. Then there was pain and weakness. It was horrible, like a nightmare. Then I came out of it and found you on top of me. And now we’re...um, here again.”

I brush her cheek and fill her with long, languid strokes. “As you emerged from the nightmare, what did you feel?”

“This weird...connection to you. I feel it right now. I don’t know why. It doesn’t make sense—”

“It makes perfect sense,” I assure her with a kiss. “Do you recall speaking words to me before we first shared this bed?”

She nods. “I blurted them. I don’t even know why. I don’t know what they mean. But you answered me. Then we, um...” Her dark brow furrows over those expressive, unusual eyes. “But you didn’t... Of course you didn’t. I don’t excite you.”

“You do, love.” I feel my way down her body, gratified when she unconsciously spreads her legs wider. “Aye, we fucked because of the connection brought on by those words. I took your virginity. And nay, I did not climax. But not because you failed to excite me. Because I was cursed. You are my key.”

“Is that why you kidnapped me and brought me out here?”

“Aye. From the moment I learnt we shared the dream of us naked and impassioned, of you holding Morgana’s book, I knew something was afoot. I know not why that happened. I only know I have wanted you from the moment I laid eyes upon you.” I stare into her eyes as I fuck my way deep inside her again. “And you wanted me.”

“I did.” The confession slips out as she raises her hips to meet my next stroke.

I tilt her up and drive down deeper, picking up my pace as her breaths grow choppy. “That dream led me to believe you were my enemy, so I lured you here. And I am not sorry.” I take her lips in an urgent yet lingering kiss. “I believe you are meant to end my immortal curse, but not in the way I first imagined.”

Beneath me, Olivia stiffens. “You’re still insisting that you’re immortal?”

“No insisting about it. I am.” Or I have been.

“You don’t need to make this stuff up to get laid.” She whimpers and wriggles beneath me as if the demands of her body override the indignation of her brain.

“Nor would I. Argue not while I make you come.” I pick up the lazy pace of my thrusts, settling my mouth over hers and sinking my tongue deep.

Zounds, but ’tis bloody impossible to ignore the sweetness of her kiss, the perfection of her cunt. I could fuck Olivia all day and all night and still want her more.

She meets me kiss for kiss and stroke for stroke, soon planting her feet on the mattress and gyrating up, crashing into me with every push into her wet heat.

“That’s it. Give me your passion. Fuck me in return.” I nip at her neck, inhaling her vanilla-and-floral musk.

“This is insane.” Her opinion doesn’t stop her from digging her nails into her palms or tossing her head back to expose her vulnerable throat as she moans. “Marrok...”

“Aye.” I stroke into her faster, then faster still as I grip one hip and settle my thumb over her clit. “I want your pleasure. Give it to me. Come now.”

She tightens. Tingles brew at the base of my spine. My stones draw up tight. Ecstasy flirts and coaxes. All it will take to tumble me into climax is for my magical “wife” to fall first.

I pummel her. My bed shakes with each thrust. My lungs can no longer keep up with my need for air. My legs feel boneless, and my heart thrashes wildly. But naught matters except for Olivia’s pleasure.

“Marrok!” She strains against her leather bindings as orgasm overtakes her. She bucks like an unbroken animal as I ride her to screaming completion, spilling my seed inside her again as deep as I can. As if it’s a biological imperative.

Somehow, this climax is even more intense and sublime than the last.

How deep am I falling for this woman?

Panting, I pull free from her snug clasp and roll to her side, staring at the ceiling, giving praise to whatever higher power brought about my welcome change.

“Marrok?” Olivia tugs at her restraints.

Quickly, I roll above her and untie them. “Sorry. ’Twas necessary, lest you hurt yourself more. Though you did look quite fetching bound to my bed.”

She scoffs. “Hurt myself? I wouldn’t—”

“You did.” I point out the raw scratches on her thighs.

“*I* did that?”

I hold her fingers above her face. When she sees the blood under her nails, she grimaces. “Oh, my god.”

“I did not lie. Not about drugging you, not about restraining you...and not about the fact Morgana used the book—the one you saw in our dream—to curse me to immortality when Arthur was king.”

Clearly, Olivia struggles to believe me. “You have to admit, you sound like you belong in a mental institution.”

I nod. “Over the centuries, I have tried nearly every way to die.” I search for some way to convince her, but Bram told me Olivia has no idea magic even exists. “Do you know aught of magic?”

She frowns. “Hocus-pocus stuff, like David Copperfield?”

“Nay. Not illusionists, people born with magic. Like Merlin. Or...Harry Potter.”

“They’re fictional.”

“Folklore misremembers much of Arthurian history.” He rolls his eyes. “Merlin was quite real—and very odd.”

Her face clouds over. “Are you trying to convince me that you’re both immortal and magical?”

“Nay, merely immortal, cursed by someone magical.”

“Morgana Le Fay?”

“Aye.”

Dare I say more? She is newly recovered. To tell her we are mated and that she is a descendant of one of the vilest witches to litter history's pages could send her into another shock. She will have many questions, for which I have few answers and even less proof.

"Morgana Le Fay wasn't real either."

"Unfortunately, she was."

"It's legend. Come on..."

I reply not. Mayhap if I give her time to consider all I have told her, she will be better able to accept the truth.

"Crap! What day is it?"

"Wednesday."

"Holy..." Olivia scrambles to her feet, then gasps, blindly reaching for my sheet to mop up our combined release as it drips down her milky thigh.

I grab her arm. "Where do you think to go?"

"My shop. I've been out for a whole day. No one is manning it, and I need the money—"

"You have been ill, and the hour is still early. Later, we will find someone to keep your shop until you are fully recovered."

"I feel fine. I have to run my business. Now that you know I'm not Morgana and that I don't know anything about the book—"

"I alone can prevent you from falling ill once more."

"I thought you knew nothing about it," she challenges.

"I know how to prevent it."

"What, you have a special tonic?"

How do I explain this if I withhold the fact we are mated?
"We must fuck. Frequently."

Olivia bursts out laughing. "Give me a break. You really don't have to make up all this stuff to get a piece of ass. You're a gorgeous guy. Coffee and a chat would get you nailed

by pretty much any woman you want. I don't know why you went to this much effort for me..."

"I have fabricated naught. I want you. You need me. I will protect you."

"From what?"

"If I mistook you for Morgana, others may," I hedge. "Ruthless killers will hunt you if they believe you are the evil sorceress."

"I think the chance that anyone else will mistake me for an Arthurian witch is pretty slim." She rolls her eyes. "Do you have a phone so I can call Bram?"

"You must stay here."

"For...? You know what? It doesn't matter. Good luck with all your curse-breaking and whatever. I'm leaving, and you're not stopping me. I need to open *A Touch of Magic* in a few hours—" She winces. "Um, I meant what I said earlier about your talent. You're going to consign your carvings with me, right?"

"If you will rest here another few days, aye."

"That's coercion."

"When it comes to caring for you, I possess no sense of guilt."

I intend to keep Olivia safe...and lay her back so I can fuck her again, while reveling in the fact we can satisfy each other.

Does being able to spill my seed—twice now—mean Morgana's terrible curse ended? Am I mortal again?

I leap from the bed, flip on the bedside light, toss on my pants, then rush to the simple maple chest I carved decades ago. Beside it, I wrap my fingers around a worn handle that conforms to my palm and lift the familiar weight.

"What are you doing?" she demands, holding my sheet against her naked body with one hand while trying to dress with the other.

I tear off the protective leather casing with a cry of triumph.

Let us see if my immortal days are over.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FOUR

Olivia

Marrok grips a long, wickedly sharp dagger that gleams in the artificial light. It's huge and imposing—like the man who wields it.

“What are you doing?”

He prowls back in my direction, looking like the Chippendale's version of a horror-film slasher.

Now that he's had his fun, is he trying to kill me? I'm more shocked than I should be. Even though I have hazy memories of him caring for me while I was out of it, he's pretty much a stranger. I was stupid to let our connection give me an inflated sense of safety.

I scramble to the opposite side of the mattress, taking the sheet with me. “If I had known that telling you I want to leave would make you homicidal, I would have kept my mouth shut.”

“God's blood, woman, I mean you no harm.” He holds up the blade. “This is for me.”

Then Marrok draws the dagger across his forearm, slicing deep. Blood gushes from the open wound in a sickening torrent. My knees nearly buckle. “Stop! Oh, my god—”

He drops the blade. Blood rolls down his arm and pools in the crook of his elbow, drizzling to the hardwood floor in a

metallic-scented rush. Since he's seen me naked, I abandon the sheet and rush to the bathroom, trying not to panic.

Towels. I need to find them. I have to stop Marrok's bleeding, then somehow get him to a hospital. Bram? I don't know how I'll call him when my phone is dead, but Marrok needs stitches ASAP.

I grab a stack of fluffy towels and dash back to the bedroom. I stop in my tracks when I catch sight of Marrok examining his arm.

The awful gash is gone. Completely. As if it never was. Only the blood beading on his skin and dripping to the floor remains.

I stagger back. The towels drop from my numb fingers. *Is this for real?*

There's no smoke, no mirrors. But something here isn't... normal.

Something magical?

That's bizarre, but I can't think of another explanation. No other scenario fits.

Now would be a good time to learn how *not* to hyperventilate.

Cursing, Marrok scoops up a towel and wipes away the lingering blood, bitter defeat darkening his face. "Thank you."

"What... You..." I raise frantic, confused eyes to him. "Your wound... It's gone."

He grinds his teeth and hurls the towel across the room. "As always, I heal in moments. Morgana still prevails."

I gape. "I don't understand. You're really...immortal?"

Marrok tosses his dagger on the dresser with a sigh. "I was born in the sixth century. Even with the longer life spans people enjoy today, I am unusual."

And then some.

Yet we're somehow connected. Even through my dizziness, when my pain was at its worst, my entire being cried out for him. That link urged me to give myself to him. Even now, I ache to reach for him.

Have you ever thought there's a reason you dreamed of the man before you met him?

I sink to the bed and drape the blanket over my body. "Why did Morgana curse you?"

He drops his head with a sigh. "I served under King Arthur as his most decorated warrior. We fended off the Anglo-Saxons at the Battle of Mons Badonicus, killing nearly a thousand invaders. We felt invincible."

A thousand? That turns my stomach. But knights of the Dark Ages lived vastly different lives from today's men. Killing one's enemy hadn't been sport, but survival.

"What does that have to do with Morgana?"

"Well-known warriors had devotees, the equivalent of groupies today."

"You had them?"

"My fair share...and the share that should have belonged to half of Arthur's army."

"Of course you did."

He's gorgeous. His magazine-ready face and manly, inked torso that eclipses the room make that obvious. What woman wouldn't want him?

The question is, why would Marrok ever want to sleep with me? Does that connection between us affect him, too?

He shrugs. "I was young and randy. Women were disposable, to be used for pleasure, then sent on their way. But all that changed after Mons Badonicus."

"When you met Morgana?"

He shakes his head. "I had known her for some while. Days before the battle, I made the mistake of taking the witch to my bed. I whispered sweet words and told her pretty lies.

Afterward, I left and never looked back. When the battle ended victoriously, we returned to Camelot and celebrated. I fucked others, and I did naught to hide it. Truly, I did not think she cared. But I underestimated her pride and vanity. And so, she punished me.”

“Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.”

“Indeed. She told Arthur I raped, beat, and left her to die. I doubt he believed her, but she bribed and manipulated ‘witnesses’ and made our encounter sound most damning. Arthur cast me out of the kingdom, took all I had fought for my entire life, and forbade me to return.”

“You’re kidding? Just like that? He didn’t defend you at all? He didn’t fight for you?”

“Arthur knew his half sister to be capable of all manner of retribution if he did not assuage her. He chose peace over right.” Marrok grunts bitterly.

“That’s horrible. And cowardly.”

“He had a whole kingdom to care about. ’Twas easier to replace one knight than to mollify his sorceress of a half sister. She would have wreaked havoc did he not side with her. Besides, more than a few knights were happy to see me go. More wenches for them, you see. They championed her cause.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Morgana found me weeks later, homeless and wandering. She swore if I came back to her bed, she would return me to Arthur’s good graces.”

“You refused?”

“I laughed. She was the source of my misfortune. I trusted her not—with good reason. She was the last woman I ever wanted to touch again. When I told her as much, she opened that damn book and cursed me. In that instant, I became immortal and incapable of obtaining sexual satisfaction. Until now. Until you.”

My jaw drops. “No.”

“Aye. I have told you all I know, and all I have told you is true.”

It sounds crazy. Then again, this whole situation is. “That was the first orgasm you’ve had in...?”

“A millennium and a half.”

And *I* was the woman to satisfy him? My knee-jerk reaction is ridiculous, but I’m stupidly giddy. Little unwanted me gave the big, bad warrior the ultimate pleasure? Maybe I’m not as ugly as Mom said.

“Why could you...um, have them tonight?”

“’Twould be more accurate to ask why I could have them with you, methinks. The answer is, I know not. I suspect it’s about our...connection.”

Yeah, that inexplicable something that makes me feel like I belong with him, to him. Despite the fact he’s saying fantastical stuff, I can’t deny feeling this bizarre closeness.

“I don’t understand what’s going on.”

“Nor do I.”

I blow out a breath and keep going. “Okay, so...after you realized Morgana had cursed you, what happened?”

“Beyond a great deal of swearing and teeth gnashing? Eventually, I paid her serving wench handsomely to steal the book and bring it here for me. Morgana damned me by writing in it, so I believed I could uncurse myself thus. But no matter how I tried, nothing made me mortal.”

The story just gets weirder and weirder. “That’s...wow. But you seem pretty detached now. She cursed you!”

“Anger burned out long ago. Centuries of it is draining.” He grunts. “Anyway, decades passed. As Camelot was falling, Merlin tricked Morgana into exile. I thought that might release me, but nay.”

“Exile?”

“Another realm as I understand it. Merlin created a dimension—another time? Another space?—for her.”

“He could do that?”

Marrok smirks. “Merlin could do anything he set his mind to. Think you it was a small feat to transform Uther Pendragon into the recently deceased Duke of Cornwall so that he might lie with the widow Igraine and fill her belly with Arthur?”

“That really happened?”

“’Twas before my birth, but according to all I know, aye. Much of the rest of Arthurian legend is bollocks.”

“I have to sit down. This is too crazy.” I wilt onto the edge of Marrok’s bed, my mind spinning. “And I thought I had a weird upbringing. Wow... And you’ve been dealing with this for centuries?”

He nods.

“So...after Merlin exiled Morgana, she what, disappeared?”

“I wish. For too long, she amused herself by tormenting me with dreams of whatever she thought would crush me. First, she taunted me with the deaths of all those I cared for. She showed me Arthur’s slaying, my sister’s demise in childbirth.” He chokes out the last words, then swallows past rage. “I saw these events as they happened—and I could do naught but hear them scream and watch them suffer. Then she delighted in showing me the warrior who occupied my lands after Arthur’s fall, followed by the ale he drank, the battles he won, and the women he tupp—symbols of the power and freedom I would never have again.”

“So torture was Morgana’s idea of a good time?”

“Other than sex? Indeed. Years passed, decades... centuries. A whole millennium. I hated every day, so like the last, knowing tomorrow would be the same. I forgot how to feel, how to care.”

“Marrok...”

He cradles my cheek in his hand, and I have to resist the urge to nuzzle his palm. “Grieve not for me. ’Tis past.”

“Is it? If you and I are having the same dreams, maybe that’s her doing?”

“Likely, even. Recently, she began seizing my dreams and tantalizing me with the possibility that I could finally die. No doubt, she was amused that I tried every suggestion she planted in my head.”

“You still want to die?”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FIVE

“What have I to live for? My castle, family, and friends became dust long ago. I dare not form friendships. Whenever I have, Morgana visits their dreams and fills their heads with my evil. People I came to respect suddenly believed me a most dastardly villain—a grave robber or a child slayer... By the time she ceased such games, I was accustomed to solitude.”

I understand isolation, being an outcast. But what Morgana did to Marrok ventured beyond revenge and into psychotic bitch territory.

My heart goes out to him. He seems strong and proud, but his carvings demonstrate patience, intellect, and tenderness. As we talk, he’s beginning to show me those sides of himself. “That’s awful. I’m sorry.”

How has he endured being so alone century after century? I’ve only had to deal with it for twenty-three years. How is he not bitter and bent?

“You said that the book you showed me is the key to ending your curse. Can I see it again?”

Marrok shoots me a narrow-eyed gaze. He’s probably wondering if he can trust me. I would be hurt...but after everything he’s been through, I don’t blame him. “Why?”

“I have a degree in art, and history is one of my secret passions. I have connections with lots of people who study and deal in antiquities—literary scholars, antiques dealers, and historians. Maybe one of them will know something about this

book and how to uncurse you. But it's up to you. I'm not Morgana, so despite whatever weird resemblance we share, I can't just sing a chant and solve your problem. I might be able to help, though."

"You would do that after I abducted you?"

He cared for me during my mystery illness. He showed me what it felt like to be desirable. He's sexy in a men's-cologne-ad way, but rougher around the edges. I wouldn't hate hooking up with him again, especially if he can make me feel that good... But I'm probably just in his way. After all, I'm an American nobody.

"You've been pushed to the brink of sanity by a curse that would have warped the average guy long ago. If you want my help, you've got it. Maybe together, we can unlock the secret of the book."

He brushes his thumb over my cheek. "You have given me light and hope where I expected darkness. Thank you."

Even that little touch makes me tingle. The sensation is still with me when he drops to one knee and lifts the floorboard. He stands a moment later with the familiar book in hand and sits on the edge of the bed. After a brief hesitation, he gives it to me.

Like before, its energy hums in my hands. Not bizarre, I suppose, since it's capable of cursing people for eternity.

It should look ancient. But the reddish leather is smooth, the gold leafing at the corners crisp. An odd symbol graces the front—a scripty squiggle in the same delicate gold as the leafing in the shape of an M, but underlined with curlicues. The lock on the side holding the volume closed has a sturdy, unusual-shaped lock.

I pick at it with my fingernail. "Have you tried prying this open?"

Marrok laughs mirthlessly. "Aye, with brute strength, sledgehammer, paper clip, skeleton key, wire cutters, butcher knife, chain saw, blowtorch... I once tied a pair of ropes to the

lock, then secured each to horses bolting in opposite directions. It gave not an inch.”

Whoa. A very powerful object. “What do you know about this symbol on the front?”

“Naught.”

I don’t remember seeing this in school, but as prominently placed as this symbol is, it must be meaningful.

“Does it mean aught to you?”

“No. Sorry.”

Marrok heaves a disappointed sigh that tugs at my heart.

“But old books aren’t my area of expertise. If I had a computer and a camera, I could ask people much more knowledgeable than me.”

“Nonmagical people?”

I nod. “Of course. Scholars, curators, professors...”

“American?”

“Yes, but knowledgeable and—”

“Good. The less risk of inquiries coming back to these shores and reaching anyone magical, the better.” He hesitates. “Pictures of the symbol only, not the book itself.”

“*You* have a camera?”

“My mobile phone does.”

“You have a *phone*?”

A corner of his mouth quirks up. “My cooking is tragic. How else would I order takeaway?”

So the big, bad warrior can poke fun at himself? Despite the gravity of everything that’s happened, I have to hold in a smile.

He hands me his cell phone. It’s an older model. Its camera doesn’t have the best resolution, but I’ll make do.

Quickly, I snap a picture of the symbol only, cropping out the book in the background before I email it to myself from his

phone.

“Do you have a computer?”

With a sigh, he trudges across the hall, to the back of the house, and opens a small door. It houses a stacked washing machine and dryer. On a little table, wedged in the corner, sits a cardboard box with the lid flung open. Marrok gives it an expectant stare.

“This is it?”

Teeth gritted, he nods.

From the look of the dusty box, it’s been here for a few months. “It’s not hooked up.”

“Not for lack of trying,” he grouses.

Suddenly, the picture becomes clear. Mr. Big, Bad Dark Ages isn’t good with technology. My mother hated it, and she was a millennial. I can only imagine the learning curve when there’s more than a thousand years between birth and booting up. It’s astonishing that Marrok can manage a microwave.

I hide a giggle behind my hand, but he’s too perceptive.

“Do you laugh at me? Remember well, I skewered people for a living. This whole Wi-Fi, RAM, operating system vocabulary is worse than ancient Greek. *That* I understand.”

For a man nearly the size of a mammoth, he’s kind of... cute when he’s disgruntled. “What made you decide to buy a computer?”

His jaw couldn’t look any harder if it had been set in concrete. “Online purchasing. My thumbs are too big to shop on my mobile, and I do not like people or cities. Having things delivered to my doorstep appealed.”

Hmm. Definitely not the life of the party.

“I can hook this up.”

He looks relieved. “Thank you.”

I attack the Styrofoam cradling the unit.

“Are you hungry? ’Tis been nearly two days since you have eaten.”

“Famished.”

“What can I get you?”

“You said your cooking was tragic.”

“I have managed a few dishes over the centuries. Toast and omelets, macaroni and cheese, or soup?”

If it’s taken him over a thousand years to master three easy meals, I don’t want to know how bad his cooking was before. “Toast and omelet would be fine. Cheese, no onions. Mushrooms?”

Marrok nods. “And tomatoes?”

I boot up, shocked to find a nearby Wi-Fi network, and begin to configure the computer. “Please. With coffee!”

Fifteen minutes later, I’m surfing while devouring a breakfast that isn’t half bad and coffee strong enough to kill an ox. Trying not to choke, I access my web-based email. The picture of the symbol has arrived, along with a dozen other messages of virtually no importance. Skipping them, I draft a message to a half-dozen professors, historians, and museum curators. We’ll see if any of them turns up something.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SIX

“What’s it like, being alive for so long?” I can hardly wrap my mind around it. He’s *immortal*. One of my favorite TV shows in college was about a gorgeous immortal, but he’s fanged.

“Wait! You’re not a vampire, are you?” I cover my throat with my hands.

“Indeed not! I spilled blood, not drank it.”

“Whew! Good to know. If you’re immortal, that means you’ve seen every major change to come civilization’s way. All the inventions...”

“Imagine my surprise to find out that the earth is, indeed, round,” he drawls.

I laugh. “What do you think of TV?”

“Loud and annoying.”

Really? I love it. “Cars?”

He recoils. “I despise them.”

Guess that means he doesn’t drive. I haven’t really mastered steering on the left side of the road, so that makes us even. “Ever been on an airplane?”

“Bloody hell, if God meant for us to fly, wench, he would have given us wings!”

His answer gives me the giggles again. “Come on, you must admit some things are better these days. Medicine? Running water? Electricity?”

“As someone who lived through three centuries of the plague, I can heartily say I wish medicine had advanced faster. Running water and electricity are vast improvements.”

“Social media?”

He recoils. “I would rather have another century of plague.”

In some ways, I don’t disagree. “Strip clubs?”

“Where women disrobe for strangers who throw money at them?” He scowls. “Never bothered.”

That makes sense. If he couldn’t orgasm, why get all wound up?

Silence invades the small room. I fidget with the computer, but Marrok’s unwavering stare distracts me. I can actually *feel* his desire for me. Does the connection I don’t understand force him to want me...or are his feelings organic? Does he know the difference?

Sighing, I open a browser and google Morgana Le Fay, as well as any symbols associated with her. I find drawings of a mystical witch wielding magical instruments and stuff about a Grail quest, but I see no mention of a symbol on a book. I scan the entries about the legendary woman—her vast power, her cruelty, her varying roles in the stories of Camelot, depending on who wrote them and when. And descriptions of a great beauty with white-blond hair and violet eyes. Looking at her renderings, I see a startling resemblance.

“Marrok, all my life, I’ve been told my eyes are unusual. Less than one percent of people have violet eyes, so why would I share them, along with the exact birthmark, of a woman born forever ago?”

He sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose. “I did not give you enough credit for connecting the dots. According to Bram’s aunt, your eyes and that birthmark are throwback genes. You are Morgana’s descendant. Several generations removed, of course.”

“How is that possible? My mother was as American as apple pie and refused to read, watch, or discuss anything with

even the slightest bit of ‘woo-woo.’ I wasn’t allowed Harry Potter or Twilight books or to play with a Ouija board at sleepovers. She forbid me to see movies based on myth or legend.”

Because she knew I have magic in my veins? Is that why she called me otherworldly?

“What of your father’s family?”

“I don’t know much. My father is British. Until my mother’s death, I thought he’d died before I was born. He lives in London—or he did twenty years ago. The detective I hired hit a dead end...” Or did he? “Wait, he sent me the address of a man who claimed to be five hundred years old. I assumed it was a mistake, but maybe...”

“He is a wizard with the according magical life span.”

“H-how long is that?”

“Roughly a thousand years, I hear. Though I strove to avoid everything and everyone magical after Morgana.”

No shock there. In his shoes, I’d avoid magickind, too. “Hold up. If I’m related to Morgana...does that mean I’m magical?”

“According to Bram’s aunt, aye. And your powers will be considerable.”

Oh. My. God. I can’t fathom... If my life will truly become that long, it puts a mind-boggling spin on planning my future. “What you’re saying... Me, magical *and* powerful? Maybe she’s mistaken.”

He shakes his head. “You have a magical signature.”

“A what?”

“An aura that tells magickind of your bloodline. You come from a strong one.”

“That makes a difference?”

“Very much.”

As surreal as this sounds, it makes a weird sort of sense. As a descendant of *the Morgana Le Fay*, if I have even a tenth of the woman's power, maybe I can help Marrok...

I spring to my feet and backtrack down the hall. The book sits on the bed, looking innocuous. I steel myself before I pick up the tome. The instant I touch it, the little red volume vibrates in my hands.

It pulsates as I stride down the hall back to Marrok. He watches curiously as I sit with the diary in my lap and grab opposite edges of the book. And pull.

Nothing.

"What if...?" My idea sounds silly, but how much dumber will I feel if this is the answer and I never try? I point my fingers at the book. "Open."

Apparently not.

"Stupid, huh? I just thought...if I'm really powerful, that maybe... But if I was, wouldn't I have done *something* amazing by now? I mean, I've occasionally had a dream that came true or a wish that happened moments later. But hasn't everyone?"

"You are not yet five and twenty, correct?"

"Not for about eighteen months."

"That is when you will come into the powers destined for you, according to Bram."

And I suppose that's why the man made friends with me. He knew my ancestry.

"Oh." The assertions just keep on coming, one more staggering than the next. I lost my virginity to an immortal knight, and I might be a powerful witch? A week ago, I was nobody.

"What kind of powers?"

Marrok shrugs. "I know not."

A small beep lets me know a new email has arrived. It's followed closely by two more. The first one, from a former art

professor, wishes me luck but doesn't know anything. Damn.

The second message is from Dr. Chastain, who has always been bookish, new-agey, and hopelessly lost in “what if.” But she loves solving academic mysteries. Today is no exception, I discover as I open the email.

“Well?” Marrok prompts.

“One of my history professors. The symbol means nothing to her, but I also asked her about Morgana and instruments of her magic. One of her secret passions is Arthurian lore. She says that, in some circles, there's talk about Morgana Le Fay having created a book that allows the one who controls it to have nearly unlimited power, but they keep to themselves because the rest of the academic community thinks they're crazy. Do you think she means this?” I point to the tome.

“Aye, and we cannot let her—or anyone else—know I have the Book of Doomsday, as Bram calls it. We will be in great danger if anyone discovers.”

“Okay.” It sounds ridiculous. Then again, I thought the same thing about Marrok's immortality, and that bit me in the ass.

I scan the professor's email again. “She says something about it being an object of feminine reverence.”

“Which means what?”

I shrug. “Obviously, the book has enormous power. It hums every time I touch it. Something that awesome must be revered by someone, right?”

“At least by one person I know,” he answers darkly. “And likely a lot more.”

“It was created by a woman... Maybe that's what she means? I'll ask Dr. Chastain to elaborate.”

Quickly, I craft my follow-up and dash off the email. Then I open the final piece of correspondence, this one from Dr. Reynolds. He's a pompous ass with a sweating head who always insists on being the smartest person in the room. But he definitely knows art history.

I skim the email and gasp. “Dr. Reynolds has seen the symbol! According to him, it appears on writings believed to be Morgana’s. The symbol also appeared in two paintings. The first in the fourteenth century of a young unnamed girl. She’s wearing it around her neck. He sent me a scan.” I show Marrok the open attachment.

The symbol dangling from her fragile neck matches the one on the book.

“For all we know, the girl saw the symbol and fancied it.”

“Maybe...but it’s really unusual. And who could have reproduced it so exactly?” Something else occurs to me. “There’s something similar among the things my mother left me. Different shape, but like it might have been made during the same time or by the same craftsman. Even in this painting, the pendant looks old, but fast forward four hundred years...” I open the next attachment.

And I gasp again. A man in Regency dress wears the symbol affixed to his lapel. Even more shocking, he has familiar violet eyes.

The caption stuns me. Richard Gray of London.

“That’s my father’s name! Could he be...?”

Marrok glances at the painting, then at me again. “I know someone who will give us an answer.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SEVEN

Marrok

I retrieve my mobile with a sigh. For the first time, I am glad Bram insisted on leaving me his number when he departed with his aunt. Using the rock was effective but too magical for my taste.

Still, 'tis another conversation with Bram Rion I must have. By God's blood, I have spoken to the wily wizard more in the past week than all the last century put together.

Gritting my teeth, I punch in the varlet's number and listen to the device ring.

My gaze strays to Olivia, still toying with my hated computer. She is likely the means to end my curse; I need her. But against her potent lure, I am troublingly weak. I cannot abide the thought of losing her. And I doubt our bond is solely to blame.

Though she is both magical and of this century, Olivia behaves differently from others I have met. She listens. She seems not absorbed in her problems, though she has plenty. And she has heart.

The last woman of this century I spent a night with cared only about her social media follower count. She constantly posted fish-faced selfies. She spoke of naught but herself and angled for compliments.

Olivia, by contrast, seems thoughtful and kind. She possesses a bright smile that illuminates my soul like a burst of light after centuries of darkness.

And now I am a bloody poet.

When she extended her offer of assistance in researching the symbols on the diary, I was stunned. But well I know that magickind is tricky. 'Tis possible she will use my feelings against me, regardless of how sweetly she fits in my arms. She is a Le Fay...and suddenly being helpful. Two plus two does not equal five.

I would do well to remember that.

Bram finally answers his phone, sounding impatient. "Marrok? How's Olivia? Are you calling to break your mate bond?"

The bloody cur. "Nay. I will not."

"Is she still alive?"

I bristle at his insinuation that I'm incapable of caring for her. "Aye."

In fact, my "wife" looks quite fetching. She still wears naught but her bra and knickers held together by a thread and a safety pin. They conceal very little of the womanly flesh I burn to suckle, fuck, and command all night.

'Tis true I found cataclysmic release a mere hour past. She is new to sex, and I should avoid all but essential contact with her. But my need to have her again scalds my veins. My skin feels too tight as I slow-walk my gaze down her cleavage before I visually devour her sleek thighs and juicy cunt. Olivia has the softest skin, and she makes the most enticing moans when she—

"She's alive, really?" Bram demands. "You were finally able to—"

"None of your bloody business."

"You know, if you're calling me for a favor, you could be a tad more polite."

“I do not seek your assistance; I ask it for Olivia. She is one of your kind. Help her.”

“We’re magical, not Martians. The way you talk about us, it’s as if you think there’s little difference.”

I bother not to confirm his suspicions. “We have located a nineteenth-century painting of a man named Richard Gray. Know you if the rendering is of Olivia’s father?”

“Is the man in the painting violet-eyed and wearing Regency dress with a lapel pin that matches the symbol on the front of the Book of Doomsday?”

Tricky bastard. If Bram knew of the man’s painting, why did he never mention thus to Olivia? “I have not the first clue about the symbol on the book, but the rest sounds accurate.”

“Right,” Bram draws. “I spoke with Richard Gray once. He called me, inquiring about the Doomsday Diary, in fact. At the time, I knew nothing, and I told him so. Since our only interaction was both brief and over the phone, I can’t speak to his lineage or anything else about him. It’s possible he’s her father. If he is, he’ll know something about that symbol.”

Indeed.

“Since I met Olivia, I’ve tried reaching out to Gray again,” Bram adds. “But I haven’t told her.”

“Why not?”

“It would be dangerous. Richard Gray is hunted by the Anarki.” He lowers his voice. “He was once one of them.”

“Fuck.”

“What?” Olivia mouths.

I shake my head, then turn my back to her, my mind racing. “’Tis certain you are?”

“Quite. That was another reason I shared nothing about the Doomsday Diary with him.”

“Was? Something changed?”

“Apparently, Gray turned traitor. His defection was a huge shock since he was Mathias’s second-in-command.”

I grip the phone with white knuckles and try not to recoil. Olivia cannot be near Richard Gray.

Later, I will learn more. Best to get the facts, then plan a strategy to keep Olivia from rushing into a search that could endanger her. Besides, I have shocked her enough for one day.

“Thank you. Should you hear more, advise me. Also, Olivia needs someone to run her shop while she recovers.”

“I’ll ask my sister. Sabelle would be perfect. She’s very knowledgeable about art. Tomorrow soon enough?”

A witch? Somebody is better than nobody. “Aye.”

“Excellent. But there’s a catch...”

“Of course.”

“I’ve been planning a gathering. Since Mathias is back, magickind must band together. Olivia should attend and meet, as you put it, her own kind.”

“Mean you a party?”

“Of sorts.”

My gut clenches at a mental picture of Olivia in a skimpy cocktail dress, hanging on Bram’s every word as he introduces her to the magical world. “Nay.”

“The poor girl has to put up with a dour mate. She knows little about her roots or magic, much less her coming transition. She’ll need information to survive. The fact she’s a descendant of one of the most ancient and powerful bloodlines in history will make her an instant celebrity.”

“Smashing for you, but she needs not strangers gawking at her. We send our regrets.”

“Are you certain? I’ve been reading more of my grandfather’s dusty tomes. How fortuitous that I’ve come across several passages about the diary and what the symbol guarding its lock means. It’s *very* interesting, and I would be

willing to share the information if you and Olivia pop by on Friday, say about seven?”

Once more, the insufferable maggot makes me grit my teeth. “That is extortion.”

“Yes, and I’m sure you’ll both need appropriate clothes. I’ll drive over in a bit and leave a car for you.”

Click.

The bastard hangs up.

I squeeze the damn device, praying it shatters.

But what if Bram has information about the symbols and their meaning? What if that could end my curse? Eternity, even if I have a beautiful mate capable of giving me ecstasy, is not something I want to endure.

“Well?” Olivia prompts.

“Bram has invited us to a party two days hence.” I turn to her, swallowing a lump of fury that nearly chokes me. “We will be attending.”

“You’re not happy about it.”

“I am not, so you will grant me a favor.” I cut a hungry stare in her direction. “Wear not a dress that is skimpy and black.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-EIGHT

The following morning, Olivia and I indulge in a languorous fucking and a quick bite of toast before we ready ourselves. As much as I enjoy the sight of my “wife” wearing one of my T-shirts after I destroyed Tuesday’s blouse and corset, I prefer her in naught at all. In fact, I would rather have my cock buried deep in her cunt, her fingers scratching helplessly at the tile wall, and her screams echoing through the shower stall.

Instead, we approach Bram’s flashy black sedan. After loading the boot with as many of my carvings as would fit, I scowl. “You can drive that contraption, I presume?”

“Not well. People here drive on the wrong side of the road.”

“Since I drive not at all, you must take your argument up with the other louts who maneuver these infernal machines.”

“Come on. You’ve had a century to learn.”

“Wench, I came from a time of deep superstition and distrust of anything new, centuries even *before* the people were being persecuted for saying the Earth is round.”

She tries not to laugh at me—and fails miserably. “Good point. So...I’m driving?”

“Have you a license?”

“Yeah. And I’m guessing you don’t.” Olivia braces a hand on her lush hip. “You can skewer a thousand people in battle, but not steer one little car?”

“Aye.”

“Have you ever even tried?”

“Would you care to take your life in your hands and have me start now?”

Olivia pales. “Oh, hell no. Where are the keys?”

“You look peaked. Mayhap we should postpone our trip to the city. You are barely recovered—”

“I’m not that tired.”

“You would be feeling better if you let me give you another proper good morning,” I murmur behind her ear. “This one longer.”

She shivers and whirls on me with a gasp. “Listen, big guy! I’m sore. You know, down there.” She fidgets like she’s embarrassed. “I’m new to all this, and you’re a lot to handle.”

If she seeks to shame me for worshipping her body and diligently maintaining her energy, she endeavors in vain.

“Am I?” I grin.

She raises a sassy brow at me. “Fishing for compliments?”

When was I last remotely tempted to laugh? “Merely clarifying your statement.”

“Uh-huh. I’ll be fine. Besides, I want to check on my gallery and stage your carvings.”

I am unable to resist Olivia’s body; I have no illusions about that. But now I am apparently unable to turn her down at all.

With a sigh, I point to the keys in the ignition, then stalk to the passenger’s seat, dragging my feet like a man heading to the gallows. I bloody well miss horses.

Inside, Olivia grips the wheel and starts the car, backing out smoothly down the long dirt road away from my cottage. With a competent turn, she finds the wider lane to the main road. In moments, we cruise down the motorway to London.

“You drive much better than Bram.”

“Thanks. I think.” She grins. “I’ll bet he’s reckless.”

“As if human life has little value.”

Mirth fills Olivia’s delicate face, and I’m taken aback by her ability to handle change in stride. Over the span of two days, she was abducted, lost her virginity, and learned she is magical, yet she still offers me—the man responsible for two of her dilemmas—help *and* can still somehow find humor.

“You’re crazy, too. You’re terrified of cars but willing to practically slice off your arm.”

“I am not terrified. Warriors are never terrified.”

“Is that right? Your white knuckles on the dashboard say otherwise.”

“Impudent wench.” I jerk my hands to my sides and glare, sending her my fiercest warrior stare.

She merely presses her lips together as if suppressing a giggle. “Let’s head to the gallery first. I want to set some of these carvings out before opening.” She slants me a shrewd stare. “You know, Sabelle doesn’t need to come watch my shop. I feel fine. I can work—”

“’Twas not our bargain. You will be healthy and protected, and I will do whatever I must to ensure thus.”

“But—”

“Do you want my carvings?” I ask, brow raised.

“You know I do,” she huffs. “Tyrant.”

“Indeed. You will tire quickly, so I will be watching to ensure you take proper care.”

She slants me a dubious stare. “Meaning you have chances to give me that frequent sex you mentioned?”

“Since that is what you require, aye.”

Her expression turns pensive. “Listen, if I’m a responsibility you’d rather not have—”

“I want you anytime, anywhere, and in any way I can take you.” In fact, I find myself curious about the back seat and its

dimensions. Could a man of my size fit back there with her, lift her skirt, and—

Olivia frowns. “Has anyone ever told you you’re bossy?”

“Arthur’s entire army, including Arthur himself.”

She turns to me with a rapt expression I feel all the way to my cock. Will she never cease to fascinate me?

“What was he like?”

“Arthur? Noble...but human. Genuinely good. Crushed by Guinevere’s betrayal. Camelot’s end was a tragedy, wrought largely by Morgana’s machinations.”

“You really hate her.”

“With everything I am.”

“But without her curse, you’d be long buried and gone. Isn’t there *some* part of you that’s happy to still be alive? You’ve *lived* history, not just read about it.”

The only reason I have to be glad for life now is this woman who has bewitched me, Morgana’s descendant.

Dear God, have I fallen that far? I must take care. No matter how warm and pleasant she seems, ’tis possible Olivia practices the same deceit her ancestor wielded.

If that is so, why did she not simply steal the book for her own purposes?

I have not an answer.

“For centuries, I have sought nothing more than to break my curse and die. I believe you and that book are the keys to doing so.”

Olivia gnaws on her bottom lip. “If that’s what you really want, I think you’re crazy, but I’ll help you.”

The grief in her voice tugs at me. Once, I sought naught more than death’s comforting embrace. Now I wonder what will become of Olivia if I find my grave?

Glancing her way, I take in the soft drape of dark hair over her delicate shoulders and her wide violet eyes affixed on the

road. Fatigue is already smudging shadows under her eyes, and I like not that she looks paler.

If I am gone, can she live without me?

Bram said the breaking of the mate bond I share with her would be temporarily painful, and she would carry a wound of grief. But because our mating is new, our connection is still fragile enough that she will survive. If I leave her with energy, mayhap she will endure and eventually find another mate.

The possibility makes me seethe with rage. No man will *ever* touch what is mine. I will gut any who try.

Aye, and if you go, who will protect her from Mathias?

Soon, we arrive at A Touch of Magic. Together, we carry in the carvings that represent nearly two centuries of my work.

Most of these pieces, I whittled as talismans against my solitude. As she sets them thoughtfully on the shelves throughout the small gallery, I cannot deny that her desire to share my art with others pleases me.

To most, I was renowned for my prowess on the battlefield and in the bedchamber. Olivia sees beyond that to the man beneath.

Smitten fool. Such sentiment for a witch and a Le Fay puts me in peril for deception and heartache later.

Olivia sets my carvings all over the gallery, making prime places for her favorites and adjusting the lighting.

“Thank you,” I murmur.

She turns. “No, thank *you*. These carvings will save my business.”

Her faith humbles me.

Before I succumbed to the urge to fuck her on the floor in front of the big picture windows, I hurry her out the door and back to the infernal car.

When we arrive at her flat, I exit the vehicle, roll my shoulders under my black T-shirt, and shudder. I would rather crawl out of my skin than ride in that contraption again. Alas,

to return to my cottage, I must. At least Olivia does not drive with the reckless abandon of an inebriated twelve-year-old joyrider, like a certain wizard I know.

She watches me fidget and scowl. “There. You survived the car ride.”

“Remind me not,” I grumble.

With more of her laughter filling the air, I follow her inside the small, older unit. Her space tells me a great deal about her. She added color to every wall and window. Each room displays her bold, modern flair, so unlike my cottage.

I follow Olivia to her bedroom, a modern fairy tale of pinks and creams with splashes of chocolate and an absence of lace, which I mentally applaud. The room is fresh, feminine, and a bit mysterious—very like her.

“You know, I could just...stay here. You don’t have to babysit me. I’m feeling much better, and no one else has mistaken me for Morgana, so it’s all good. I’ll drive you back to your cottage whenever you want and meet you at Bram’s party—”

“Stop.”

The witch is mad if she thinks we are parting ways. She needs me—at least sexually...even if she knows it not.

How to explain our mating? I must soon. Olivia was not equipped to handle the news earlier. And now...I fear she will rebel against it—and me, which will only make ending my curse and keeping her properly energized more difficult.

“I want you safe. You will be with me each night.” I prowl closer and brush against her, gratified when her breath catches and her eyes darken. “Under me, taking me deep inside your pretty, tight cunt. Pack whatever you need and bring it to my cottage.”

Olivia hesitates, regret softening her face.

I lay my finger across her mouth. “’Tis a nonnegotiable command.”

Confusion furrows her brow. “You don’t owe me anything, and I don’t want to be a burden.”

A burden? “You never could be. I want you with me. Who else will help me with my computer?”

A reluctant smile creases her face. “You make it hard to say no.”

“Then do not.”

“It’s not that simple. I have a life, you know.”

“Working all day and coming back here each night to... microwaved food and telly?”

“You don’t get to judge my choices.”

I forget women of this century zealously guard their independence. I must change tactics.

“Would you not enjoy yourself more with me?” I drop kisses down her neck. “I promise to be far more...pleasurable than a rerun.”

God’s blood, she smells edible, and I cannot hold in a groan. If not for her sweet cunt being sore, I would commence disrobing her now, work my way between her thighs, and prove my point.

Olivia’s head slips back. Her eyes slide shut. Seemingly of their own will, my fingers find their way into her hair, and I pull her under me for a kiss that only throws kindling on the flame of my need.

“All right.” She sighs when I finally lift my lips from hers. “I’ll go with you on one condition.”

“Dare I ask?”

“That we check out this last address the detective gave me for my father. I didn’t look before because the guy is supposedly five hundred years old, and I didn’t think... But maybe he really is my father, and we’ll find him there. It’s possible he’ll know something about the symbol, and he can help end your curse.”

If Richard Gray was once Anarki, I will not have Olivia looking for the wizard by herself. I prefer her not to look for the man at all. Her quest could prove dangerous.

Unfortunately, unless I divulge Richard Gray's past loyalties...and explain that she and I are bound for life, I have no good excuse to refuse her.

"Come with me?" Her expression pleads.

Little does she know her whisper saves me the trouble of insisting I join her search. "Aye."

Her beautiful smile blinds me.

"Thank you!" She rushes to a little desk in the corner of her room. After pulling the drawer open, she withdraws a folder. "Here's the detective's report with the address."

She slips into the bathroom to change clothes as I flip through the paperwork.

As I read, I scowl. The details are lacking. She has paid the boil-brained detective for this tripe?

Olivia emerges in a pair of tight jeans and a flowy floral shirt. "What do you think?"

Of the report? I grunt. "No knickers."

"Right." She scoffs, stuffing her clothes and a few personal items into a bag.

"'Tis serious I am, wench."

She pulls a handful of underwear from a drawer and drops them into the open duffle with a glare. "I am, too." Then she zips up her bag. "Ready?"

My "wife" wants to challenge me? She may have won this skirmish, but I am a warrior. I will prove victorious in the war.

After another twenty minutes in the hated car, we stop in front of a run-down building in an east London industrial neighborhood. Soot and caked mud tinge the once-pale walls. Black licks of charred brick stand exposed around each window.

Though I am relieved we find not a trace of Richard Gray, Olivia's crestfallen face tugs at me.

"Everything burned down. No one lives here anymore."

The remnants of the former row house are barely standing. In fact, the whole block looks deserted. Was the blaze an accident...or an act of arson?

I slide my arm around her waist and ease her against my side. "Did your detective provide other information?"

"No. This was the last lead he gave me, and I can't afford to pay him for more. I guess...I'll try myself. Maybe I should start by looking into this fire and see if anyone survived."

If this Richard Gray was once Anarki and he turned traitor, 'tis possible he was burned out by the "friends" he betrayed. If this double-dealing wizard is her sire, I hope he was inside when the building went up in flames. Olivia seems possessed of a gentle soul. She has no need of a varlet who failed in his duty as her father.

"Bram is looking as well, is he not?" At her nod, I caress her shoulder. "Mayhap he will find the man."

"I hope. Shall we return to the cottage, then?"

"Aye. I want you back in bed." *Where you belong.*

"Why?" She frowns. "Marrok, I'm glad you can finally... you know...again, but I'm hardly a temptress."

I kiss her. "You never fail to give me wicked ideas and a stiff cock."

"You need your eyes—and your head—examined."

Why does she not understand her own appeal? Bram said that she considers herself unattractive. Why? 'Tis a puzzle to solve later, not when we stand out in the open, in the middle of what I suspect was an act of retribution and violence.

"If you choose not to heed me, then perhaps you will consider your health? Hours ago, you were quite unwell."

"That was some weird flu or whatever."

“It will relapse if you do not take care. Let us return to my cottage and rest.”

She huffs as I lead her back to the infernal automobile. “Hmm. Under that stud-muffin exterior, you act like an old man.”

Stud muffin? I repress a smile. “I *am* an old man.”

“Point taken.” She cocks her head. “If we’re going to... spend time together, we should maybe go on a date or something.”

“A date?” ’Tis something I have never done. In the Dark Ages, you courted, you married, or you fucked.

“Yeah. We’ve, um...shared the sheets, but don’t really know each other.”

True, but fate and magic have already decreed that matters not. “We get on well enough.”

“In bed,” she whispers. “I don’t know much about you. Brothers? Sisters?”

“A younger sister. Analise was always happy, if too talkative and nosy.” I have not spoken of her or anyone from my childhood in centuries. I forgot how much I miss them.

Olivia slips into the driver’s seat with a wistful smile. “I always wanted a sister. What about your parents?”

I climb into the seat beside her, watching as she starts the car and pulls into traffic. “My father was a warrior for his chieftain and died in battle my twelfth summer. He was rarely home, so I knew him not. My mother was sweet and even-tempered but superstitious. She told me to avoid Morgana. Would that I had listened.”

“So fifteen hundred years is a long time.” Olivia pauses and bites her lip. “You must have married a few times.”

“Never. When I was mortal, I was too busy making war.”

“And taking all the women to bed.”

“That, too,” I admit wryly.

“But in later centuries, you never married? Or took a girlfriend?”

“Nay.”

She looks shocked. “Come on. You must have had a relationship with *someone*...”

“I could give no one my body and chose not to give anyone my heart. Why bother?”

“Then why bother with me?”

How could I answer without blurting everything and overwhelming her? “You are different.”

“Because you can orgasm with me?”

“’Tis a much-welcome boon but not the sum of my reasoning.”

“Or because I might be able to end your curse?”

’Twas her initial appeal, but now... Do I dare tell her of these new feelings I can scarcely understand? “I only know that we are connected.”

“Yeah. It’s bizarre to feel so tied to someone I barely know. Most people date and talk, *then* decide if they’re interested in more. Everything’s backward for us.”

“And you propose we become better acquainted on a date?”

“It makes sense.”

“You understand that, in my era, that concept existed not. I know the meaning of the word, but I have never been on an outing in public with a female with the express purpose of getting to know her.”

“If it’s any consolation, I haven’t been on many dates, so we’ll be the blind leading the blind. But it’s a beautiful day. We could explore the city together. When was the last time you really saw London?”

“A few years.”

Olivia shoots me a leveling glare. “Which means centuries.”

She is learning me well.

“Before the Great Fire,” I admit.

She gapes. “Of 1666?”

“Aye. Flames and Sir Christopher Wren completely changed the city. I hardly need to explore it to know it is polluted with more noise and people than ever.”

“But there are so many wonderful landmarks. The Tower...”

“There I have been, and not under pleasant circumstances. You will forgive me if I wish to forgo that tour.”

Olivia winces. “St. Paul’s Cathedral?”

“I prefer war over religion.”

“The Victoria and Albert Museum?”

“You will be on your feet too much, it will take too long, and we will see little of the city.”

She sends me a mulish stare. “The Tube.”

“Never. I dislike cars, but that... I would rather burn in hell.”

“I’ve got it!” She snaps her fingers. “The London Eye.”

“The what?”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-NINE

Olivia

Less than two hours later, I settle into one of the observation cars of the giant Ferris wheel. Marrok sits stiffly beside me.

In fifteen hundred years, he's never given his heart to anyone. What does that say about him? He must have been gun shy after Morgana.

The attendant closes the door. Thankfully, the attraction isn't terribly crowded since it's both midweek and early. I'm excited to see the city from this vantage again. But when I turn to Marrok, the big Dark Ages warrior is fidgeting, sweating, and green.

"Are you claustrophobic?" I whisper.

"Nay."

"Uh-huh. That's why you're restraining the urge to claw out of here with your bare hands."

"Silence. I must focus on not vomiting."

"Look out the windows, at all the open space and fresh air."

"And one locked door trapping me from it all."

I wince. I don't want to upset Marrok, just make him see what he's missing. "Once we get in the air, the view will be gorgeous."

“Or we will fall to our deaths.”

With a reassuring smile, I settle my hand over his, shocked again by the resulting jolt of energy—and desire—from that one touch. “Are you afraid of heights, too? I got you.”

Marrok squeezes my hand and focuses on breathing as the car lurches into motion, taking us up, up, up.

Slowly, London reveals itself in all its glory. Fall nips at the last of the summer greenery, giving the city a more austere face than my springtime ride on the Eye, but a few of the colorful flowers remain. An unseasonably warm wind blows, considering it’s nearly November. People in the car with us laugh. Tourists snap pictures.

I love being in the middle of humanity...and it feels special to have Marrok by my side, even if I have to ignore every other woman eyeing my hot hunk of man.

Well, not *mine*. But he’s here with me for now. I’m not getting attached. I can’t. Sure, it feels like we’re connected, and we’re having sex. No, we’re having jaw-dropping, I-never-imagined-it-could-be-that-hot sex. But despite the fact he seems determined to keep me in his bed, he’s not actually mine.

As we near the top of the wheel, Marrok clenches my hand in a death grip, his breathing shallow and fast. I squeeze back reassuringly.

“Look.” I point out the window to distract him. “The Westminster Bridge.”

Eyes squinted shut, he nods and grips my hand tighter.

“It’s okay, big guy. I promise. One little peek?”

He shakes his head emphatically.

I’m not sure whether to laugh or hug him.

London spreads out before us like a giant maze. The River Thames just north, south London filling the other half of the view. From here, the scope of the city amazes me.

“Wow,” I breathe.

Tentatively, Marrok lifts one lid and follows my gaze. Then he gapes, eyes wide open to the view. “The city has grown...beyond belief.”

“There was little here when you fought for Arthur?” I murmur discreetly. “Other than what the Romans left behind.”

“Aye. I am in awe, though I could not live amongst all these souls.”

I smile. “You will never be a modern man.”

“Not if I can help it.”

I laugh and let him clutch my hand through the slow descent to solid ground, feeling a dangerously warm, fuzzy feeling. I like knowing he trusts me enough to lean on me when he’s afraid.

I’m probably reading too much into it. After all, I’m the only other person here he knows. But my support and encouragement seem to help him. My commentary rouses his curiosity, too. And best of all? He doesn’t close his eyes for the rest of the ride.

What’s happening between us is crazy. I’ve barely known the man for three days. By his own account, he isn’t into relationships. But somehow in that short time, he’s started filling in the empty corners inside me that should have been occupied by my mother, girlfriends, or a significant other. But I keep feeling like I’ve met my “person.”

It’s official; I’ve gone insane. But I don’t feel that way. The bond between us keeps growing, strengthening, every moment, every breath, every heartbeat. First like a string, then a heavy-duty rope, and now an impenetrable mammoth steel rod reinforced with ten feet of concrete. And my foolish heart? It keeps insisting that I belong with him. *To* him.

How long before he breaks it?

As we exit the Ferris wheel, I sneak a glance at his strong profile—and ignore more women gawking at him, all hot and tall and inked.

Though Marrok doesn't glance twice at any of them and doesn't seem like he's in a hurry to let me go, that doesn't mean he shares my feelings. He's immortal, and he has an ax to grind with one of my ancestors. He's probably only giving me attention to keep me close so I'll help break his curse.

I need to remember that—or at least try. Problem is, I'm falling hard and fast. And I don't think there's any stopping it.

CHAPTER
THIRTY

When the night of Bram's party arrives, I honor Marrok's request...sort of. My dress isn't skimpy and black; it's minuscule and siren red.

I grabbed the flashy garment, left over from a gallery showing, from my flat when he wasn't looking. Since he seems strangely attracted to me, I'm eager to see his face when I remove my coat. And feel his wicked touch once we're alone.

Just thinking about the delicious way he reduced me to moans a mere hour ago makes me flush. For a man deprived of sexual satisfaction for a millennium and a half, he's making up for lost time fast. I'm not getting much sleep. And I'm not complaining.

As soon as we exit the car, Marrok pulls me close with a sly smile. "Your face tells me your thoughts."

"Proper party etiquette, of course. Is there an Emily Post of the magical world?"

"Liar. For that, I will enjoy making you suffer later."

I shiver. That's a promise I know he'll keep.

Marrok wants me so feverishly and so often, it feels like more than making up for lost time in the orgasm department. Every time he touches me, he dedicates himself to my pleasure. He worships me. What we're sharing seems like way more than sex.

Sure, he can be gruff, and he's not a big talker. But his protective glances and constant attention are like buckets of golden sunshine after years of my mother's cold indifference. My hopeful half is convinced I matter to him.

The rest of me keeps waiting for the other shoe to drop.

What will happen if we break his curse and he no longer needs me? Will this...whatever we're having just end?

I don't have an answer, just like I don't know what I'll do if he dies. He's sought the end, and after all he's endured, I don't blame him. But if he's gone, I'll be alone, and the spaces he's filling in my heart will be empty again. He'll leave a gaping wound in his wake. I should definitely pull back and protect myself.

I'm afraid it's too late.

Shoving the thought aside, I flip a glance over my shoulder and nearly stumble in my high heels at the sight of him. His charcoal suit hugs his tall, fit frame and bulging shoulders so perfectly that he looks like some imposing billionaire or mafia overlord. His crisp black shirt clings to his lean waist, the open collar revealing his strong, tanned throat and a hint of the ink on his powerful chest I love to drag my lips across.

Holy cow, he's beyond hot. And he's mine...at least for now.

With his huge hand at the small of my back, Marrok walks stiffly, glaring at Bram's more-than-impressive front door.

This place isn't your average McMansion in a merely upscale neighborhood. No, the stately white structure with its towering ionic columns and sweeping terraces sits on acres and acres of pristine land. It shouts old money.

"Wow. Are you sure we're at the right place?" I crane my neck to stare at the massive portico and the gorgeous wrought iron balconies lining the front of the grand house. "It's stunning."

"'Tis my first time here, as well. But this is the address."

We make our way up the well-lit path, lined by ruthlessly trimmed shrubs, to a towering black front door. Reluctantly, Marrok knocks.

The man *so* doesn't want to be here, and Bram seems like one of his least favorite people. So why did he come? Marrok accused Bram of extortion, but what is the wizard holding over Marrok's head to compel him? And what is the purpose of this party? Every time I ask, Marrok mutters something about information and silences my questions with a kiss...or more.

The door opens as if on its own. A sleek, contemporary foyer appears where a handful of people mingle in the corner. Beyond the entryway, we follow a long hall to double doors that are flung wide. Inside, I glimpse a huge space with people of all ages dancing to an upbeat tune.

The moment we step inside, conversation stops. The music fades. About forty strangers turn. Everyone, young and old, male and female, stares at us. No, at me.

Nervously, I bite my lip.

Marrok sidles behind me. "'Tis fine. Take off your coat and act as if you belong."

On autopilot, I comply, unbelting the trench and trying not to squirm under everyone's intense stares.

He peels the jacket off, then sucks in a sharp breath. "You will pay later for that dress, love."

I'm not listening. "I'm not sure what to do. Smile? Flip everyone off? Act like they don't exist?"

"Come with me." Ignoring the partygoers' gapes and gasps, he tosses my coat over a nearby table and takes my hand, glowering as he escorts me further into the airy room, decorated in taupes, creams, tranquil blue, and crystals.

"Why are they staring?" I whisper.

He turns hot eyes on me. "Have you any notion how tempting you look in that dress?"

"I'm serious." They look shocked.

“As am I.”

I fidget. “Let’s get lost in the crowd and dance.”

“What say you?”

“Dance. You must know how.”

He snorts. “As well as I cook.”

“In fifteen hundred years, you never learned to dance?” *Or had a relationship?*

What else has he skipped?

“Aye, bawdy victory dances with an ale in one hand and a wench’s backside in the other.”

“Everyone is still staring. Please. I’ll teach you.”

“Is your goal for them to stare at me in your stead?”

“No, but if we’re in the middle of a crowd, I won’t feel like an insect on a corkboard.”

His frown says he’s confused. Then I remember he never took tenth-grade biology.

“Come, then.” He sighs and leads me to the center of the room.

People give us a wide berth as we find our place in the middle of the crowded floor, where he towers over everyone. A sensual ballad drifts through the speakers. Just what I need to take my mind off being the local freak show.

I cling to his huge shoulders. He wraps his arms around my waist protectively and scans the crowd. Against him, I melt. I feel safe.

He brushes his hand down my spine, mostly exposed by my skimpy dress. I filter my hands through the inky strands of his dark hair. It’s a bit longer than fashionable but seems perfect on a Dark Ages man. And his woodsy, male scent goes straight to my libido. Suddenly, I wish the crowd would fade away and leave us alone. Since that’s not going to happen, I have to deal with my other problem...

“You’re not moving,” I murmur.

“I told you; I know not how to dance.”

“When you fight, you move your body. Dancing is the same sort of thing.”

“Nay.” Marrok begins to shuffle from one foot to the next. “Like this?”

I try to contain my reaction, but I just can’t. I burst out laughing.

He scowls. “Few of the men here dance differently.”

That’s true, but it’s not what tickles me. “It doesn’t matter the century; the average man doesn’t like to dance.”

“I am a warrior, not a fop on a stage.”

I soothe his ruffled feathers by planting a kiss on his neck, his jaw...his oh-so-tempting lips. Again. Once more, just in case he’s still angry. Then I sigh when he takes charge and captures my mouth. The man’s touch is truly heaven.

The song ends, and we wander to the bar. People still stare, but now I’m far more attuned to Marrok than a bunch of strangers I might never see again.

“An ale, please,” he orders. “I need one to pass this evening. Especially if there will be more dancing,” he mutters the last so only I can hear him.

“We all need a pint after hearing about the Anarki attack on the MacKinnetts, mate.” The bartender, an Irishman with curly auburn hair, sets the beer in front of Marrok. “And now to hear that Craddock’s youngest daughter is missing, and the Anarki symbol burned into her bed... Poor thing. If she comes back at all, she’ll wish she weren’t alive.”

I gasp. “What’s the Anarki? And what’s being done to find this poor girl?”

The bartender suddenly zeroes in on me. Does he think I’m an idiot?

Marrok shoots him a warning growl. “Ask the lady if she would like a drink.”

I should chastise him, but the bartender was rude first. And Marrok's chivalry is endearing.

"Forget it. I'm fine."

"The questions you ask about the Anarki and the girl, they are for magickind, love," Marrok soothes. "They do not want humans involved."

If that's the case, why does Marrok know?

"He's not wrong." Bram sneaks up on us, his artfully mussed hair looking as if he just stepped from a salon. His blue suit fits as if it were made for him. "But neither of you are exactly human, are you?"

Marrok pulls at Bram's suit coat. "We have arrived. Now, keep your part of the bargain and tell me what you know of that bloody symbol."

"In good time." Bram grabs a glass of champagne from a passing tray and passes it to me with a smile. Then he takes hold of my free hand and lifts it to his lips. "You look incredible, Olivia. Red is definitely your color."

Marrok snatches my hand back, tucking it in his. "If you wish to keep all your appendages attached to your body, do not touch her again."

Bram grins like he knows a secret. "Of course. Feeling possessive of a new mate is to be expected, especially one so lovely."

Mate? Does he mean in the British "we're friends" sense? The context of his statement and my very intimate relationship with Marrok seem to suggest otherwise. Wait, Bram isn't using that word in the wife sense, right?

CHAPTER
THIRTY-ONE

“If I look so lovely, why is everyone staring?” I mutter.
“They have been since we arrived.”

Bram’s gaze turns a cunning blue. “Besides the fact you’re gorgeous, you’re Le Fay, an incredible bloodline most believed to be long dead. Right now, they’re all wondering how powerful you’ll be once you transition and exactly where I found you.”

Suddenly, I understand he’s cultivated a friendship with me for reasons I can only guess at. I better not make the mistake of underestimating him again.

Marrok grabs Bram by the throat. “She is not a conversation piece.”

“That wasn’t my intention, but...”

I love that Marrok wants to protect me, but he isn’t helping. “Let him go. People are only staring more.”

With a huff, he does. But his pissed-off is on full display.

“Transition?” I ask Bram. “Marrok says I’ll be magical. Is that true?”

“Very much so.”

That still sounds insane. “What will I be able to do? More than pull a rabbit from a hat, I guess.”

“Far more, but what precisely depends on you. Magic is individual. Every witch or wizard is born with basic powers to

perform small tasks. Increased ability begins developing rapidly before transition. The big stuff comes afterward.”

“Basic powers?”

“You should already be able to conjure or bewitch small items, teleport from one place to another—day-to-day stuff—once you train up. At transition, your powers will truly develop. They’ll vary widely, based on a few factors. The power that comes from your bloodline is critical. But magic also depends on your intent and passion. If you’re an exceptionally gifted witch, you’ll have the ability to perform difficult spells, but unless you truly mean that and want the outcome with everything in your body, you’ll fail. The more difficult the task, the more you must desire the outcome.”

In a weird way, that’s like real life. People who succeed at anything persist because it means everything to them. “You said the ‘big stuff’ comes later. What does that mean? Doesn’t everyone have the same powers?”

“Think of it this way: when you were in school, some kids were good at math, others good in sports, and yet others excelled at, say...dancing.” He smirks at Marrok. “Some kids might have been good at more than one skill, even, right?”

“Sure. Dancing and sports, I’m there. Math...not so much.”

Bram laughs. “Magic is the same way. Some people have magic of the heart, like my Aunt Millie. My sister, Sabelle, is good at many things. Pot-stirring comes to mind,” he grouses good-naturedly. “She has excellent magical battle skills, but don’t tell her I said that. She’s a walking internet of magical history, but she also possesses amazing domestic magic. Food is always perfect. The house is always spotless. She can make or repair almost anything. It’s very handy, and one reason I keep her around.”

What he’s saying... It’s a lot to take in. “Marrok tells me I’ll transition at twenty-five. So I have to wait until then to know what kind of magic I have?”

“I’m afraid so. But then you’ll learn the special magic you were born to wield.”

“What’s yours?”

He clears his throat. “That’s actually not a polite question in magical circles. If you’re attacked, your special magic can often be your last line of defense. People confide only in those close, never someone they don’t trust and never before the other has proven themselves. Asking someone about their particular magic is a bit like asking how much money one makes in the nonmagical world.”

“Oh. Sorry.” Magickind is new and different. I’ll have to adapt. “What *will* transition be like?”

“Arduous, overwhelming, and possibly dangerous. You’ll spend an exhausting few days absorbing your full powers. But then, you’ll be a witchling no more.”

I’m still having a tough time believing all this. I keep waiting for the laugh track...

“Don’t worry,” Bram adds. “You won’t be alone. Marrok will help you through it.”

Why would he think that? Marrok and I are having a... Well, it’s more than a fling on my part. But that doesn’t mean those feelings are a two-way street. He’s never had a relationship, never even wanted one. And the next thing on his to-do list is to die. So I’m not counting on him.

“Why don’t you come with me? I’ll introduce you around.” Bram escorts me across the room, Marrok in tow.

We pass groups of people, presumably magical. I try to smile, but when they all gape and stare, I focus straight ahead and ignore them.

Bram finally stops beside a couple. Scratch that. A *gorgeous* couple. The man is striking, with the bronzed skin of an outdoorsman, warm chocolate hair, and blue, blue eyes. The petite woman beside him has a head of golden ringlets that brush baby-smooth cheeks and accentuate her pouty, fuck-me mouth. The pair hold hands like totally smitten teenagers.

A bolt of envy pierces me.

Next to them stands a goddess. There's no other way to describe her. The only thing average about the woman is her height. After that...she's all sumptuous and golden, glowing and perfect. Her shining hair falls in pale waves to her waist. Her blue eyes dance with humor and intelligence. She's also been blessed with dimples, grace that would make ballerinas cry, and a damn-near-perfect body. Even her sparkling sheath dress is *Cosmo*-ready. Is it any wonder that virtually every man in the room is giving her the visual twice-over?

Next to her, I feel like the old hag from *Snow White*, nose wart and all.

"Olivia, Marrok, these are my good friends Lucan MacTavish and his...wife, Anka." Bram gestures to the couple.

Lucan smiles and extends his hand. Marrok shakes it as Anka greets me.

"Do I need to brew you a remembrance potion, dear brother?" the goddess chimes in.

Bram laughs. "As if anyone could forget you. This is my sister, Sabelle."

"Oh! You've been manning my little gallery. I can't thank you enough."

I miss A Touch of Magic, but I'm so grateful Sabelle has been watching the place. If she even has half of Bram's charm, I won't be shocked to hear hordes of customers have been clamoring at the door.

"Little gallery? Not anymore. Word of Marrok's carvings has spread. People are snapping them up."

"Really? He's incredibly talented." I smile his way. "I knew his work would resonate with people."

"Indeed! I might have set aside a few pieces I'd like for myself. They're wonderful."

Marrok shrugs his massive shoulders as if the compliments don't matter. But I catch a little flash of pride on his face.

Sabelle nods. “Just today, I sold over thirty pieces.”

“Thirty?” My eyes threaten to pop from my head, and I grab Marrok’s sleeve. “I told you! I knew they would sell.” I whirl back to Sabelle. “Thank you *so* much. I’ve hated to impose.”

“It’s no imposition. I’m enjoying every minute I spend at A Touch of Magic.”

“You’ve been a godsend. Really. I promise I’ll be back in a day or two.”

Marrok’s grip tightens on me. “A week or two.”

I elbow him.

Sabelle laughs. Damn, even the sound of her mirth shimmers. “Don’t rush back on my account. It’s been so refreshing to spend time with people who appreciate art as much as I do.”

The temptation to spend more time with Marrok is too hard to resist. “I’m really not imposing?”

“Please. You’re saving me from spending all day under his thumb.” She points at Bram. “I should be paying you.”

“Very funny, little sister.”

After quick nods and goodbyes, Bram leads us deeper into the crowd, past more people who gape at me, open-mouthed and unblinking.

“I’m never going to get used to that,” I mutter.

“It won’t last forever. Just ignore it,” Bram says as he guides me toward two men, opposites in every way, who stand in the corner arguing in low tones.

“If this is some sort of outcast outreach program, you can sod off,” grates out a scruffy giant dressed in leather.

“I merely suggested that in these troubled times, perhaps —”

Bram clears his throat. The conversation stops, and the two men turn identical, heavy stares on me.

Isn't this awkward?

The man on my left is smooth, urbane. Every pore of his unblemished skin and every thread in his clothing shouts money. Old money. A lot of it. He's incredibly good-looking in the male model sort of way, with his dark hair styled in some carefully artless, £500 haircut that accents his sophisticated charm. Not staring at the man is impossible, and from tabloids, I know immediately who he is. But I'm shocked to find him here. He's a wizard?

"Your Grace, this is Miss Olivia Gray and Marrok of Cadbury." Bram's lips twitch. "Olivia, Marrok, Simon Northam, the Duke of Hurstgrove."

A real live duke. Holy hell! I hate being so American about these things. What's the proper greeting?

"How do you do?" He nods at me, shakes Marrok's hand, then turns to Bram. "Dispense with the formalities. You know I dislike them."

He sounds even more British than the average Londoner.

"Just call me Duke," Northam says. "To me, it's a joke, not a title."

I don't get it, but if that's what he wants... "Nice to meet you, Duke."

"Amazing." He stares at me as if I'm a priceless work of art. "A walking, breathing Le Fay. I had no idea—"

"Can everyone tell?"

"Of course." Duke shoots me a startled stare. "Your magical signature..."

Just like Marrok said.

The leather-clad man rolls his eyes and tries to leave the conversation. Bram grabs his beefy arm. "And this is Shock Denzell."

He looks like a cross between a biker and a marine, built and big. A black vest strains against mammoth shoulders. His biceps are ringed with various tattoos. His inky-dark hair is

mussed and unruly, and he's in need of a haircut. I have no idea what color his eyes are behind his impenetrable black shades.

"Say hello. You don't want to be rude to our guests, Shock," Bram chides.

"Why the hell should I care?"

Bram sighs. "Is 'polite' in your vocabulary?"

"No, but 'fuck yourself' is."

When he tries to bolt again, Bram grips him tighter.

I wish he wouldn't force Shock to stay. The wizard clearly doesn't want to be here, and it's embarrassing to have Bram push me on the guy.

"You're making her uncomfortable, and she thinks you should shove off," Shock snarls.

Bram raises a golden brow. "How would you know that?"

"Besides the fact she's no poker player? She's blaring her thoughts."

Seriously? I drop my gaze. "I'm sorry."

Not that I can help it, but if I've committed some faux pas...

"You're good," Shock assures, then glares Bram's way. "I'm finished socializing. I came to crush Anarki, not fucking make friends."

After yanking free, Shock stalks to the other side of the room and props up the wall with his sizable back. Even behind those sunglasses, his watchful stare nearly burns a hole in me.

"Well, that went swimmingly." No one can possibly miss Duke's sarcasm.

"Indeed." Bram sighs. "Let's move on."

"It was nice to meet you," I toss back to Duke as Bram leads me even deeper into the room.

"Enough." Marrok wraps his arm around me and leans toward Bram. "I came about the symbol. Tell me what you

know.”

“First, there’s one more person Olivia should meet. Very important. Come with me.” Bram extracts me from Marrok’s protective embrace, places my hand on the crook of his elbow, and glances down at me with a sharp smile.

What is he up to?

I’m not at all unhappy when Marrok takes me by the shoulders and inserts himself between Bram and me.

“Final warning. Never touch Olivia again, or I will dismember every protruding part of your body with my bare hands.”

Marrok’s threat is bloodthirsty and over the top, but he makes me feel safe.

I should pump the brakes on my attachment...but how am I supposed to ignore the fact he makes me feel special? That when I’m with him, I never feel like less than the center of his world.

“I have no intention of stealing her. I merely intended to steady her. She may need it.” Suddenly, Bram stops before a door and turns to me with a dramatic pause. “You’ve been looking for someone...”

CHAPTER
THIRTY-TWO

Bram opens the door to a sitting room—and a tall, dark stranger with gray dusting his temples turns to face me.

Except he isn't a total stranger. His face resembles the painting of the man in Regency clothes, though he's now wearing a sleek, modern suit with a tie that matches the unusual eyes we share. Looking at him is like looking at a masculine version of me in thirty years.

My heart stops. "Richard Gray?"

He sends me a smile of regret. "I suppose it's too soon for Dad."

Oh. My. God. "It's really you?"

At his nod, elation bubbles inside me. Finally, the father I've been waiting a lifetime to meet is here.

I try not to tear up, but everything turns blurry. I desperately want to hug him. After my mother's repeated rebuffs, I don't. His rejection would crush me.

When I was a kid, every time I pictured our first meeting, he was so excited to see me. Full of affection. Now that we're standing face-to-face, it's awkward. I have no idea what he's thinking or how he feels.

"I'm happy to meet you." I hold out my hand.

Richard shakes his head and pulls me close. Joy explodes in every corner of my heart when he wraps his arms around me. This is my father. After twenty-three years, I'm finally hugging my dad! And now I'm crying.

“How did you find him?” Marrok demands of Bram.

Why does he sound angry? This is a happy occasion.

“After I first met Olivia, I put out the word that I sought Richard on her behalf. I heard nothing until tonight. He dropped in an hour ago.”

“You might have warned us,” Marrok growls.

Why would I need warning against my father?

“I’ve been searching for you,” I tell Richard. “I even moved to London to find you.”

“Oh, dearest girl, since I learned about you, I’ve loved you. I wanted so badly to know you. But your mother...”

“Kept us apart, I know. I saw the letter you wrote her, asking about me.”

“She received it?”

I nod. “But she never opened it, just stashed it in the back of her dresser. I had no idea you were still alive until she died earlier this year.”

“I’m sorry. I’m sure you’re devastated by her loss.” He settles his hand over his heart. “I was.”

It seems odd that this man I’ve never met knew my mother intimately. How did they even meet? And how did he know about her death?

“Actually, Mom and I weren’t that close.”

Regret settles between his dark, expressive brows. “I’m sorry to hear that. I hoped leaving would help, but...” He sighs, watching Marrok cup my shoulder possessively. “I suppose you exhibited magical gifts early? I’m sure Barbara hated that.”

Did magic break my parents apart? Is Richard the reason my mother was so antiparanormal?

“Nothing like that. We just didn’t...click.”

“But you have abilities, yes? Though I adopted the Gray surname a few centuries ago, we’re Le Fays. This blood comes

with amazing magic. I manifested tendencies very early. Certainly you've shown some ability..."

Occasional snippets of dreams that come to fruition, but I've heard average Americans on TV talk about doing the same. "No. Well, except Marrok and I had the same dream."

My father gives him another once-over and frowns. "Of each other?"

Hoping like hell that he can't see my flushing cheeks, I nod.

"When?"

"A few days ago. The night before we met."

Richard hesitates. Something in his expression tells me I'm saying something he'd rather not hear. "Sometimes, witches call to their mates through dreams. If you dreamed of him, your heart magic guided you."

I blink. There's that word again: mates. And Richard's connotation definitely seems like a husband-wife thing. "What do you mean by mates?"

Bram covers his surprise with a cough.

I turn to Marrok, who's too busy glowering at my father to meet my stare.

"Heart mates," Richard answers, as if that explains everything.

"You mean like, until-death-do-us-part mates?"

"Yes." Given his sour tone, my father clearly isn't happy to be confirming that.

Does that mean magic compelled Marrok to be with me? That he isn't with me of his own free will? Without my magic, would he even want me?

If mere news was ever going to make me sick, this is it.

Marrok's stony countenance reveals nothing, but his lack of surprise is a bombshell. He knew that we're mated. And he didn't tell me.

Distress and pure, pissed-off anger mix into a potent emotional cocktail. I feel like screaming...or clobbering an immortal warrior.

But I'll confront Marrok later. Alone. Now isn't the time, and here isn't the place. After this party, we'll have our first fight as a "married" couple.

Something to look forward to.

I turn to Bram. "Did you suspect when you introduced us?"

"That you would be mates? No. I only knew you were Le Fay, and that you might have some means of helping Marrok end his curse."

Of course. The real reason Marrok began this "romance" with me. "Why do you care about helping Marrok?"

"He knows what I want."

"You really shouldn't yet have a mate," my father chimes in.

"I hardly took out a bridal registry the moment Marrok and I met."

Richard drops his voice to something low and soothing. "Parents usually restrain their younglings from forming a mate bond until after transition."

The first time Marrok took me in his arms, something compelled me to speak those archaic, unfamiliar words. I was literally unable to hold them back. Richard's sage counsel wouldn't have done me any good.

"Those words we exchanged... They were the magical equivalent of wedding vows?"

Marrok nods.

"Mating before you attain your powers can be very dangerous," my father adds.

Dangerous? I mentally riffle through the moments before Marrok and I first joined. I felt so weak, and he gave me

strength. He gave me sex. Then he made sure I can't live without it—or without him.

“Well, I had no way of knowing. Mom certainly never warned me, and since this is our first meeting, it's too late for fatherly advice on the mating front.”

Richard hangs his head. “You're right. I haven't been a father to you. I'm sorry.”

His dejection makes me feel like a bitch. “Why haven't you come to see me in the last twenty-three years?”

“Your mother...” He sighs. “She left me. I never tried to reconcile because I hoped it would be better for you.”

“Did she refuse to let you see me?”

Richard casts an uneasy glance at Bram, as if looking for privacy. The younger wizard crosses his arms over his chest like he has zero intention of budging. Behind me, I feel Marrok's solid, stalwart presence. He's protecting me again.

Or hoarding me.

“You were conceived during dangerous times and...” My father sighs. “No, I must go back further. You know little of magical history, I presume?”

“Nothing.”

“Four hundred years ago, a wizard named Mathias d'Arc gathered followers with the idea of crushing the current order in the magical world. He named his followers the Anarki.”

“Why would he or anyone want anarchy?”

Richard shoots another careful gaze in Bram's direction. “Magickind is divided into two castes, the Privileged and the Deprived. After some unfortunate deaths about five hundred years ago, the Council enacted the Social Order, which outlawed magicfolk with certain magical traits, diseases, or relations from positions in which they could influence crowds or harm younglings. The intention may have been good, but what actually happened is that anyone whose family had ever produced a witch or wizard with a tendency to violence or dissent was cast down. Soon, once prosperous families lost

their esteem, professions, and lands. They fell into poverty and were truly deprived. Richer families simply bribed the Council and their minions to overlook transgressions. Anger, divisiveness, and finger pointing became the norm. Magickind has been divided since.”

Magical segregation?

“A hundred years after the Social Order, Mathias began protesting these practices. His philosophy made him the egalitarian of the magical world and his Anarki like the disciples. He wanted to rescind the Social Order and return magickind to a balance of power.”

“And he didn’t care how many wizards, witches, or younglings he had to kill to achieve his supposed utopia,” Bram spits.

“But not everyone understood that right away. What I knew was, the Deprived were poor and downtrodden, often treated without dignity—never mind respect—for reasons completely beyond their control. They had no family fortunes to recommend them and wanted more opportunity for their children. Many told me how heartbreaking it was to look at your infant and know he or she was doomed to a thousand years of prejudice and squalor.”

“Which is why I’ve always advocated change within the system. I agree that the Social Order is flawed. But matters will improve.”

My father sneers. “Rubbish. Magickind is nothing but an oligarchy. The Council merely bickers while getting richer off the backs of the Deprived. Wizards like you—all Privileged—who comprise the Council cannot possibly understand what the Deprived endure.”

“I’m working on it, but reshaping the beliefs of people steeped in tradition isn’t quick.”

“They’ve been ‘patient’ for hundreds of years.”

“So impatience is a good reason to side with Mathias? Or did you do it because you like the bloody ravages of war?”

My father ignores Bram and turns back to me. “Once I saw Mathias for what he was, I helped vanquish him, but that came at a terrible personal price. With the Anarki minus their leader—the rallying figurehead for their cause—they sought revenge. They pursued me, so I fled England.”

“And went to America?” I see where this story is going.

“Indeed. I met your mother and, I heard matters had died down in England, so I persuaded her to return with me. We were happy...until the Anarki found me. When we were attacked, I was forced to reveal my powers to her to defend us.”

“She didn’t know?” I feel my eyes go round. “She must have been terrified.”

“Utterly. I explained and begged her to stay.” He shakes his head. “She refused to hear a word and ran. I didn’t know she was pregnant when she left. I didn’t learn about you for three years, and only then because I had another run-in with the Anarki, who told me they’d tried to kill my daughter.”

I gasp. “The Anarki wanted to kill me?”

“The product of my bloodline? Of course. They considered me bringing down their leader an act of war.”

Crazy. Less than a week ago, I was a normal, if broke, American living in London, hunting down her heritage. Now, I’m the mate of a cursed immortal who seeks death and the descendant of one of the most formidable bloodlines in magical history. Oh, and I apparently have a target on my back.

How much of this did Marrok already know?

He doesn’t look shocked in the least.

I file that away for later and focus on my father. “That explains why we moved so often when I was a kid. Mom would suddenly decide to pack up our rental, load everything into her tiny car, and drive as far as a few tanks of gas would take us. I thought she was paranoid.”

“She was cautious,” Richard corrects. “She had a duty to keep you safe.”

If my mother did anything by me, it was her duty. Barbara reminded me daily of the difficulties and sacrifices of having a daughter. No wonder she refused to tell me about Richard Gray. To the bitter end, she was—in her way—protecting me.

I tear up again. “She resented me for ruining her life. At least I know why.”

Richard clasps my shoulders. “You didn’t ruin her life. I did. I’m sure Barbara wanted to love you. She wasn’t a cold woman. But she was likely afraid both *for* you and *of* you. After she saw the magic I wielded, she feared you would inherit my abilities as much as she feared the Anarki.”

More tears pool. He’s right. Forgiveness washes through me as anger pours back in. Still, why couldn’t my mother say, even once, that she loved me?

“I’m sure you read this in my letter, but I vowed to do everything in my power to keep you both safe. I would have promised her the moon if I believed it would bring my mate back to me.”

“You were mated?”

“Of course. Children are far more difficult to conceive in the magical world if you aren’t.”

Does that mean that Marrok and I could soon be...magical parents?

Bram whispers in my ear. “In case you were wondering, it’s highly unlikely you’ll conceive before transition.”

That’s a relief.

Marrok frowns. “How were her parents separated with no...ill effects?”

“The difficulty Olivia experiences is the result of being a mated but untransitioned witch. This is a critical time in her life. She needs a lot of power. Sort of like starving a teenager going through a growth spurt. Your vitality sustains her. But Olivia’s mother was human, so she suffered no such trial in

Richard's absence...except to be irritable and unable to have sex with another man."

My recent flu-like trauma was because I'm mated but not yet a witch? Again, Marrok doesn't look surprised. He said I need frequent sex, but he never said why.

What the hell else has he failed to explain?

Richard grips me tighter. "Dearest girl, Mathias is back now. Your mate is strong, but he's merely human."

"Sort of. He's immortal," I clarify. "He was cursed by Morgana—"

"You're *that* Marrok? Of Cadbury?"

"Aye," he answers warily.

"What do you know about his curse?" I demand. "What is the symbol...ah, in the painting you posed for during the Regency?"

My father cuts a questioning gaze to Marrok, as if seeing him in a whole new light. "The symbol in that painting is only meaningful if you've seen Morgana's Book of Doomsday. You have *seen* it, yes?"

I don't answer, but the memory of Marrok gripping the book and snarling that I must uncurse him roars through my head.

Bram touches my cheek and closes his eyes.

I rear back. "What are you doing?"

He smiles, triumph glinting in his mischievous eyes.

Marrok tugs me away from them both. "She knows naught."

"Of course." But Bram's smile gloats.

Marrok lunges at him. "Keep your bloody hands off her, and stop trying to read her mind."

Richard clears his throat. "Bram's abilities in this area may require touch, but anyone with a true telepathic skill now knows that you have the Book of Doomsday. I suspected it

anyway. Although legend says that the man who paid to have the book stolen vanished from this earth for his sins. Clearly, that is untrue.”

Marrok shoots my father a stone-cold glare.

“Your secret is safe with me,” Richard assures. “But there are others at the party who may have heard Olivia’s thoughts.”

“Fix it,” Marrok snaps at Bram.

“I can’t alter people’s memories. The damage is done.”

My father nods. “You’ll have to learn not to broadcast your thoughts, my dear. Anyone nearby who’s telepathic now knows you’re happy to meet me, furious with the mate you didn’t realize you had, and are trying to break his hex with the Doomsday Diary.”

Mortification rushes from my toes to my hairline.

“No need to be embarrassed,” Bram assures. “You’re young and untrained. You’ll learn—”

“Not at your hand.” Marrok pushes me behind him and bares his teeth. “You promised if we arrived that you would tell us what you have learned from your grandfather’s journals. We have kept our end of the bargain; now keep yours.”

“As you wish. According to Merlin’s writings, the symbol represents the key, which is made up of two halves that fit together.”

“Where are these keys?”

“Legend says Morgana gave them to her son before Merlin banished her. No one knows what he did with them. They’ve been missing for a thousand years.”

Richard pipes in. “We have a more pressing matter now. Marrok, you were Arthur’s greatest warrior, maybe the greatest warrior of all time. But Olivia needs magical protection from Mathias, and you’re helpless to give it to her.”

“Helpless?” Marrok’s face fills with venom. “I protect what is mine. I may not be magical, but thanks to your ancestor, I am invincible.”

“Your curse may prevent you from being killed, but it won’t stop the Anarki from immobilizing you, then taking the diary—and Olivia. *If* you ever see her again, she won’t be the same. What Mathias can do to a woman...” Richard shudders.

“I am aware.” Marrok clenches his fists.

“Then let her come with me. I know how the Anarki work. I can protect—”

“Olivia *needs* me, or she will perish. Before I understood that, she nearly did. She will not endure such hell again.”

“We’ll arrange safe visits, then.”

“They may be too difficult or come too late.” The refusal in Marrok’s tone is steel.

“You stubborn warrior! You’re risking her life to spare your pride. If I hadn’t learned how to hide from the Anarki, I would have been dead long ago. She is my daughter—”

“And she is my *mate*. Since you failed to acknowledge her for twenty-three years, why should either of us believe you now care?”

This arguing about me as if I’m not standing here needs to stop. “Marrok, I’ve waited my whole life to meet my father. If he knows how to hide from the Anarki, shouldn’t we at least listen?”

He stiffens. “You waited because he was too cowardly to come for you. Because he sent a letter instead of his protection. I will not put your safety in the hands of a man who feared his own mate’s wrath more than his child’s death.”

“He was trying not to bring danger to our doorstep.”

“More excuses. He was protecting his backside.”

“And what about you? When were you going to man up and tell me that we’re essentially married?”

Marrok’s hard gaze softens. “You were unwell, and I feared shocking you.”

“Wednesday, sure. Maybe even yesterday. Today, I’m fine. You just gave me excuses. Why should I believe you?”

“Because as your mate, I will protect you with every ounce of my strength and every breath in my body. Can you say the same of him?”

No matter how much I want Marrok, he isn't with me because he cares. He only wants me to help break his curse. He only has sex with me because he can and because our mating makes it mandatory. He never once said he has feelings for me.

God, how stupid I've been.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-THREE

Marrok

When we arrive back at the cottage, the silence is grating, even for me. Olivia has uttered not one word since we left the party.

She itches for a fight.

Bram's dolt of a driver drops us in front of my dwelling, saving us the long walk. I actually looked forward to carrying my mate the mile-plus up the road to spare her little feet in those ridiculously high, sexy heels. At least I would have been touching her. Instead, she storms up the steps of the darkened house.

Given everything that transpired tonight, my innate sense of caution kicks in. "Wait!"

She refuses to even face me. "What?"

I band my arm around her waist and pull her back. "I must make certain the house is safe. I will not risk you."

She wriggles free. "If you're so damn worried, maybe you should have at least listened to my father. He knows how to evade the Anarki. But no, you had to be a proud jackass and assume you're powerful enough to fight anything."

I grit my teeth as I nudge her aside, unlock the door, and step into my cottage. I sense nothing amiss. Doubtful that Mathias's ruffians can pass my magical line of protection, but just in case... My gut tells me we are alone, and instinct saved

my life more than once when I was mortal. Still, better to look with my eyes, as well.

Silently, I ease into the house and flip on the lights, quickly checking every room and every wardrobe.

When I return to the entry where Olivia hovers in the open doorway, her face says she is even angrier.

Now that I am assured we have no uninvited guests, all I can think about is the way her red dress clings to her luscious tits. How long will she remain so angry that she refuses to remove her coat and rebuffs my seduction?

She plants her hands on her hips. “Are you even listening to me?”

“Aye, and I heard plenty about Richard Gray tonight. He knows not only how to evade the Anarki, but how to twist the truth. ’Tis convenient that he should take such an interest in you now that you know where to locate the Doomsday Diary.”

Olivia slams the door. “He just touched base with Bram again tonight. Richard had no idea that I know how to find the damn book.”

I raise a brow. “You recall he contacted Bram once before looking for it? Then, lo and behold, those two are suddenly chums again just as you mentally blare to all and sundry that I possess the tome. Make no mistake, if that information reaches Mathias and the Anarki, we will be in for a bloody fucking fight.”

“It was an accident! Okay? I didn’t know. What do you want, an apology in blood?”

“Of course not. You knew not that you were projecting your thoughts. But I will not release you to a stranger, especially one with a murky past, even if he shares your blood. You know naught of his beliefs, his allegiances, or his character.”

“But he’s *proven* he can ditch these monsters.”

“Is that how you wish to spend your life, running?”

“No, but I’m all about living to see another day.”

She has so little faith in me as a protector that she would rather entrust her safety to a stranger? Fury blazes through me. I try to remember that she waited every one of her tender twenty-three years to meet the varlet she calls father, and she is too trusting to believe he would use her thus. But I know better.

“I want that for you. I want to give that to you.” I take her hands in mine. “But I want a mate who trusts that I can—and will—care for her.”

Olivia shakes off my touch. “Yeah? Well, you’re not the only one who wants a mate they can trust. I’d like one who might have bothered to tell me we were essentially married. It would have been dandy if you also let me decide where I’m safest, since I’m an adult, not a blow-up doll. If I was making a list of the most attractive traits in a man, deceiving and controlling wouldn’t have made the cut.”

“I already explained that. I dared not stun you with the truth when you were recovering.”

She scoffs. “I also told you what I thought of that. Why couldn’t you be bothered to clue me in about our mating today? Did the truth slip your mind?”

“’Tis...complicated.”

“Yeah, I can see it would be hard for you to confess that you’re only with me because you think I’m your ticket to being curse-free.”

“That is not why!” Well, not the only reason.

“Really? Then what exactly made you answer my Mating Call?”

“I assume the same thing that made you issue it: ’Twas impossible to resist. I could hardly believe the strength of our connection myself, much less deny it.”

“Did you know what it meant when I said the words? I sure as hell didn’t.”

I hesitate. But lying will not dim her anger. “Aye.”

Her jaw drops. “You weren’t shocked?”

“I was.”

“But you said nothing? You asked no questions?” She scowls. “Because you thought I was Morgana. You believed you were binding yourself to the woman who cursed you. Despite the fact you were convinced I was your enemy, you answered my Mating Call. I gave you”—she chokes on her tears—“every bit of me. What we did... It mattered. Even after you realized I’m not Morgana, you stayed because, hey... if you can’t have the bitch who hexed you, well, at least you have a Le Fay. Feels great to know I’m nothing to you but the means to an end.”

I haul her against me and press our bodies together. “That is untrue. Hear me well, mate. This bond we share? I feel it, too. Every minute of every day, growing stronger and stronger. And I crave it—and you—more than you comprehend.”

“That’s exactly what I’d say if I was a manipulative asshole,” she mocks as she pushes me away. “The only things you ‘crave’ are a wet, willing hole and mortality. From now on, you can go to hell.”

Olivia stomps past me and marches down the hall. I let her go...for now.

“You will die without my touch,” I remind her. “You need me.”

She whirls on me, eyes narrowed. “I’ll die before I let you use me again.”

CHAPTER
THIRTY-FOUR

Olivia

A few hours slip by. I spoke too soon. My need for Marrok wakes me from a dead sleep. My craving doesn't care that he's a deceitful bastard. My muscles ache. My skin feels tight. My insides burn. My body throbs for him.

Late October is chilly, so I roll deeper under the covers, closer to a beckoning warmth.

Suddenly, he wraps his arm around me and presses me against his wide, hair-roughened chest. My relief is instant. I melt into a quivering puddle.

Without thought, I curl closer, clutching one bulging shoulder and steadying myself on the hard rise of his pectorals.

My traitorous fingers trace the ridges of his six-pack, skirting dangerously close to his steely cock, rising thick and tall between us. I bite my lip and fight the urge to stroke him until he desires me as much as I need him.

When he groans, I snatch my hand back and scoot away.

This has to stop. We may be mates, but that's in name only. I can't imagine two people more ill-suited than a Dark Ages warrior and a twenty-first century American. And I refuse to beg the man who lied to me—who's only using me to break his curse—to roll me to my back, crush my mouth under his, and fill me in one savage thrust.

Even if I want him to.

Nothing about our time together has been real. Every moment he's spent with me—the incredible pleasure and the possessive protection—just smoke and mirrors. Machinations and bullshit.

A glance at the clock tells me it's not quite two in the morning. I'm exhausted, but my body is on red alert—belly clenching, nipples peaking, pussy aching.

Too bad. I'm too angry. I roll to the far edge of the bed.

My energy evaporates. Dizziness swoops in. I close my eyes to stop the spinning room. But that only focuses my attention on every inflamed cell and sizzling nerve that clamors for Marrok.

Tears sting my eyes. Defeat is bitter.

Fate and magic are playing a cruel joke on me. After being a burden to my mother, I'm now dependent on this man. Except this is worse. I only needed food and clothes from Mom. I require Marrok for sex.

It's humiliating.

Unfortunately, self-pity won't change my reality. Neither will stubbornness.

I try reaching across the chasm between us, but I can barely move. The edges of my vision turn black. Shit, am I going to pass out?

Panic sets in. Pain, too. I whimper and curl into the fetal position.

Why did my heart magic compel me to spew those stupid words and seal our union? I can't remember exactly what drove me to say them. I only recall my euphoric joy when he accepted.

Of course he told me what I wanted to hear. I gave him the perfect way to exploit me. At best, he's using me. At worst, he pities me.

God, I want to retch.

I'm trapped in this hell of my making. I need him, or I'll die.

But I refuse to be a sacrificial lamb. From now on, I'll hit him and quit him. He'll be my walking, talking sex toy. Nothing more.

Through sheer will, my fingers twitch. I curl my knuckles, then form a fist. I reach my trembling hand out for Marrok. It's as if I'm swimming through thick water against a raging current. My frustration and anger beat back encroaching fatigue. The chasm across the bed feels like a continent, but I refuse to give up.

After another incremental gesture, Marrok's body heat reaches me. I graze him with my pinkie. Relief pours into me as I touch steel under silk and scars, dusted with hair. His forearm.

Sparks zip through my veins, followed by a hot wash of unbridled need.

Across the mattress, I inhale him—musky, earthy, and woody. It's masculine and complex, just like Marrok. A rush of pleasure jolts me, fierce and sizzling.

Don't feel anything. Get what you need and get away. Stop falling for him.

Easier said than done.

Too bad merely touching him won't keep me "charged" or whatever term magic has for this inescapable clause. Without Marrok deep inside me, I won't even have enough energy to leave this bed.

Steeling myself, I sidle closer and gather the last of my energy to fling my leg over Marrok's thighs and climb on top of him. He's like scaling a mountain, so huge in every way.

I manage to straddle his hips, bracing myself against his shoulders and grinding against his cock. God, he feels good.

He comes awake with a gasp. "Olivia?"

I tear off my T-shirt and press my chest to his, groaning at his body heat. "Fuck me."

Marrok grips my hair, forcing me to meet his silvery stare in the moonlight sweeping through the bedroom window. He isn't asking what I'm doing; he's asking if I'm sure.

We both know I don't have a choice.

"My energy is gone."

He nods, then curls one hand around my neck. The other he anchors on my hip, pressing me against his stiff length, before he takes my mouth.

His kiss is masterful, the grind of his cock against my clit overwhelming. My bones turn liquid. I moan and lose myself before I remember all the reasons I shouldn't.

Before I can recover, he pinches my nipples. I can't bite back my gasp.

My head falls back, exposing my throat, as pleasure blooms. Energy zings. Every instinct screams to kiss him again, to give him total access to my mouth and total control over my body.

Not happening. My terms. My way. I refuse to be used and pitied.

Shoving the covers aside, I grab his cock. He's like iron velvet. He's so thick my fingers don't meet. He's so hot he burns me all over.

If there was any chance he could love me, I'd take every inch of him in my mouth, swallow him down my throat, and drive him past the edge of his resistance. What would he sound like if he let me have my way? What does he taste like when he comes? I'm dying to know...

But if I give into my curiosity, I'll be the one to surrender.

"Olivia..." he groans, eyes closed, jaw taut.

I rise above him, shove my panties aside, and try to impale myself on his cock, wriggling and pushing, biting my lip against the discomfort. I didn't know that being on top would make him feel downright massive. I've barely wedged a third of him inside me, and I already feel perilously close to splitting in two.

Marrok grips my hips to stop my frantic gyrations. “Slow down, love. Let me prepare you.”

He removes my underwear and presses a thumb to my clit. The barrage of tingles are instant.

Nope. Not happening. That always makes me putty in his hands.

“Stop it.” I shove his fingers away and try to force myself down on his stiff cock.

My body isn’t budging, and I can’t hold in my whimper.

“Nay. I will not risk hurting you.”

“Just do it. Get it over with and fuck me.”

“I will not.” He sounds pissed off.

I’m done arguing. This shitshow is at least half his fault, so I swivel my hips. Marrok tosses his head back with a hiss. Smiling, I do it again.

He groans loudly and stares at me through the shadows with darkening eyes. I’m getting to him. Power floods my system, and it feels awesome. And since I love a good spicy book, I have more ideas about how to undo him.

But he circles my clit with his thumb, holding me immobile when I protest. Once I’m wet and crying out, he plants his feet on the mattress and surges up, barging even deeper into me.

His growl makes me shiver. Thrill thrums through my veins. Desire curls in my belly. Need pools in my pussy.

Damn it, I’m only here for energy. Screw what I want.

But Marrok has other ideas. He yanks me down and fills me with every one of his inches. Sensations burst between my legs. He wrenches a high-pitched gasp from me.

He’s so good at this.

I have to be better.

Diverting to a new tactic, I nuzzle my face in his neck, nipping at the tendons bulging with effort while I ride him in a

hard, steady rhythm.

“Yes. More!” I breathe in his ear. “The feel of you inside me... God, the pleasure is almost too much. I’m bursting, and I still want more.” I slide down his cock and bite at his bottom lip.

With a thrust up, Marrok glides over a sensitive spot that sends me reeling. I moan, wishing my reaction was fake. Too much more of that and...

No! Time to finish this.

I sit up. Instant relief. Being near him, with our faces inches apart, it’s too intimate. More like making love and less like an obligatory fuck.

Wearing a kittenish smile, I toy with my nipples. Instantly, his eyes widen. His breathing roughens. He swallows hard.

“You like to watch me touch myself?”

“Aye. The sight of you...”

I do it again and thrust down on him. Inside me, he swells, pressing tight against my slick, swollen walls. As I lift all the way to his tip, his thick head scrapes me again. I propel my hips faster.

Marrok grits his teeth, his whole body taut. “Olivia. Come...with...me.”

Not on your life.

From now on, sex will be on my terms. Orgasm is the only thing I’ll take from him. Yes, I’m tempted. Climax is right there. I’m so close. Only sheer willpower keeps me from giving into my racing tingles and burning blood. He’s going to beat me to the finish line...but not by much.

“Now!” I shout. It has to be, or I’ll go over with him.

Marrok grabs my hips and impales me on his length in rapid-fire strokes. I claw at my thighs and focus on the pain, blocking just enough of the ecstatic bliss as he plows into me.

I’m sweating, panting, and shaking when he finally lets go with a massive roar. I do my best to block out the quivering of

my womb as he splashes it with hot seed.

My energy surges.

Finally, I catch my breath and lift away, struggling to ignore the heavy, unfulfilled ache making my body weep.

But when I try leaping from the bed, Marrok catches me by the ankle and drags me back to the mattress, shoving me flat on my back. He affixes his thumb to my clit. Fire streaks between my legs. Then he grabs a fistful of my hair and angles my face under his, just where he wants it. “I know what game you play, and I will not have it.”

“I don’t know what you mean.” I try to sound as if I’m sated and his touch doesn’t affect me at all.

“Liar. If you ever withhold your pleasure from me again, I will fuck you ruthlessly and make you scream. Then I will fuck you again.”

Oh, god. I close my eyes and refuse to look at him. But it doesn’t matter. He’s all over me—his touch, his scent, the echo of his threat. His mind-blowing thumb. Everything about him melts my self-control. I’m seconds from coming.

“Marrok, don’t. Stop.”

“Do not stop?” He smirks. “As you wish...”

That’s my only warning before he flips me onto my hands and knees and positions his crest against my aching slit. Insistently, he probes, teasing me with just the tip.

How is it possible he’s hard again?

I scratch at the sheets. “No.”

“Aye. I will not stop until you have come for me so many times you beg and plead and admit you are *mine*.”

“Kiss my ass,” I manage between harsh breaths.

He laughs without mirth. “Oh, I shall start there, but I intend to do more than kiss it. Later, you will see. But for now, I will fuck this cunt. It’s mine.”

Marrok grips my hips and shoves forward, driving in and bottoming out in one rough thrust. I gasp and toss my head back as desire threatens to undo me.

My head tells me to hurl insults or insist he leave me alone. My body isn't having it.

Then he pushes my shoulders to the bed and braces his palm on the mattress. His chest covers me as he begins toying with my clit and shoving inside me over and over.

"You are mine," he growls in my ear. "All your pleasure belongs to me. Never. Withhold. Your orgasm. From me. Again. Now scream."

I grit my teeth. "No."

"Stubborn wench. Scream," he demands.

Then he spans my pussy.

Pleasure bursts, burns, and merges with the unrelenting tingles. The sensation is so sudden, so staggering, what few defenses I have left crumble.

As he fucks me like a man possessed, I can't breathe. I can't move. I can't hold out. Rapture overtakes my body.

I scream so loud the sound of my satisfaction drowns out the banging of his headboard against the wall and the frantic roaring of my heartbeat in my ears. I'm left with nothing but the pulsing of my womb and the feel of him deep inside me, pounding away until he drives me up and over again.

I scream until my throat hurts, until I run out of air, until I'm utterly spent.

Dimly, I wonder how the hunter became the hunted. Then all thought disappears.

I'm too busy begging him for more.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-FIVE

Lucan

The coming winter unleashes a howling, unseasonably chilly wind. I'd give anything to be at home with Anka.

After Bram's party, I left her deliciously naked in our bed. Sadly, I was not able to spare the time for seconds. Duty called, damn it. Or rather, Bram did.

Fucking Shock didn't see fit to stand for the guard duty I'm now stuck with. No surprise.

My best friend is barking mad if he thinks a Denzell will ever truly hunt Anarki. Help them, more like.

So I sit deep in shadows, watching Marrok's cottage in what Bram aptly named the Creepified Forest. Alone and silent, the place seethes with something disquieting. Pain. Haunting loneliness.

The very things I saw in Marrok's eyes—until the immortal looked at Olivia. Even without their blended signatures, I would have known she was his mate. Idly, I wonder if Marrok himself realizes how besotted he is. My guess? The man has yet to figure it out. *Poor bastard.*

Then again, all the feminine screams I hear tell me he's enjoying mated life to the fullest.

As the night wears on, I watch branches sway in the wind and listen to Olivia beg for mercy. I adjust my aching cock and

vow that as soon as Bram turns up, I'll return to Anka and finish what she started.

But I can't budge now. Unfortunately, Olivia mentally shouted to everyone at the party that Marrok possesses the Book of Doomsday. They need protecting, and contrary to what the Arthurian warrior thinks, that old magic circle won't keep out true evil for long.

The mental tap on my shoulder makes me smile. Apparently, Duke, stationed on the other side of the cottage, has had enough of listening to the Le Fay woman scream in ecstasy, too.

Then a *whoosh* a mere handful of feet away breaks the quiet. I freeze. That isn't Duke coming by to chat.

Five figures materialize on the path to the front door. Gray capes and masks emblazoned with the upside-down *M* most of magickind dreads means one thing.

Anarki.

Bloody hell! I slide behind a tree and bewitch a nearby frog to deliver a message to Duke that we have uninvited guests.

Five is a small squad, and only one of their signatures is particularly vivid. Then again, why would Mathias imagine he'd need a great deal of force to capture a human and an untransitioned witch? The better question is, how did Mathias learn where to find the diary in barely five hours? Who at Bram's party is a traitor? I have my suspicions...

And what do you know? The one Anarki approaching is from the House of Denzell.

Shock? Hard to tell. If it is, I can't wait to beat the bloody hell out of him.

Moments later, the wind carries Duke's silent countdown to my ears alone.

Heart revving, I leap from the black shadows on the count of three and, with a wave of my hand, stun the nearest

unsuspecting Anarki. With a silent spell, I tie him with invisible bonds and move to the next.

I glance up to find that Duke has already dispensed with one berobed freak. The other two peer frantically into the tree line, wands at the ready. So play time is over, is it? I dash behind the sycamore again and wave my own wand.

My spell hits, and the Anarki slips into unconsciousness. As the goon falls, he hits his head on a boulder with a satisfying thud. When I check, the bastard is still alive. Pity... Death seems a more fitting punishment for these fiends, especially since they came to torment Marrok, hurt Olivia, and steal the diary.

Unfortunately, Bram wants at least one Anarki captured alive. Good sources of information, he claims. I think they'll make better sources of fertilizer.

A quick glance around reveals Duke wrapping up Anarki number four. The last one—Denzell—looks ready to teleport away. Clearly, he didn't expect resistance.

With a quick spell, I whip invisible bonds around the wanker's ankles and wrists. His wand falls to the ground. Behind his mask, his eyes widen in panic. His fear is cloying; I can smell it.

I stroll from the shadows and over to the wizards who are bound, passed out—or both. Duke joins me.

“Good evening. What a shame you're wandering where you aren't welcome. Do I have to ask who sent you?”

Denzell glares at me with gritted teeth. He isn't saying a damn thing.

I tuck my wand away and lift off the man's mask, revealing a craggy face with bronzed skin, inky hair, and jet-black eyes. He's definitely a Denzell, but a younger version of the one I despise.

Still, the only good Denzell is a dead one.

I point my finger toward the man's groin, make a wrapping motion, then yank, strangling his stones. He grunts and

chokes, trying desperately to reach down with his bound hands. I pin them to the ground.

Perfect. Now Denzell might prove cooperative. If not...I have no trouble pulling harder.

“Why are you here? You’re awfully early for a morning stroll.”

“Fuck you.”

I pull tighter on the invisible binds, and he spews a satisfying wail of pain. “England is home to some of the most accomplished poets and playwrights in history. Apparently, none of their eloquence rubbed off on you.”

“Release me, or you’ll pay.” He thrashes and makes a mad dive for his wand.

I kick it away. “Answer my questions, and I might let you keep your stones attached.”

Under the bluish shadows of moonlight, the dark wizard visibly steels himself. “Eat shit.”

Since I can make the man not just spill information but sing it in three-part harmony, I smile. “Let’s start simple. What was your mission here tonight?”

Denzell glances at the other four hooded figures, some now coming to. “I have nothing to say.”

With a jerk of my fist, I yank on the invisible bonds—hard. “Do you really want to lose your family jewels over such a simple question?”

Even in the moonlight, I see him sweat. He glances again at the other Anarki. Is he looking for help?

Duke kneels beside Denzell. “You’re keeping him from his mate. You know the very lovely Anka, right? That makes him cranky. You should cooperate. We would all be much happier.”

“Go to...hell,” the asshole ekes out.

“We’re not making progress.” I sigh in mock concern. “I have a knife. Since the bindings aren’t getting his attention...”

“Good thinking. I’ll hold him down.”

I extract a long blade and settle it between Denzell’s legs. “This is ten inches of serrated, unforgiving hell. Did I forget to mention it’s coated in hag’s blood?”

Denzell’s eyes threaten to pop from his skull. So he realizes that, not only would this knife slice his balls clean from his body, the poison on it would slowly eat away at him, starting with his dick?

Excellent.

I smile and nudge the blade closer to his bits. “Let’s try again. What exactly was your mission tonight?”

The dark wizard casts another wary glance at the other Anarki. Some stare back, wide-eyed and horrified. Ah, he doesn’t want anyone squealing to Mathias that he talked. I understand.

With a flick of my fingers, I render the two nearest me unconscious. Duke follows suit with the last two, just to make certain they stay knocked out.

“Now, answer the question,” I growl.

Still, Denzell hesitates. I tug on the invisible rope around his balls again. They have to be throbbing like hell. Stubborn bastard.

He finally breaks when I slice his pants with my blade, coming perilously close to his cock.

“Break into the house and search it,” he blurts.

“And?” I know there’s more.

Denzell hesitates. “I can’t say more.”

“I insist.”

Duke pipes in again. “Mathias sent you?”

The wizard pales. “He’ll kill me...”

True. Mathias is ruthless to any who crosses him.

“We can always keep this one captive until we defeat Mathias,” Duke suggests. “I believe Bram has a dungeon.”

“Yes, but last time vanquishing the bastard took decades. And it was only temporary,” I point out, then focus on my captive. “Which Denzell are you?”

“Zain.”

Shock’s youngest brother. “Bloody hell.”

“If we make Mathias believe you’re dead, he won’t kill your family for betraying him,” Duke says.

Zain sweats, despite the cold. “But you’ll kill me.”

I try not to roll my eyes. “As much as I’d like to, no. We’re the good guys. But we’ll make your unfortunate demise look convincing. Mathias will chalk it up to your ineptitude, and unfortunately, everyone from your House will keep breathing. You can enjoy Bram Rion’s ‘hospitality’ until this new war blows over. We’ll try to step up the timetable, but no guarantees, mind you. The Anarki is growing again, correct?”

Zain nods. “You’re really not going to kill me?”

“Your information is more valuable to us than your running blood. So if you were a dead man, what would you be willing to divulge?”

Denzell struggles and sneers. “Why should I trust you?”

I lean over the little bastard again. “We want to spare lives, especially innocents like the MacKinnetts. More blood will be shed if we fail to stop Mathias. Unless your idea of a bright future is pushing up daisies, help us, and we’ll help you.”

“I don’t give a bloody fuck about the MacKinnetts. They’re Privileged.”

“What did they personally do to you? Did they really deserve their fate? Does anyone deserve to be carved open and have their energy sucked from them until their heart stops? Would you wish any witch to be abducted and raped to death?”

Zain looks away.

“Maybe he didn’t hear you. It’s possible that pulling tighter on those strings ‘round his balls will unclog his ears,”

Duke suggests.

The supine wizard stiffens but remains stubbornly mute.

“It hasn’t worked well so far. Are you any good with a knife?” Lucan asks.

“Terrible.”

“Perfect.” I hand the blade to Duke.

“No. God, no!” Zain pleads.

“Then talk,” Duke snarls, gripping the wicked knife by the handle. “What did Mathias plan to do with the man and woman inside? Why does he want the house searched?”

Zain glances in panic between Duke’s face and the blade.

“Yes, I will cut you. Yes, it will hurt like the devil. And yes, you will die a horrible death. You’re not leaving me a lot of choices...”

Denzell looks clammy, sweaty, and half-ready to wet his pants. “The man we were to kill.”

I snort. “Kill an immortal? Did Mathias fail to do his homework? How sloppy of him.”

Duke raises a dark brow at the irony.

Zain glares at me. “I would find some way to carry out my order.”

“Unless your magic is stronger than Morgana Le Fay’s, that’s impossible,” Duke points out. “I doubt Mathias was unaware that he ordered you to kill an immortal. He’s many things—”

“Manipulative, ruthless, evil—” I cut in.

“Bloodthirsty, maniacal, and power hungry,” Duke goes on. “What Mathias is *not*? Stupid.”

“He set you up to fail, Zain. Do you see that? He set you up to die, because Marrok will kill you.”

The dark wizard exhales. His defiant expression collapses. “I’m not saying another word until you take me someplace safe.”

“Why should we? You haven’t told us what we need to know.”

“Because more Anarki will arrive if we do not return soon.”

Shit. The last thing we want is more Anarki all over Olivia and Marrok, who are still too busy to realize they’re under attack.

I quickly zap the four unconscious Anarki back to their last location. Presumably, they will reach Mathias.

With a quick swish of my finger, I unwind the invisible string around Zain’s balls, remove his robes, and puddle them next to his mask. The wizard wears a pair of joggers, trainers, and a T-shirt that reads CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW? above a picture of a Tibetan monk giving a one-fingered salute.

“Good thing you’re going into captivity. Otherwise, the fashion police would arrest you,” Duke comments dryly.

Quickly, I take the knife from Duke, grab Zain, and slice into his palm. As he gasps, I smear his blood on his robes before zapping them back to their last location.

Zain glares. “That never had hag’s blood, did it?”

“Oops.” I shrug. “Now, we’d like that information.”

He grumbles. “The woman we were supposed to take to Mathias.”

I grit my teeth against fury. “You know what he would have done to her?”

Zain shakes his head. “Not her. She’s valuable. Priceless, he said. And not to be touched.”

Duke shoots me a glance. So...Mathias not only knows that Marrok has the Doomsday Diary, but that Olivia is Le Fay. Word from Bram’s party traveled fast.

“And the house?” I demand.

“We were to secure and search it.”

“For what?”

A lick of his lips, a shift of his gaze. Zain hesitates as if he knows that whatever he says next can't be retracted. It will betray Mathias as nothing else has.

My heart pounds as I wait for the little shit to gather his courage.

I'm about to give up and resort to threats again when Zain blurts, "Mathias received word last night that the Book of Doomsday is in this cottage."

"Who told him?"

"I don't know." At my skeptical stare, Zain adds, "I swear!"

I glance at Duke. "We must stash him somewhere immediately."

"And get Bram here, along with another guard detail."

Nodding, I stare at Marrok's cottage. "Before it's too late."

CHAPTER
THIRTY-SIX

Marrok

Olivia jolts in pleasure again, bucking as she clamps upon my cock. While she rides the climax, I stroke her skin, so like sun-warmed silk, with one hand. With the other, I rub her clit while I fuck her deep and slow, prolonging her release.

She claws at me. I bask, the sounds of her satisfaction loud, long, and desperate.

Finally, she shudders and sighs, clinging as I gather her closer, still buried deep.

Jesu, she feels sweet in my arms. For centuries, I was alive yet dead inside—until her. Olivia is like a vivid splash of paint on my monotonous gray canvas. She is a beautiful wonder who makes my eternal life worth living again.

As a man who has never wished to be chained by a single woman, I know not how I could ever let this one go. For the first time, I am gladdened that magic decreed us mates.

Who would have thought I would become infatuated with someone of Morgana's blood?

Then I feel Olivia's tears wet my shoulders. Sobs shake her.

"Cry not, love." I nuzzle her soft neck. "You are so enchanting. The things you make me feel..."

My words neither stop nor slow her cries. Is she overwrought by more than the pent-up power of her release?

“Don’t say shit you don’t mean.”

I clutch her face. “If I could, I would give my life to keep you safe from harm.”

“But you don’t mind hurting me yourself.”

So Olivia is still vexed over our spat, and the ecstasy I heap on her seems ripped from her soul because she not only tries to reject the pleasure I give her, but our very bond.

I will not have it.

“Olivia—”

“No.” She shoves at me. Her jagged inhalation dissolving into a wail that pierces my black heart. “Don’t talk to me. Don’t touch me.”

She is upset. I ripped her from the parent she waited a lifetime to meet. I do not trust Richard Gray nor his explanations, and my every protective instinct rose on its hackles when he insisted on parting me from Olivia.

On that, I will fight him for eternity.

Mayhap she could forgive my misgivings had I not withheld our mating.

I stare down into her wet, reddened face. She squeezes her eyes shut, refusing to look at me.

When I accepted her Mating Call, I thought only of ending my curse. Now I feel shame that I cared not for her feelings. When did she begin to matter so much?

Shoving aside the question, I meld my lips to hers, kissing her in a long, slow penetration, mirroring what I do to her body. Gliding my cock over the spot that never fails to provoke a response.

Olivia gasps. I ease back, then glide in again, stroking her sensitive flesh as if I have no purpose in life except to please her.

As I skim kisses across her jaw and down her neck, my unhurried thrusts soon have her lifting her hips and clawing my back. The knowledge that I will bear scratches makes me smile, until I realize they will heal faster than she can make them.

Damn immortality. Once again, Morgana robs me of all I cherish.

“Aye, love. Your cunt is so wet for me. Feel how hard I am for you.”

“No.” But she sounds breathy. “I can’t—”

“You can.” I cut her off by capturing her mouth in a slow kiss saturated with longing.

She wrenches free. “You just want release from your curse.”

“I want *you*.” I shift my hands beneath her, lifting her to my next thrust and melding our bodies together.

“You’re using me.” Her accusation ends with a moan.

“As you used me?”

Her eyes fly open. Red-rimmed, bloodshot, and brimming with emotion. “That makes us even.”

Since rebutting only prolongs the argument, I shove deeper inside her and brush fresh kisses across her mouth, drowning in her sweetness.

When I finally lift from her swollen lips, we both pant. My cock swells inside her. Climax is near.

I am determined she will find orgasm again, dragging my crest over her sensitive spot before bottoming out in her very depths. “Let me please you.”

Eyes wide, she grabs a fistful of my hair. Her cunt begins to flutter. Her teeth sink into my shoulder. Her breathing turns ragged. “No. You pity me! You’re doing your *duty* by me.”

“Think you pity and duty make me hard?” I withdraw, then sink to the hilt once more, brushing her clit with my downward plunge. “Think they make me ache to fuck you?”

“Marrok!” She digs her heels into my thighs. “No. No. No!”

But her body says yes, yielding. As her cries of release ring in my ears, every possessive instinct roars, demanding I let go again and reaffirm her as my mate in word, deed, and truth.

With one last push, I fill her. The white-hot ecstasy shimmers inside me.

I want this to last forever.

’Tis dangerous to feel such for a Le Fay whom I need to be uncursed. What if this desire is another of magic’s practical jokes? What if Olivia cannot forgive me?

She spills no tears, instead sniffing in my arms. “Why?”

“Why keep you? Why join again with you?”

“Why try to convince me I matter? We need each other. I must be with you to stay alive, and you can’t—”

“Climax without you? Aye, but ’tis not the reason—”

“Stop. I know you need me to break your curse.” Her flushed face mottles as fresh tears threaten.

’Tis not all I need her for. Caring is reckless, yet I do. I cannot leave her in such pain. “We require one another. Why does that upset you?”

With a desperate push, she tries to wriggle away. I anchor my elbows beside her, spreading her legs wider with my knees and rendering her immobile.

I have suspicions about her childhood. “Tell me about your mother.”

“You don’t care.”

“You have no notion how I feel, Olivia. Tell me.”

“You want to lay me bare? Fine. My mother didn’t love me. She always called me ugly. Fat. Unlovable. She wanted me to be invisible.”

The thought horrifies me. Parenting has changed much since the Dark Ages, but I always knew my mother loved me and my father was proud. “That cannot be. You are perfect.”

She scoffs. “When I was seven, I was picked to play the lead in our school play. Mom always browbeat me to be average, but I didn’t want to be like everyone else. She loved the theater. I thought she’d be so proud to see me onstage. I practiced for days, giving up playtime, TV, even sleep.

“After the first performance, the other kids’ mothers brought them roses and hugged them. I really hoped...” Olivia swallows and shuts her eyes. “She told me I was making a spectacle of myself. I quit the next day.”

I scowl. Young Olivia craved her mother’s approval and received none. “You cried.”

“Mom took care of me and protected me because she was obligated to—and she never let me forget that.”

How could any woman with a heart treat her own daughter so coldly? “You looked to her for love. When she did not provide it, you felt rejected. Lacking. Like a burden.”

Olivia says naught, but I need not hear her reply. Little wonder she was eager to embrace her long-absent father.

Which only makes my next words more difficult. “Meeting Richard Gray was a dream fulfilled.”

“Finding him is the reason I moved to London, and you were rude to him, even dismissing his suggestions to keep me safe.”

“I do not trust strangers.”

“I usually don’t, either, but he’s my dad.”

Who has been naught like a father. “Do you think me incapable of protecting you?”

“In the human world, no. The magical one? What do either of us know about Mathias?”

“My cottage has magical protections. The book is hidden and locked. Until we discover its secrets, it is useless. Believe

me, I know.”

“But my father—”

“Is someone you know not despite your blood ties.” When she opens her mouth to object, I lay my finger over her lips. “He hid from the Anarki, but do you not think it odd that he never once felt safe enough, not merely to write you, but to seek you out?”

She looks away. So that occurred to her. Good. I wish not to shatter her dreams. But I also will not have her crushed, especially if her father only seeks her for his own purposes.

“We don’t know exactly what happened,” Olivia argues. “And I *need* to.”

Though I am not accustomed to relenting, I fear that until she hears Gray’s side of the story, trouble will brew.

I sigh. “All right.”

CHAPTER
THIRTY-SEVEN

Olivia

When Marrok finally drifts off, I can't sleep. He consumes three-quarters of the mattress, wrapping his big, hot body around me protectively.

Dawn is at least an hour away, but I wriggle free, slip from bed, and shrug into my clothes, studying him in the moonlight. He can be so intimidating yet gentle—when it suits his purpose.

Despite his pretty words, I don't dare trust him with my heart. I can't fall for his tenderness. I've already let him too close, and he's had fifteen centuries to practice deception and perfect manipulation. I've always led with my heart.

If I don't put distance between us, he'll crush me.

I need to figure out how to help Marrok end his curse. Once I do, he'll leave. He'll probably break my heart, too. But I'll survive. I always do.

First, I have to see my father, find out what he knows about the Doomsday Diary.

Of course, that's not the only reason I'm reaching out. As a child, I spent hours devising tales about the man who, of course, died in some heroic way and would have loved me had he lived. As an adult, I'm trying to separate my fantasies from facts. And I want to know the man from whom I inherited my Le Fay blood.

Last night, before Marrok and I left the party, Richard pressed a piece of paper into my hand. His phone number. Now seems like the time to use it.

I pluck Marrok's phone off his nightstand, tiptoeing over the cache of weapons he scattered around the bed before he climbed inside. Lord, it looks like enough to defend a small country.

An enormous broadsword leans against the mattress near his head. In a nod to contemporary warfare, he has something that looks suspiciously like a machine gun, two semiautomatic pistols, and a terrible looking knife spilling around him—for starters.

"I told you I would protect you." He rolls to face me, his voice rough.

"Will these kill anyone magical?" I nod at the guns.

He shrugs. "Slow them down at least. In battle, winning is not always possible. Sometimes, a tactical retreat is the wisest choice. Why do you ask?"

How do I explain that I'm unsettled because everything in my life is? "Curious."

"You have hardly slept. Come back to bed." His voice is soft, but it's a command.

I've given into him enough. "I'm going to call my father."

"'Tis too early."

"I didn't ask your opinion." I turn to leave.

Cursing, he vaults out of bed after me. "You must wake him before six in the morn?"

Okay, so maybe I'm being impulsive. But the longer I wait, the sharper my sense that valuable time is ticking away. "I'll leave a message."

Before Marrok can protest, I head to the farthest corner of the house—the kitchen—and stand by the window, then dial the number I've already memorized by heart.

"Lo." A husky male voice answers on the third ring.

“Sorry to wake you. This is Olivia.”

“Is something wrong?” Sleep clears from his tone. “Did you change your mind about staying with Marrok?”

“No. I don’t know. I...”

When the bastard isn’t fucking me into the mattress, he has a valid point. I barely know my father. No matter how kind or accepting Richard Gray seems, I can’t refute that. “I’d like to talk to you before I decide anything.”

“Of course. Becoming mated and finding out you have magical blood so soon after losing your mother, and then meeting me...”

“It’s a lot. I have questions about the past. About the diary and the symbol on the front, about my mother... Everything, really. When can I see you?”

“Now. I’ll come to you.”

I hesitate. Would the man who once turned on the Anarki sell out his own daughter for the Doomsday Diary? I hope not, but if I’m going to get answers, I have to take a leap of faith.

Quickly, I give him directions to Marrok’s cottage and disconnect the call.

I barely have time to toss on some pajamas and brush my teeth when I hear a soft tap. Marrok, shirtless and barefoot, sword in hand, beats me to the door.

As he yanks it open, I spot a nasty semiautomatic tucked into the back of his low-slung jeans.

He takes one look at my father, then whirls on me. “You invited him *here*?”

“You don’t want me to go, and I need to talk to him. I figured here would be safe.”

Marrok snorts. “Unless he was followed or brought ‘friends’ from his past.”

“Give the man a chance. I just want his side of the story.”

“Then ask him how he came close enough to Mathias to lure the wizard to his doom.”

What is Marrok insinuating? I face my father, who still lingers in the doorway. “Richard?”

He looks pale and strained and won't meet my stare. “Invite me in.”

“Why should I?” Marrok leans against the frame, blocking his path.

“Do you really think your mate will be happier if you keep us apart?”

Marrok clenches his jaw. “’Tis for Olivia I do this, not as any favor to you.”

“You want what’s best for her.”

“Do not *ever* forget that,” Marrok growls. “Come in, then. And explain *all* of it, not merely the heroic bits.”

“You’re right. Everything.” Richard crosses the threshold with a shiver. “Interesting magic circle. Who drew it?”

“Merlin.”

Richard raises a brow and scans the cottage. I follow suit, trying to see the rough-hewn place through my father’s eyes.

“Electric lights, running water...” He saunters in, then glances around the corner at the kitchen. “An oven, a microwave. Merlin was not alive to draw a magic circle around this structure.”

“I have demolished and rebuilt many times in this exact spot.”

“It’s a good line, but not infallible. The Anarki can be very determined.”

“As you well know. Did you come here to discuss the protection of my dwelling or talk to your daughter?”

“I fear we’ve gotten off to a less-than-friendly start.” Richard’s words hold a note of censure.

“You know why.”

“You’re both talking around me, and it’s really pissing me off.” Neither has asked me to choose between them...yet. But I feel it coming.

Marrok turns to me with burning eyes. “You deserve the truth. Make him give it to you.”

“You keep saying that. What truth?”

My father sighs and sinks to the sofa. “I knew exactly where Mathias was most vulnerable because I was once one of the Anarki.”

“You are being modest,” Marrok sneers.

Richard sends me an imploring glance. “I was Mathias’s second-in-command.”

Of all the things he could have said, that shocks me most. I back away until my knees hit the chair. I fall onto it as my Jell-O legs give out.

Richard rushes to his knees before me. “I was young and idealistic when I joined him. I was scarcely out of apron strings when his speeches about equality seduced me. He showed me the squalor of the Deprived. Their shanties, the discrimination they suffer, the vile hate they endure for nothing more than having a less-than-pristine bloodline or a mad family member. I was horrified, and Mathias sounded so forward-thinking. At the time, humans here in England were tearing themselves apart in some stupid civil war. Mathias spoke of fairness and tolerance, of eradicating the cruel establishment.”

I gape. “B-but didn’t he kill people? Rape women and enslave children?”

“Eventually, I saw that. When I was first presented with the evil he was capable of, he made those acts sound necessary, the ends justifying the means.”

Marrok scoffs. “And sometimes, for the mere sport of hearing innocent people scream.”

My father grimaces, then concedes with a nod.

Another horrifying thought washes over me. “You participated in Mathias’s cruelties?”

His shoulders slump. He looks more haggard than he did last night. “I...did.”

I scramble out of my chair, recoiling until I back into Marrok, who settles a soothing hand on my shoulder. But is he any better? He’s slain in the name of battle and war, too.

“You’re wondering how I could do such things.” Richard leaps to his feet. “In the centuries since, I’ve wondered that myself. Sometimes, I still hear the screams... I wanted to believe we were doing something that would change magickind for the better by opening opportunities for wizards and witches of all classes. I allowed myself to be led blindly. Youth and ignorance are little excuse, but the only ones I have to offer.”

Well, I wanted answers. Now I’ve got them.

Bile creeps up my throat. All the years I’ve built my father up to be a hero, he was running from his horrifying misdeeds like a coward.

The rest of my questions—about the symbol and the diary matter but not now.

“I’ve alienated you.”

Some part of me wants to reassure my father, but I can’t be less than honest. “I’m stunned, and I’m trying to...process everything you’ve said.”

“As you should. I’m hoping you can set the past aside and listen for a few minutes. There are more important things to discuss, like your future. I have remained hidden and most think me dead. But by virtue of Bram’s party trick last night, magickind knows you exist. Your magical signature told them your bloodline. And through your untrained thoughts, dangerous people know I’m alive and that the Book of Doomsday is here. It won’t be long before Mathias learns as well. Then...your human mate will be unable to save you.”

“We have had this conversation,” Marrok warns.

“I’m not certain Olivia understands the full import. I have knowledge of the diary. I can evade the Anarki.” He sends Marrok a pleading stare. “She’s my only child, and I’m finally connecting with her. I beg you, let her come with me and bring the diary. I can break your curse, keep Mathias at bay, and provide you peace.”

“Or deceive me, harm my mate, and use the book to gain power. How am I to know which?” Marrok fingers the handle of his broadsword.

I’m annoyed that he’s making assumptions that might not be true...but I understand why. And I love that he’s so willing to protect me.

A sudden pounding interrupts the conversation. I glance at Marrok’s cell phone, still in my hand. It’s barely six in the morning. Who can that be?

Marrok shoves me behind him, grips his sword, and stomps to the door. “Who is it?”

“Bram. You have grave problems.”

“Indeed. Richard Gray is under my roof, and you are on my doorstep.”

“Shove off and open the door.”

Marrok doesn’t.

If Bram is here before the sun after throwing a killer party, it can’t bode well. “What’s going on?”

“Since you left my house, I set guards around your property—”

Marrok yanks open the door and raises his sword threateningly. “You had *no* right. ’Tis my property to protect.”

“Lower that, damn it. I sent them because I suspected the Anarki would soon arrive here. I was right.”

I frown. “We didn’t see or hear anything.”

“Because Lucan and Duke stopped the five dark wizards before they attacked.” Bram turns to Marrok. “They were sent to kill you.”

He snorts. “I wish them good luck...”

“And they were ordered to take Olivia, along with the book, to Mathias because they’re ‘valuable.’”

Terror runs cold through my veins. “Oh, god.”

“Over my dead body,” Marrok assures.

Bram lunges in his face. “Are you listening? Mathias knows everything. And he’ll let nothing stop him from seizing both your book and your mate. He intends to hold the power of doomsday in his hands.”

“And I suppose you suggest I gather Olivia and the book and leave with you, too?” Marrok says cynically.

Bram nods. “Now.”

“Or with me,” Richard offers.

Marrok ignores my father and crosses his arms over his chest. “By your own admission, two of your kind already dispatched the Anarki.”

“This is Mathias, not some lone nutter brandishing a wand. He won’t give up at the first sign of resistance. He’ll return with an army to take Olivia and the book. Once, he was felled by a group of very powerful wizards—with help from Gray—and nearly killed in the process. Other than that, he has never been thwarted.”

“He cannot pass my magic circle.”

“This one?” Bram steps over the line and into the house. “If I can trespass your protective barrier, Mathias can. I let you believe it worked so you could keep your sense of security, but it’s faded. Times being what they are, you need to know.”

“Magic fades?” Marrok looks skeptical. “I know a particular book that has not faded at all since the day it was used to curse me fifteen centuries ago.”

“Morgana poured her soul into that diary when she bound the book to this earth. To this day, her spirit keeps it humming so you will be sufficiently tormented. My grandfather drew the magic circle as a favor, probably without any real passion or

power—both of which make magic strong. Is this really the discussion you want to waste time on when Mathias and the Anarki will soon be swooping down on us?”

“Draw another magic circle.”

Bram shakes his head. “Mathias will come with an army, and it won’t hold.”

“What assurance have I that your words are not swill?”

“None, but I’m telling you Mathias will strike. And he knows where you’re vulnerable.”

Three sets of male eyes fall on me. They’re insinuating that *I’m* Marrok’s weakness?

He pulls me against the solid bulk of his body. “No one touches her.”

Before today, I’ve seen Bram laughing, with a certain detachment, arrogance, and a devil-may-care charm. Today, he stands determined—almost combative—to make Marrok see reason.

“Then she needs to come with me and bring the book. Stay at Goldcroft Manor—”

“Or with me,” Richard cuts in again. “I offered before you arrived to take Olivia into hiding. Together, I’m certain we can unlock the book’s secrets and right Marrok’s life.”

“Nay.”

Bram nudges the drawn sword aside and grabs his shoulders. “My friend—”

“We are not friends.”

“Then listen to me. You may not trust me, but I care about Olivia.”

“So much so, you put her on display last night.”

“That was a calculated risk. It was only a matter of time before magickind discovered her. Better now, so she can make friends and allies before the war starts.”

Marrok merely grunts.

“You care about Olivia, too,” he goes on. “We have that in common. I won’t attempt to separate you from her. But if you don’t come with me now, Mathias will get his hands on her. I’ve shown you what can happen.”

I haven’t seen...and I’m not sure I want to.

A heavy silence falls over the group. Marrok sizes Bram up with a suspicious glare.

“I think he’s being honest,” I murmur.

Marrok turns a furious gaze to me. “You know precisely where trusting magic has gotten me.”

“I do, but can we afford to be stubborn?”

“I would not risk you.”

Does he say things like that because I actually mean something to him or because he needs me to end his curse? “I think the risk is staying here. I’m scared. Even if we don’t go with my father or Bram, we should go somewhere.”

“The book—”

“We’ll take it with us.”

Marrok shoots the other men a dark scowl. “We will leave. But she stays with me. Period.” Then he whirls on Bram. “’Tis only for Olivia that I will stay at your manor.”

“There’s plenty of room and a great deal of magical protection around the premises. It’s the safest place against Mathias and the Anarki. You’ll be free to leave anytime you wish. You can hide the book wherever you like.”

Marrok leaves the room and returns moments later, clutching the Doomsday Diary. As usual, I recoil against the power it radiates.

“Bloody unbelievable.” Bram stares reverently.

“It’s been found,” gasps my father.

“And so have we!” Lucan runs into the open doorway. “The Anarki are here, hundreds of them!”

CHAPTER
THIRTY-EIGHT

I slant a glance past the men and out the cottage door to find a sea of gray robes trimmed in deep red with an unfamiliar symbol on the front. My blood runs cold.

“We’re surrounded!” Bram shouts.

“This fight is too dangerous for Olivia. Let me take my daughter and the book. I’ll protect them.” My father reaches for me.

Marrok blocks him. “You will not touch her or the diary.”

“Later, you two,” Bram shouts. “Focus on the enemy outside. This will be ugly.”

My heart thuds. We need to defend ourselves, and I want to do something. But I don’t know how to wield magic.

Just outside, Lucan brandishes his own wand furiously. Duke jumps into the fray. Three of the Anarki drop instantly. Others merely jolt when a spell hits them, then resume their zombie-like shuffle, coming straight for the cottage door.

As they close in, I gasp. Their skin is cadaver pale. One reaches the threshold, staring at me with colorless, malevolent eyes.

I try not to scream...but it’s terrifying. “What *is* that?”

“Former human,” my father says. “Unlike wizards, these Anarki creatures have no soul.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I hear Mathias has been converting humans to swell his ranks. He abducts capable men, often military, then rips out their souls. After that, he can command their thoughts and actions. Nothing can break the link but demise of the body.”

Another of the corpse-like Anarki reaches the door. Then another. Marrok kicks them back. But they keep coming.

One reaches inside and swipes at me with a rotting hand, eyes ruthless in its sagging face. It misses my shirt by a mere breath. Cold oozes from his fingertips, like a walking freezer.

Oh, my god. That...thing nearly touched me with its rotting flesh. My flight instinct kicks in, and I jump away with a gasp, whirling to find an escape, maybe out the back door. But more zombies pile up against the glass, like a writhing wall of undead.

I shake with terror.

Marrok shoves the book into my hands and lifts his broadsword. With a mighty growl, he wields the blade, skewering the trio of zombies trying to breach the front door. Black blood oozes from their wounds and drips from their mouths before they finally crumple to the earth.

What the hell?

Clutching the book in horror, I watch Marrok yank his massive arm to free his sword before he lops off the head of another soulless demon. Nothing fazes him, but I stifle a scream when I find undead piling up against the windows all around the cottage, threatening to break the glass. Trembling, I spin around. There must be some way out. We can't just die.

But I see nothing.

Marrok charges another pair of undead Anarki and emerges victorious. Relief edges through me. Worrying about him isn't logical; he's immortal and heals instantly, but...what if something happens to him? Marrok and I have problems. I don't know if I can trust him with my heart, but life would be painfully empty without him.

We'll have to work that out later. Now, I need to help the fight.

I whirl on one foot and sprint down the hall, tying the book inside my shirt along the way.

“Olivia!” Marrok’s shout rings above the din of his sword.

“Be right back!” I snatch up a pair of handguns, ignoring the creepy zombies slithering in front of the bedroom window, and rush back to the fray. I’m grateful I took a gun safety class when I moved out of my mother’s house and lived on my own. I might not be able to identify this weapon, but I know how to unlock it, aim, and shoot.

When I reach the main room, Marrok looks relieved to see me. He’d kill anyone who tries to harm me.

“I’m fine,” I promise. “Look out!”

Marrok whirls and fends off two approaching undead creatures, one on his left, the other on his right. He backs up a step. Foolishly, they follow. He crouches and swings the sword in a wide arc, severing their torsos in half. I try not to gag when the black liquid spurts from their bodies and puddles on the porch, running over the stones and into the dirt below.

Marrok charges forward, then. More of the awful creatures fall.

“I can help.” I approach behind him and try to squeeze through the door.

He shoves me back inside. “Stay where ’tis safe!”

“But—”

“Nay,” he snarls, then demolishes more corpses.

He’s not letting me help because I’m female? I would point out that’s sexist and old-fashioned, but given the century he was raised in, I’m pretty sure he would laugh.

Bram, Lucan, and Duke flick their wands furiously while Richard perches himself on the half wall at the edge of the porch and zaps more Anarki who don’t look as if they’re rotting on their bones.

Soon, a pile of Anarki wizards lay bound and stacked at Lucan’s feet. Bram curses as he tucks away his wand.

Is he insane? There are hundreds of creatures left. Does he expect Marrok to slay them all? The odds are overwhelming, even for someone with his amazing prowess.

A moment later, Bram curls his hand into a fist and does his best to punch one of the undead. The first time, he misses completely, nearly knocking himself off balance. The second, the crack of knuckles on flesh resounds sickeningly through the house. Bram grimaces as he shakes his hand, uttering a few choice words—which he repeats when the Anarki continue toward the cottage. Toward me.

Marrok has been waylaid far from the door. More zombies approach. Bram tries to punch another. The thing shoves him on his ass with a hearty push, then continues toward me.

“Olivia!” Marrok calls across the porch, trying to hurtle the zombies.

I don’t want to die, and I’ll be damned if Mathias is getting his hands on the Doomsday Diary. Anyone who can create these soulless zombies isn’t someone who needs a book with such power.

My heart rate ratchets up as I raise one of the guns. “I’ve got it!”

But do I? Swallowing my fear, I set one of the weapons on the table beside me, then fumble to release the other’s safety and aim. I shake as I stare at the nearest zombie closing in—with a veritable army behind it.

Once upon a time, he was human, someone with family and friends, people who would mourn his loss. How can I just kill him?

“Shoot!” Marrok shouts.

I bite my lip. My finger curls around the trigger.

It’s not really alive anymore, my father’s soothing voice fills my head. He can never be human again. You’re doing everyone—especially him—a favor by putting him out of his misery.

Perhaps...but it feels a lot like murder.

Several more of the terrible creatures crowd behind the first, all trying to breach the doorway. An arctic blast from their bodies chills me.

Suddenly, the cottage's furniture zooms past me, and I look up to find Bram brandishing his wand. The sofa and chairs stack up at the door between me and the rotting Anarki, preventing them from entering the house.

Until one climbs the blockade and lunges for me with eyes hungry for a kill.

No time for compassion now.

I pull the trigger. The rotting freak jolts and spasms. His blood spurts, glopping thick and black, before he collapses in a heap.

Seconds later, another Anarki picks up where the fallen one left off, pushing at the furniture with evil glee to reach me. No time to question if I'm doing the right thing. I fire again.

Bingo! Right in the head. Black liquid splatters everywhere—the walls, the floor, my shirt. The urge to wretch is strong, especially when I see what's left of its head roll off its body.

“Give me a gun,” Bram barks from the door with bloody knuckles. He's sweaty, his clothes are in tatters, and his hair looks like it's been through a hurricane.

I toss my spare semiautomatic across the room and watch Bram storm the barricade, firing quickly without hitting much. He practically needs to be on top of one of the undead to kill it.

“Let me try,” Lucan shouts from the other side of the barrier.

Bram tosses him the weapon. The result? The same. Until they run out of bullets.

My jaw drops. Have these wizards never thrown a punch or used a gun?

“Fighting like a human looks easier on TV,” Bram grumbles.

Then he scrambles to me and grabs my shoulder, shutting his eyes. Is he praying? That's all well and good, but right now, shouldn't we all be fighting?

More Anarki have arrived, Bram's voice is a boom in my head. Too many to fend off. The soulless humans are bloody impossible to kill with magic. We must leave!

More? There were already too many to overcome, and no one magical can fight them.

"Marrok!" Bram motions him over.

He darts toward the door, his bare feet sloshing through the slimy black liquid covering the ground.

Suddenly, Lucan vanishes. Duke follows suit.

This must be that tactical retreat Marrok spoke of. I approve.

Bram wraps his arm around me. A moment later, Marrok charges through the door and clammers over the barricade with at least three dozen Anarki behind him, all trying to get their hands on me and the diary.

"Hold tight to that book!" Bram shouts. Then he grabs Marrok's forearm and mutters something.

Suddenly, I see nothing but black. The ground beneath me drops away. I'm falling, falling...my stomach pitching and rolling, hollow as if I'm on a roller coaster with a steep drop.

Just when I think I might hurl, I land on my feet with a gasp and a jarring thud, Bram's arm still around me. The book remains pressed to my chest, knotted in my pajama top. Marrok appears beside the wizard, looking somewhere between furious and confused. The room around us belongs in a palace. Vaguely, I remember catching a glimpse of this room last night.

Frantically, I look around. "My father?"

"Teleported away, likely back to his own place," Bram assures. "He was fine."

That's a relief. "So now what?"

“Are either of you hurt?”

Marrok scoffs. “Worry not about me. Olivia?”

I try to block out the last few minutes, but the black blood and zombies I blew away come rushing back.

Shit, I think I’m going to pass out.

“No fainting on me.” Bram grabs my shoulders.

Marrok scowls, then yanks me into his embrace. “Olivia?”

I need to stop freaking out. “I’ll be fine. You were so outnumbered. I was worried—”

He hovers a gentle finger over my lips to quiet me. “I am unharmed. I have faced such odds in battle even before I was immortal and lived to tell. Fear not for me.”

Bram cuts in. “We must hide the book. I would suggest you give it to me so I can stow it someplace safe, but I know you’ll refuse. So search the grounds and find a spot that’s difficult to reach and impossible to guess. Sabelle and I will put extra enchantments on the house to make it a fortress against the Anarki.”

Something about Bram’s words gives me pause. “What happens if the Anarki invade?”

“They should never get past my protections.” Bram sends me a hard stare. “If they manage somehow, we’ll have to pray...then fight like never before.”

CHAPTER
THIRTY-NINE

Marrok

An hour later, I pace the elegant chamber Bram's sister readied for Olivia and me.

A modern Louis XIV-style four-poster bed dominates the room, its frame gold and tufted headboard black. The gray drapes match the comforter and echo the mood of the adjacent sitting area. Nothing over the top, but very posh and all the finest.

I care for none of it. I can think only of the ways in which I might sink deep into Olivia and fuck her on that sumptuous bed. I need to feel her alive and clinging to me.

This morn, I could have lost her.

Shaking off the disturbing thought, I try cataloging the room to find a hiding place for the Doomsday Diary. But beyond the couch and chairs lies the bathroom, currently cut off from sight by the closed door I am sorely tempted to break down. Inside, my mate stands naked and wet, soaping the bare silk of her skin while I shake with need.

I must stop. I must control myself and hide the book.

Search the grounds, Bram said. Cheeky. But the wizard is no fool. Never would I stash it far from my line of sight. He knows that.

I find no lifting floorboards here as I had at my cottage. The thick area rugs are nearly wall-to-wall, making accessing

such hiding places difficult...but I can scarcely wait to press Olivia to the plush carpet and impale her on my cock. 'Twould be a pleasure to grip her legs and spread her wide as I feel her pulse around me...

Concentrate!

The furniture, while ornate, provides no obvious hiding places. I possess a knife. I could cut a hole in the mattress—but that would be too easily guessed. And it might lessen the pleasure Olivia and I share in both sleeping and sex.

Think!

Contrary to Bram's assurances, the Anarki will not be the only ones searching for the book. I have no doubt the wily wizard will do his utmost to seize it for himself.

After this morn's battle, I understand his point. The scale of the skirmish troubles me. So does the timing.

Almost the minute Olivia invited her father to the cottage, the Anarki arrived, virtually on his heels. Coincidence?

For her sake, I want to believe thus...but I do not. Happenstance damns Richard Gray in my eyes. Traitors can be relied upon for one thing only: to switch sides when doing so most benefits themselves.

The question is, do I include Olivia in that faction?

I hate to consider her capable of such betrayal. Even pondering her duplicity twists something in my chest that feels suspiciously like my heart. But I must be clearheaded and wide awake.

Though Olivia seems like no lover of the Anarki, and her shock at her father's past was genuine, I cannot help but wonder... How far is she willing to go to please her long-lost sire? She moved to a new country and began a new life to find him. I hate to believe she would cast aside her ideals to win Gray's affection but...'tis something I cannot rule out.

Despite those doubts, the instant my "wife" opens the bathroom door, wrapped in naught but a towel, I charge for her, hungry and desperate.

She watches, blinking, her rosy lips parting with a gasp.

I must kiss them now.

A part of me wishes I could dismiss our connection as magic meddling in my life. But Olivia—with her innocence, her vulnerabilities, her sass, and her unexpected bravery—touches something in me I believed long dead. She seems so sweet...

Could she actually be poison?

I want not to believe that.

Dripping wet, she clutches the towel to her bare body. “Marrok?”

My name on her lips. One whisper, and I am compelled to reaffirm her safety and to restake my claim.

I only hope my trust and growing devotion in her is not misplaced.

Must. Have. Her. Now!

Olivia

Marrok stalks toward me with an intent stare and a ready erection that threatens to bust from the fly of his jeans. Is he serious? I’m still shaking, and my mind is racing. Disquiet and foreboding vie for control of my emotions. And he wants sex?

I step back and blurt the first thing that comes to mind. “Marrok, I’m all wet.”

His eyes darken. “Not as wet as you will be.”

He cuts off my reply with a kiss. Fisting a desperate hand in the wet tresses at my nape, Marrok angles my face under his and devours me.

The aggression in his touch puts me more on edge, and right now, I need peace, perspective, and space to figure out what the hell happened and what we do next. I’m afraid to

surrender more of myself to a man whose reasons for wanting me probably have a lot less to do with his heart and a lot more to do with his curse.

I wriggle free. “I don’t need energy right now.”

“But I need you.”

Does he mean that, or does he just want sex? “I’m not your convenient booty call.”

His entire body tenses. “I do not simply want to fuck. I want to fuck *you*.”

“Why? The really bad guys are after us, and before that you and I fought—”

“After seeing the Anarki pursue you, I need to touch you. And you, foolish, brave woman, did what you needed and shot them. It pleased me to see your fighting spirit. Was I mortal, the sight would have taken ten years off my life.”

Really? I’m not used to anyone caring...but maybe he does?

Get real. Your own mother didn’t.

“I’m here, Marrok. I’m fine.”

“Thank God, love.” He cups my face in his big, rough palms. “Let me feel you alive and whole and mine.”

At his possessive words, I bite my lip. My belly flutters. That’s probably a come-on to keep me close...but the fantasy of a man with his strength and protective instinct cherishing me is too tempting to resist.

In fifteen hundred years, Marrok has never committed to a woman. He gives new meaning to the term “eternal bachelor.” He’s never been in love, either. Hoping I can be the one to change that makes me really, really stupid.

But somehow...I can’t help myself.

“First, we need to hide the book and figure out where we go from here.”

He sighs. “You speak true. But hear me well. We argued before the attack, and you were angry. But that changes naught. We are mated. Once the book is hidden and we are safe, I *will* have you.”

I should be bristling at his implication that I’ll just lie down and spread my legs because he demanded it. But no. My pulse leaps. My nipples bead. Even lower... Yeah, I’m ready there, too.

I need to think with my brain, not my vagina. “Is that a threat?”

“A vow. I keep and protect what is mine.”

“Regardless of what I want?”

“Say you that you do not desire me?”

I can’t say that without being a liar. I yearn for him, and it isn’t just our bond. He’s stubborn and difficult...and he might be using me, but that doesn’t change the fact that he’s quickly burrowing his way into my heart.

“Aren’t you being a little medieval?”

He shrugs. “You can take the man out of the Dark Ages, but...”

“Nice.” I roll my eyes. “Let’s focus on hiding the book. The rest, we’ll deal with later.”

“Soon. Very soon.”

Putting my impending heartache in the mental box marked *later*, I search the room. “I guess we can’t go back to your cottage. The Anarki know where it is. And they’ve probably destroyed it by now. I’m sorry.”

He tenses. “For ringing your father?”

“Why would I apologize for that? You think he brought the Anarki down on us? According to Bram, they’d already located us, remember?”

“Aye. But many more came with Richard.”

“That has to be a coincidence. I was apologizing because it’s my fault Mathias found out you had the book in the first place. I didn’t mean to blast my thoughts to everyone at Bram’s party.”

“You knew not that others could hear you. Nor did you know what your father would do with the information.”

“I don’t think he had *anything* to do with the attack. He may have been with them once, but he saw the error of his ways and helped capture Mathias.”

“How do you know that he has not changed his mind again?” Marrok grips my shoulders. “He likely has allies on both sides, which means he has divided loyalties at best. You wish not to see that. Because your mother showed you so little affection, you want to believe Richard Gray is the father you have always pined for, and I understand—”

“Who are you now, Dr. Freud?” I shake free of his touch.

“If I must be to make you see the possibility that he could be more foe than the father of your dreams, aye.”

“This is why you’ve never been in a relationship. You wouldn’t know someone else’s feelings if they slapped you upside the head.” I stomp away.

Marrok hauls me back. “Have you not wondered exactly from whom among Bram’s party guests Mathias learned I have the book?”

He asks a fair question. Still, why would my father risk his life to do away with Mathias, only to suck up to the dark side again? “Shock said others could hear my thoughts. *He* could. He did it as we were introduced.”

“Shock is no saint, I grant you. But your father has the motive, the connections, and the history. Deceit runs in the Le Fay blood.”

“That’s my blood, too. Do you think *I’m* guilty?”

CHAPTER
FORTY

Marrok

“I did not say such. I merely point out that you know Richard not,” I dodge her question. “‘Tis also possible that Mathias coerced your father into compliance. He is evil in a way you can scarcely fathom.”

“Oh, I didn’t think of that...”

“And if he procured the book, Mathias might well forgive your father’s transgressions. Richard could regain his life. No more watching his back.” I sigh and tread carefully. “You do not wish to believe the father you have long sought may not be all you imagined, I know. But please consider that, to save his hide, he might be willing to forfeit the daughter he hardly knows.”

Her expression turns mulish. “I won’t believe that without proof. Where I come from, people are innocent until proven guilty.”

Every instinct screams at me to keep her safe, yet how can I if she refuses to see danger lurking in her family tree? Still, I have said my piece, and arguing will only get me kicked out of her bed—where I can neither protect nor claim her.

“Where I come from, suspicion was enough. But I convict him not in my mind, merely ask you to consider all the possibilities,” I placate. “We cannot know his influences or intentions. If I could prove who had divulged the book’s

whereabouts to Mathias, I would know better how to protect it.”

She reaches for a dressing gown that Sabelle brought earlier and drapes it over her curves. Once she secures it around her waist, she pulls loose her wet towel. I lament that I saw not her silky-soft body.

“True.” She finger-combs the wet strands of her long, midnight hair, heedless of the fact I ache to help. “But we don’t know, and we have to hide the book now.”

We. Does she offer because she wishes to help her mate? Will she keep the information strictly between us? Or will she tell her father to curry his favor and win his love?

“Indeed.”

She glances at the little red volume on the table. “Where? I don’t think it’s wise to hide it where we can’t guard it. Otherwise, Bram will track it down.”

“I thought as much.”

“And I’ll try my best to keep my thoughts to myself this time.”

Upon weighing all the risks and rewards, allowing Olivia to help hide the book serves multiple purposes. It keeps us together. With some instruction, ’tis possible she can conceal the book in magical ways. And if the hiding place makes it back to Richard Gray... Well, then I will know how willing she is to please the man. That is key. Protecting and needing her, yet wondering if she will ultimately choose him, will weaken me. I want to believe in the honesty shining from her eyes. But if she betrays me...I will know where her loyalties lie.

That misery would be more hellish than anything I’ve suffered thus far.

A brief knock resounds through the room. Growling, I wrench it open the door enough to see who disturbs our peace.

A servant hands me clothes that Sabelle altered to fit us. After a quick thanks, Olivia disappears to change in the

bathroom, while I don the trousers. Everything fits perfectly. Bram's sister truly has mastered magical domesticity.

“Wow!” Olivia emerges in a pair of jeans and a simple black V-neck shirt that cling to her breasts and hips as if they were made for her.

She has refused the fucking I ache to give her, but wondering if she wears a bra is making my new jeans too tight in uncomfortable places.

I clear my throat. “Have you ideas where to hide the book?”

Olivia scans the room. “There aren't many places here.”

“I reached the same conclusion.”

“But I was thinking...”

Before she can say what's on her mind, another knock echoes through the room. I tug the door open again with rising impatience. I tug it open with rising impatience. If Bram and his staff intend to be down our bloody throats, Olivia and I will stay elsewhere, risk be damned.

In the threshold, Bram's sister stands with a hesitant smile. She may be the most beautiful female I—or any other man—will ever set eyes on. She seems the soul of kindness and gentle temper, but intelligence and cunning lay behind those blue eyes.

“Sorry for the interruption. I merely wanted to see... Oh, splendid. The clothes fit.”

“Indeed. We thank you.”

“My pleasure. Are either of you hungry? The Anarki were very rude to storm in before breakfast.”

Olivia nods. “Famished.”

“Food will be ready in ten minutes. You'll find the dining room down the stairs and to your left. Follow the scent of eggs and sausage.”

“Thank you. Marrok and I are grateful to you and your brother.”

“It’s our pleasure.”

Naturally. Bram is one step closer to the Book of Doomsday.

Sabelle turns away, then whirls back. “Oh, I almost forgot —” She snaps, and a small leather volume appears in her hands. “This is for you. It’s a simple book of spells to get you started. My brother says you were not raised with magic?”

Olivia accepts the weathered manual. “Not at all.”

“This will help catch you up so you can perform basic magic before transition. You won’t be setting lakes on fire, but with practice, you can perform some necessary bits...like hiding the diary from my brother.”

With a wink, she’s gone.

The moment I shut the door, Olivia frowns. “She doesn’t want her brother to have the book?”

I shrug. Sibling rivalry? A performance? Something more nefarious?

Olivia opens the little volume, then scans and flips pages. “Hmm. What if I got you a hunk of wood? You could carve a hiding place for the diary, maybe something that would... I don’t know, attach to the furniture or mount to the ceiling somehow? And maybe we could find a creative way to lock it.”

I stare at her. Naught about involving Gray. Simply the two of us, working together.

With fresh hope, I peer around the room again. Possibilities leap out at me, like attaching it under the massive bed. I can carve something to the book’s dimensions that blends beneath the existing frame.

Her solution may seem simple, but ’tis workable.

“You like that?” she asks with a hesitant smile.

“Aye, love.” I cannot resist kissing her.

Olivia beams. Mayhap I have rushed to judge her. ’Tis possible that growing up apart from magic has kept her spirit

less tainted. I was rash to compare her to Morgana. She cannot help the bloodline she was born to. I misjudged her, and I should not mistake her excitement to meet her father as blind devotion.

Or perhaps she lets you grow complacent before stabbing you in the back.

I hate to even consider that, but ignoring the possibility only endangers her and the book more.

Time will tell. If Olivia is a typical Le Fay, her blood will soon be screaming.

Bram

“You high-handed prick! What’s this bloody summons about?”

I stare at Isdernus Rykard. At nearly six and a half feet tall with blazing green eyes, he’s a wizard no one intelligent tangles with. I don’t count myself as stupid. But desperate times... Having Ice under my roof is definitely a desperate measure.

He’s a crafty prick. Nearly every branch of his family tree is packed with slithering worms, so I shouldn’t be surprised. But he and I have history. Tricky bastard.

But I don’t have the luxury of hate.

“I strong-armed you to appear, Rykard, because Mathias is back and magickind’s situation is dire. Have you heard?”

As usual, his face gives away nothing. “Despite the dodgy Council’s attempt to suppress the news? Yes.”

Lucan crosses the room to stand beside me. “The past few days have been alarming. And it will grow worse.”

“Indeed.” I weigh my next words carefully. “The Domsday Diary has been found.”

He can’t hide his shock. “Bloody hell! Where is it?”

As if I would tell him. “When the time is right, we’ll secure it.”

“It must be far beyond Mathias’s reach.”

On that point, we agree. That’s the reason I invited Ice. “Naturally.”

Lucan sends me a quelling glare. “If we’re going to ask him to defend the book and magickind, he needs to know what’s happening.”

My best friend only says that because he doesn’t know Ice like I do. He barely knows the wanker at all. Not shocking since they never socialized in the same circles. I certainly learned my lesson slumming it.

“Marrok of—”

“Lucan!” I rebuke him.

“Shut up.” He lashes back. “Marrok of Cadbury has the diary. He’s upstairs with his mate, a Le Fay. The Anarki attacked them earlier this morning. We all fought. We barely escaped with the book and our lives.”

“Fuck.” Ice swears more, using language so filthy even I grimace. Then his eyes narrow in a glowing, furious green. “Why tell me?”

Now that Lucan has divulged everything, I have nothing to hide. “We need your help. Unless you want more abducted women to suffer your sister’s fate—”

“Don’t you *dare* use Gailene as some rallying cry!” He stabs his finger into my chest.

“It’s the best way to help you understand the urgency. Already, there have been other abductions, starting with Auropha MacKinnett.”

“So the rumor is true?”

“Unfortunately.”

Ice swears again.

I scan the rest of the wizards in my office. Lucan silently provides support with a nod. Duke looks on with a studied air of boredom, but I'm hardly fooled. He's sharp and shrewd... and surprisingly dedicated to saving magickind. In fact, he's barely left my house or seen his human family in days.

"I'm deeply concerned about the frightened younglings forced to perform unspeakable magic, sometimes against their own families. Perhaps, if we hurry—"

"Hurry?" Ice cuts in, shaking his head. "If he's already got those little souls, they're lost forever."

I hate to admit it, but he's right. "We can't wait for Mathias to grow more confident or for the Anarki to swell with those they've managed to bewitch. We must take action."

Ice raises a disdainful brow. "Won't your precious Council have a problem with that? After all, they wouldn't want to be seen as the incompetent, self-serving group of buffoons they are. Tell me, when do they think we should finally do something about Mathias? When he's knocking down our doors and threatening all we hold dear?"

Like last time. He doesn't say it; he doesn't have to. Everyone in the room knows magickind was slow to act during Mathias's previous ascent to power. Only a handful of brave wizards managed to defeat Mathias and rid magickind of his cancer.

"Do you want to malign the Council so you can feel that superiority you so desperately seek? Or shall we stop wasting time and talk about what needs to be done?"

Ice grinds his teeth. "You and your personal opinion can fuck off. If you want to be serious, go on."

He's right.

"We all know who brought Mathias down last time," I continue.

"The Brethren," Duke murmurs.

As another figure strolls in, clad in head-to-toe leather, long hair, and bad attitude, I direct my attention his way.

“Shock, you’re late. Do you know about the Brethren?”

Every other wizard turns, their expressions somewhere between stupefied and suspicious. No one likes him. Built big for strength and stamina, he’s a scary bastard on the best of days. On the worst...no one dares to push his limits. Most in his tainted bloodline go mad, and I wonder how close to the edge he is.

“You invited him here? Are you fucking kidding me?”
Lucan snarls in my ear.

I ignore him and keep my gaze trained on Shock, who glares hatchets at Lucan behind black sunglasses. Not surprising, given their past.

“I know magical history,” Denzell growls. “I *am* capable of reading.”

That isn’t all he is rumored to be capable of—but everything is just rumor. Shock, like the rest of his clan, keeps to himself.

Does he know we have his youngest brother in my dungeon?

“Brush the chip off your shoulder. I wasn’t insinuating that you’re not learned about magical history. But you were fairly young when Mathias was last in power.”

“I know what happened.”

“Did your father bounce you on his knee and tell you grand, glorious stories about how they supported the murderous psychopath?” Lucan sneers.

“Did your father do the same to you while he shoved that stick up your ass?” Shock quips back.

I sigh. These two are going to be a problem. “Stop it, both of you. We have far more serious issues.”

They fall blessedly silent.

“After the Brethren defeated Mathias nearly two hundred years ago, they disbanded, vowing that if magickind ever saw dark times again, they would reunite,” I continue.

“All of them have moved on to their nextlife,” Ice points out. “So the brilliant idea of resurrecting them won’t work.”

“I’m not suggesting we find the old Brethren; I’m saying we *replace* them.”

“Become Brethren warriors to take down Mathias and the Anarki?” Now Ice sounds intrigued.

“Precisely. But unlike the last Brethren, we have another important task, one that goes hand-in-hand with stopping Mathias. We have the Book of Doomsday under this roof, and it’s imperative we keep it out of his hands. So I’m suggesting we pair the old purpose with the new.”

“Protect the book *and* defeat Mathias?” Ice snorts. “That’s not a fucking tall order at all. Leave it to the prince to demand the world bow and scrape.”

“Since you obviously have a better idea, why don’t you share it with everyone?”

The big, green-eyed brute crosses his arms over his chest and looks away.

“That’s what I thought. Who’s with me?” I ask around the room. “Several of you have already lent your skills to the cause, but who will officially join?”

“I already said I will,” Lucan speaks first.

I acknowledge my friend with a grateful nod.

“Why not?” Duke shrugs. “Vastly more entertaining than watching my parents plan my brother’s wedding to the human girl.”

Relief chugs through me. With Duke comes his powerful connections and a sizable fortune. We’ll need both.

That leaves Ice and Shock—the two hardest sells. After Mathias’s attack on the MacKinnetts, Shock claimed he would lend his support. But other than the night of my party, I’ve scarcely seen him. The wizard strikes fear in others...when he shows up. But in answering this summons, he’s defying his family. I hope that means something.

Shock turns, angling his body away from Lucan. “Look, I have no quarrel with you, Rion. I’m in, as long as I don’t have to deal with the bloody mate thief.”

“Mate thief?” Lucan snarls. “You and I both issued the Mating Call. Anka chose me. I did *not* steal.”

“You waited to Call to her until after I had, and she considered saying yes. That’s stealing in my book.”

“I didn’t steal anything that didn’t want to be stolen, you bast—”

“Gentlemen,” I cut in. “I’ll keep the two of you as far apart as possible. But we need you both, so whatever bad blood lies between you, bury it. Saving magickind is bigger.” Then I turn to Shock. “Thank you.”

He shrugs and straightens his sunglasses, distancing himself from the rest of the room.

So now the Doomsday Brethren has four wizards willing to fight. I need more. Even if I hate it, I need Ice.

“What about you, Rykard?”

“Fall in with a bunch of rich pricks and a madman?” Ice laughs harshly. “Hell, no.”

“You want Mathias tearing through magickind?”

“I want to protect what’s left of my family.”

“Then help us stop Mathias.”

“While we’re off playing war, who will keep our loved ones safe? You’ve got a sister. Imagine knowing that sick fuck has taken her and forced her to subm—”

“Leave Sabelle out of this.”

“Why? Mathias didn’t leave Gailene out of his evil schemes. He merely returned her mangled body, scorched with his brand, and forced us to live with the heartbreak.”

“You want revenge. So *do* something.”

“I don’t need a bored rich boy on a good Samaritan kick for that. I’ll do it myself.”

Ice turns for the door, his long strides eating up the Italian slate floor.

The cause needs him. I have to bring out the big guns.

“Alone, he’d simply kill you, too. Is that what Gailene would have wanted?”

Just then a pop and a puff of white smoke burst in front of my face. *Finally*. I’ve been waiting for an image of Auropa MacKinnett’s body. Seeing the horror and tragedy should scare the hell out of anyone who has a heart—or a brain in their head. I hate using the girl’s death to bring back memories Ice has tried to bury, but I’m out of more polite options.

“Do you want more innocents winding up like this, like Gailene?” With a flick of my wrist, I hurtle the image across the room, into Ice’s face. “Auropa was fifteen years old.”

The rest of the wizards crowd around.

Arms and legs sprawled wide, she looks up from the image with silent terror in her sightless eyes. Once, she was pretty and sheltered and sweet. Now she looks horrified, violated, and desecrated. Blood soaks her thighs and the ground between. Her pubic hair was removed and the Anarki symbol—Mathias’s signature—branded red into the soft skin there.

“Dear God.” Duke casts his eyes aside.

Lucan grimaces. “Sick bastard.”

Shock clenches his jaw in silence. I’ll need to keep my eye on him...

“This will happen again and again if we fail to band together.” I turn to Rykard. “Ice?”

The big warrior hazards a glance at the image one last time. Fury and vengeance harden his face before he closes his eyes with a sigh. “Fuck. I’m in.”

CHAPTER
FORTY-ONE

Olivia

I stare in the mirror and sigh with frustration.

Marrok hovers close, watching me so intently he never blinks. “Is something amiss?”

I turn to him, shoulders slumped. “No makeup, no hairbrush. No nothing. Ugh, I look—”

“Beautiful.”

My heart jerks. Despite our past and our disagreements, he’s hard to resist. He’s big, fit, seemingly possessive...and tempting. But when he’s charming, too? I’m like chocolate, dissolving into a melted, gooey pool at his feet. He’s most likely using me, but my heart doesn’t care. Every time I resolve to give him an aloof cold shoulder, something—our magical bond?—compels me back to him.

Or am I just that sad little girl who didn’t get enough parental love, so I’ll take this man’s scraps? That’s a harsh assessment, but...

Why does he bother complimenting me? Is he trying to placate me after hiding the fact we’re mated? Or is it possible he means what he says? I want to believe that...

“I look like a refugee.”

“You were unconcerned about your looks at my cottage.”

“You were my horny kidnapper. Of course I didn’t want to look good.”

He laughs. “I will see about obtaining what you require.”

“I can ask Sabelle—”

“Nay. ’Tis my right and privilege to care for you. I will both protect you and provide for you in all ways.”

Does he mean that—or half the things he says?

Before I fall down my rabbit hole of self-doubt again, he lays a fierce kiss on my lips, grabs the Doomsday Diary and my hand, then leads me down the stairs.

We drift through a wide, airy space, made stunning by exquisite tile floors, marble pillars, and antique tables with colorful plumes of fresh flowers.

As we approach the dining room, Bram stands outside an open door to our left. “Breakfast isn’t quite ready. I’d like to chat first. Olivia, you’re welcome to join us.”

Marrok tenses as if gearing up for battle. “We appreciate your hospitality. We will trouble you not for more than a day or two. ’Tis doubtful you would stage an inquisition merely to ask about the length of our visit, so I assume you wish to ‘chat’ about the Book of Doomsday, and I decline your invitation.”

“Actually, I want to talk about this morning’s battle. Please.” Bram gestures us into the sitting room.

“Touch the book, and I will kill you.”

Bram holds up both hands. “Not a finger. Though I think it will be safer with me, what I need to ask you is every bit as important.”

Glowering, Marrok settles a proprietary hand on the small of my back and leads me into Bram’s domain.

It’s like a museum. A gilt fireplace, heirloom rugs. Traditional mixed with modern to create a fresh, posh effect. And the art? I want to cry at how beautiful it is. As I study

each piece, I feel my jaw drop. Is that an original Pollock on his wall? Nearby is a statue that reminds me very much of a...

“Is that Bernini?”

Bram gives the sculpture an absent glance. “Art would be Sabelle’s department, but I believe so. Please sit.”

We sink onto a velvet sofa facing a huge picture window that reveals a bright, cheerful morning. Hard to believe that a handful of hours ago we were fighting for our lives.

I was so dazzled by the art that I didn’t notice the other men standing around the room. Three I remember from Bram’s party. One isn’t familiar at all.

In the far corner, Shock is once again decked out in leather, sunglasses, and badass attitude. Lucan glares at him as if he has no problem challenging Shock, despite the fact the other wizard is three inches and thirty pounds larger.

Near the door, Duke hovers, shrewd, pedigreed, and clearly named one of Britain’s most eligible bachelors for a reason. His designer khakis, crisp shirt, and impeccably expressionless stare belong in Bram’s palace.

But the unfamiliar man... He’s a mountain, almost as tall as Marrok. His dense, dark hair is mere stubble inching from his scalp. A model’s cheekbones slash across his strong face. Below his thick neck, he’s all Conan the Barbarian—enormous shoulders, biceps, and pectorals stretching a dark blue T-shirt so tight that its seams are beyond strained. Camouflage pants and dirt-crusting combat boots round out his look. His dissecting green eyes pin me in place.

Whoever he is, he’s flat-out scary.

Beside me, Marrok stiffens, clutching the diary in a death grip. “Rion, is this a bloody ambush?”

“Not at all.”

In the months I’ve known Bram, I’ve seen him teasing, solemn, even calculating. But never quite this determined.

Fury narrows Marrok’s eyes—and no surprise. Despite Bram’s assurances, I’m feeling a little ganged up on, too.

“Think of this as a mass plea,” he says finally. “We need your help.”

“With what?”

“First, thank you for jumping into the battle today. If not for you, Lucan, Duke, and I would have been completely overrun by Anarki.”

“Thank me not for protecting my mate. ‘Tis her I sought to safeguard.”

“Of course. But I’m sure you noticed that the Doomsday Brethren and I—”

“Doomsday Brethren?” Marrok cuts in.

Bram nods. “Wizards banding together to defeat Mathias and help you protect the book. Lucan and Duke, whom you met at my party, captured the Anarki in front of your house early this morning.” They nod Marrok’s way. “Along with Shock, whom you also met at my party.” The dude in leather sneers his greeting. “And Ice, whom you did not.”

“Sorry I missed you. I wasn’t invited. Shocking, that...” Ice drawls.

“Um...not trying to be critical, but five wizards aren’t enough to fight an army the size of Mathias’s,” I point out.

“Quite right, especially not after the flood of undead we saw this morning. Wizards we can fight with magic. Those undead creatures...” Bram shrugs. “They deflect magic. I’m not certain why, perhaps because they have no soul.”

I shiver. “Any idea how they became undead?”

“Precisely, no. But it’s dark magic. The soul cannot be removed from the body without the individual’s consent. He or she has to release it. After Mathias captures them, I’m sure he uses his well-honed skills to make people beg. The promise to wipe away shattering memories or unbearable pain will prompt many to surrender theirs. Then, with some powerful zap... Well, you saw.”

“How are you going to fight someone who’s both ruthless and insane?”

“It’s crucial that we reduce the number of undead Anarki. Since they’re impervious to spells, we need you to teach us human combat. You skewered several zombies at once and punched others. Olivia shot two. We’ve never needed these tactics. Frankly, they’re considered barbaric in magical circles, so we’re clueless. I’ve hand-picked all the Doomsday Brethren because they’re warriors to the core. We know casualties are a part of war, but we can’t face battle so unprepared. Unless we learn to fight your way, Mathias will slaughter us. And magickind will fall.”

Marrok sits back and says nothing into the silence.

I have no idea what he’s thinking. “Marrok?”

“If you’re wondering what’s in it for you, in exchange for teaching us human combat, we vow to provide magical protection for the Doomsday Diary and your mate.” With a swish of his fingers, Bram produces a trio of images that float before our faces. “Remember the vision I showed you a few days ago? This is the aftermath of that attack.”

A mere glance at the pictures has me clapping my hands over my mouth, both to contain my scream and my urge to retch. Blood everywhere. Chaos. Sightless eyes. Naked, abused bodies. Men, women, babies. The pictures show abject torture and pain. My stomach churns. I look away.

Beside me, Marrok clenches his jaw. He wants to be unmoved by the photos, but he isn’t.

“This could be any of us,” Bram goes on. “Or all of us, if we don’t band together. Mathias won’t rest until he has the book. And you”—he swings his gaze back to me—“are particularly at risk. According to our prisoner, Mathias considers you critical to his plan. He will kill anyone he must to get his hands on you. God help you if he does.”

Fear stabs at me. I don’t want to be one of Mathias’s victims, stripped and tied, used up and bled out, branded and left to die. “Because I’m—”

“Le Fay.” Ice is still staring, and I realize now he’s stunned.

“My name is Olivia Gray.” Should I offer my hand? In the end, I don’t. He just looks too scary.

“I thought the line was dead. The diary *and* the witch under one roof? Fuck. Mathias will come for you.”

I shiver. “But I don’t know anything.”

“You don’t have to. Your blood and that book are connected. He’s well aware of that.”

“Stop frightening my mate, or I will slay you where you stand,” Marrok growls.

Ice shrugs. “Since Mathias already attacked, I’m not telling her anything she doesn’t already know.”

“Enough. We can’t waste time squabbling while his power grows,” Bram snaps. “In the past month, reports of missing men among the human male population in England are up threefold. There have been two full-scale attacks on magical families, one on the MacKinnetts, a member of the ruling Council. The other on a Privileged family with two breedable daughters. One of the girls is already dead, the other still missing.”

I single out one of the images. “This picture shows what Mathias did to the dead woman?”

Ice nods. “It’s called Terriforz.”

“Tell her.” Bram cedes the floor.

Menace rolls over Ice as he prowls closer. “Mathias gets off on torture, and his version, Terriforz, kills slowly. He forces a woman to beg for him but leaves her fully aware that she’s being raped. After Mathias got tired of the victim depicted here, he gave her to his army. She was used to death. He’s already moved on to the next unfortunate female.”

“Let us help keep Olivia safe from this fate,” Bram goes on. “Train us in human combat.”

Marrok hesitates, then sets his jaw. “I want no part of this. Staying here places Olivia in greater danger. I will take her elsewhere and—”

“What if he follows you? Finds you?”

“He will not.”

“Can you be sure?” Bram challenges. “Now that Mathias knows who has the book, he will hunt you, no matter where you hide. Don’t you see? He already has.”

Marrok dismisses Bram with a wave of his hand. “He had help locating me.”

“Agreed. Someone at the party overheard Olivia’s thoughts and came after you, but we don’t know for certain who betrayed us. And that doesn’t change the fact that Mathias—”

“I have an idea who double-crossed us,” Lucan breaks in.

Marrok whips around to face the wizard. “Tell me.”

I tense, hoping like hell Lucan has a better theory than Marrok. It can’t be my father. Granted, I don’t know him well, and he was once Mathias’s second-in-command, but it doesn’t make sense to take the evil wizard out once, then help him regain power.

Lucan’s burning blue gaze snaps across the room. “Shock can read others’ thoughts. He heard Olivia’s. His family is crawling with Mathias sympathizers. How many turned Anarki, Shock? Zain, the one we captured, for sure.”

At the sound of his brother’s name, Shock snorts. “Congratulations on catching an idiot barely out of nappies. Very brave of you.”

“He’s old enough to don Anarki robes and kill people. You’d stand to gain a lot if Mathias’s ideals about equality were adopted...but my mate still wouldn’t want you.”

Shock lunges over the sofa to leap at Lucan’s throat. “Motherfucker!”

Lucan holds off Shock’s attack—barely—with a raised hand that creates some invisible forcefield. But the effort costs him. Sweat breaks out across Lucan’s forehead. He tenses, the tendons in his neck standing out as he strains to maintain control. My jaw drops. And still, Shock keeps charging and cursing Lucan.

Finally, Shock flings a hand in Lucan's direction. A buzzing fills the room. Lucan gasps as if a thousand-pound weight landed on his chest. Then he twitches and drops his hand. Shock invades his personal space with a growl and wraps his hand around Lucan's neck.

"Listen, you holier-than-thou fuck, I—"

"What's your magical blood mixed with?" Lucan croaks. "Your whole family is known for their evil tempers. Did your tainted blood win out after Bram's get-together? Did you get cozy with Mathias and put Olivia at risk?"

Shock's fingers tighten around Lucan's throat. "Anka is too good for you."

Lucan growls in Shock's face. "But she'll always be mine. Did she refuse you because you're part vampire? Because you're infected with darklust? What are those sunglasses you never remove hiding?"

"The exact moment I'm going to rip you apart with my bare hands."

"Stop, both of you!" Bram demands.

I can't blame him for being exasperated. Lucan enjoys baiting Shock. And Shock... Is there really such a thing as being part vampire?

Bram, though not the biggest badass in the room, carries the mantle of a leader, cool most of the time but commanding when he has to be—like now.

"Lucan, I know you and Shock have...issues, but I don't think he betrayed us. By helping us in the first place, he's put himself at odds with his family. Yet he's still here."

"Of course. He's a spy!" Lucan insists.

I agree. I have to—or face the very real possibility that my own father betrayed me.

"You're way off, you stupid sod," Shock spits, then turns to me. "You, too."

I have no doubt that, behind Shock's sunglasses, the wizard glares out a death wish.

"I said stop!" Bram shouts before he addresses the group. "The truth is, we don't know exactly who our Judas is. I won't believe it's someone in this room." He casts a hard glare at Lucan. "Nor will you. Anyone telepathic at the party had the information. Any of them could have told Mathias, and we will likely never know who. Fighting the Anarki and learning to eliminate the undead is our priority. So, Marrok, will you train us?"

CHAPTER
FORTY-TWO

Marrok

I sit back. Six pairs of eyes burn into me, none more than Olivia's.

What is the most advantageous strategy? It matters not whether my "wife" is conspiring with her father to earn his fickle affection or that I'm not thinking straight because I've been denied the chance to reaffirm our bond. I must keep Olivia and the diary safe at all cost. I cannot make decisions based on fear, impulse, or ignorance of the magical world.

If we remain with Bram, Mathias will know precisely where to find us. Staying here sounds mad, but if we venture alone, our location will be a secret...but 'tis hardly a guarantee of our safety. Olivia will insist on reuniting with her father and returning to her gallery. Either way, should he find us... I cannot best a maniac who fights with magic.

As much as I hate it, the job of protecting both the book and Olivia while dodging the madman and his undead army is too big for me alone. Part of being a good warrior is knowing when to make strategic alliances.

I know of only one person in the room, who, without a doubt, would never take Mathias's side.

I tear my gaze from Olivia's and focus on Bram. "I must speak to you. Alone."

Surprise flickers across Bram's face, but I read men well. My request is not unwelcome.

"Right. Out with the lot of you," Bram says to the others. "Let me talk to the warrior."

With a mixture of shrugs and disgruntled stares, Lucan, Shock, Duke, and Ice file out. Olivia remains unmoving beside me. She, more than anyone, cannot hear this.

I turn to her. "I'm sorry, love. Can you leave us?"

She rears back. My request clearly stuns her. Hurt crosses her soft face. I hate it, and if my worries prove false, I will find a million ways to make it up to her. If not...

"Sure. Whatever." Stiffly, she leaves the room.

Bram shuts the door softly behind her. "What's on your mind?"

"We have not been friends."

"I've tried. You don't appreciate my finer qualities."

"After my experience with Morgana, perhaps you understand why I distrust magic."

"And here I hoped you'd come to realize we're not all evil freaks."

I smile faintly. "After the attack this morn, I have reevaluated my position. I trust no one except—and I never thought I would utter this—you. When you passed the magic circle at my cottage, 'twas clear you could have entered and stolen the book anytime you wished."

Bram nods.

"Why did you restrain yourself?"

"To build your trust. Besides, stealing it may do more harm than good. It's possible bad things come as a result. Some objects can be cursed if they're taken from their owners."

"Like the book locking and never opening again?"

“Or worse. Illness, death, tragedy... I’m sure you know that I introduced you to Olivia, hoping that if she freed you from your curse, you would pass the diary into my hands for safekeeping. Such a powerfully magical object should be protected from Mathias.”

“Why did Richard Gray suddenly appear at your party?”

“When Olivia began searching for her father, I suspected Gray might be him. I floated word ‘round the magical underground types that I had information he might want. When he turned up on my doorstep, I asked if he had any children. He supplied me with Olivia’s name, age, and London address.”

The wizard took much time to learn about his daughter, but never bothered to meet her? He claimed he steered clear for her protection, but... “You let him stay to reunite father and daughter? ’Tis doubtful your motives were that touching.”

He shrugs. “The bottom line is, Olivia is your mate. It’s no coincidence that one Le Fay woman is the instrument of your torture while another completes you. I’ve no doubt Olivia is the key to ending your curse.”

“And if you help me break my affliction, you obtain the Doomsday Diary more quickly.”

Bram shoots me a self-deprecating smile. “Yes, but Gray likely knows more about the diary than anyone on this plane of existence.”

I sigh and steeple my fingers. “My cooperation, if I give it, does not come without a price.”

“Naturally.”

Bram has nerves of steel. I respect that. Though he looks calm, the future of Bram’s Brethren—indeed, magickind—rests on his ability to persuade me, a warrior who loathes magic, to teach wizards to fight like men. Olivia’s life depends on evading Mathias. She will never be safe until he is dead. If Bram’s forefathers could defeat the dark wizard once, I have little doubt he and his ilk could do it again.

“Olivia is protected, no matter who threatens her, what it costs, or how many die.”

“That’s a given. She’s critical to both sides.”

I resist the urge to swear. ’Tis too telling while negotiating with someone as wily as Bram Rion. Instead, I cross my arms as if I have not a care. “I trust Richard Gray not. When he returns, I want him watched. He must never be alone with her.”

Suddenly, Bram bursts out laughing. “You have balls of steel. At the thought of their mates in danger, most wizards exhibit panic levels somewhere near atomic. Yet you sit there like a stone. No wonder history recorded you as a great tactician.”

Except when it comes to my cock. ’Tis possible, Olivia is a liability I should not carry. A mistake I should not have made. But I do not regret her—even knowing that, because of her, I sit squarely in the middle of a war I care little for, that the very woman I seek to protect might betray me to please a parent who has never troubled himself to find her.

“Let us bypass the pleasantries. You want me to teach you and your fellow Brethren to fight like warriors in...months? Weeks?”

“Days, if possible. Wizards have abilities that allow us to master skills faster than humans, but we still haven’t a moment to lose. Mathias will do anything to obtain Olivia and the diary.”

“Then this place must become a fortress, guarded with everything possible.”

“We have spells and enchantments around it, some placed here by Merlin himself. It’s tight.”

“Perhaps I am old-fashioned, but I want eyes in the very topmost tower scanning the land in every direction, every moment of every day.” High-powered rifles and rocket launchers would please me greatly, but they are bloody difficult to obtain and would be useless in the hands of the

untrained. “And only those you trust, who have a vested interest in succeeding.”

“Done. If the Domsday Brethren are well-trained, Olivia and the book will be safe.”

“Think carefully before you agree. What you suggest will require eighteen hours each day of sweating dedication. You will hurt like you never have in your life. You will cry and beg for mercy, and I will have none.”

“You will find us up to the challenge.”

“Shock, perhaps. Ice, too. If Lucan can channel his anger...” I shrug. “Duke looks far too privileged to sweat for hours on end. Tell him to leave his designer clothes at home.”

Bram cracks a smile. “Of course. And what is your assessment of me?”

“When I have finished with you, you will no longer resemble magic’s pretty boy. But you will be ready to fight.”

“That’s what’s important.” Bram stands and extends his hand across the desk. “Do we have a deal?”

After I agree to train the Domsday Brethren and consume breakfast, I journey upstairs to find Olivia lounging on our bed, reading a book. She mumbles something unintelligible to herself, then flicks her wrist. “Damn it.”

“What troubles you?”

She lifts not her eyes from her page. “Nothing that concerns you.”

So my “wife” is still in a snit. She liked not me asking her to leave Bram’s office. ’Twas necessary. She would object to being coddled, and insulting her father would only rile her again.

“What are you reading?”

She arches a dark brow. “Oh, I’m supposed to let you in on stuff, but you don’t have to tell me anything? I don’t think so, buddy.”

“Forgive me for protecting you from what I sense will be a terrible war.”

She glares my way, then sticks her nose in her book again. I am sorely tempted to cover her mouth with mine, stretch her out on our bed, and take her until she cries my name loud enough for all and sundry in the house to hear. Until she acknowledges our bond again.

But the wizards are waiting to begin their training. Their assistance in Olivia’s protection must start immediately, no matter how badly I wish for an hour or two to devour her.

“I’m not a hothouse flower. You can’t protect me from everything.”

“Protecting is in a warrior’s nature. I am too old to change.”

“And I’m too independent to be cosseted.”

’Tis one of her qualities that both attracts and infuriates me. “I will endeavor to remember such. Does aught else upset you?”

“Now that you mention it... From the conversation at breakfast, I guess you’ve agreed to train the wizards to fight. I agree it’s a good move—not that you asked me. But we should hide the diary before you go.”

“Excellent idea.” Hopefully, it will be temporarily safe since the men will be with me...unless Olivia contacts her father.

“We talked before breakfast about you carving something to hide the book in that we could affix to the furniture. So I was trying to conjure up a block of wood.”

“Did you curse because you have not yet succeeded?”

She frowns. “While you shoveled down your third helping of eggs, I came up here to figure this out. I’m focusing,

picturing what I want, pouring my energy into it. I know I won't learn magic overnight, but...argh!"

I sit beside her on the bed and cup her cheek. "Can I help?"

She shrugs. "I don't see how."

"Magic requires concentration and desire for the outcome?"

"According to Sabelle and this book, yeah. But maybe since I haven't transitioned yet, I'm trying to do too much."

Mayhap it is unwise to encourage her magic, but I hate to see her so disheartened. "You have powerful blood, and you are smart. Believe in yourself."

Olivia turns a soft gaze my way, full of thanks and something that hits me in the chest. In days, the woman has wrapped herself around me. And no matter how often I tell myself to maintain distance, I cannot.

"Thanks."

I take her hand and squeeze it.

"How big do you need the block of wood to be?"

I hold up my hands to mimic the size of the diary. "Once I have whittled its shape, I will affix it where I can."

She nods and mumbles again, squeezing my hand tighter and tighter.

Suddenly, a hunk of smooth maple, the same color as the furniture, appears on the bed at our feet.

Her eyes pop open, and she squeals. "I did it! My very first bit of real magic!"

"Aye, you did." I plant a congratulatory kiss on her mouth. 'Tis a relief to know she used magic for the first time to help me, not her father.

Have I been suspicious of her and her heritage for naught?

"It was easy because I had plenty of energy with you here. Now you can carve a hiding place for the book." She looks

adorably proud.

Quickly, I whittle the hunk of wood, kneeling at the head of the bed periodically to measure the fit of a niche beneath, until the case fits in a corner, against the leg. As I do, Olivia attempts to conjure a lock to secure it. After many tries and much frustration, she finally succeeds with an excited squeal.

Together, we place the book inside its wooden vessel. I secure it beneath the mattress to the post nearest my head and attach it to the wood. When I finish, she encloses the lock with a spell I hope will hold.

We are done. If she genuinely wishes to aid my cause, that should adequately hide the book. If not... I stifle the thought.

She worked with me, helped me. Mayhap I should put the past behind me and judge Olivia based on her actions, not her family.

Satisfied for now, I change into the T-shirt, joggers, and trainersabelle left for me after breakfast. I am as ready as I will ever be to teach these wizards to fight like warriors.

CHAPTER
FORTY-THREE

Olivia

Within a few hours, I finish reading the book of simple spells. I practice conjuring small objects and manage to slide a picture frame across the dresser, turn on a faucet, and close a door—all with my mind. I'm miserable at teleporting, since I haven't moved even an inch. I try not to be impatient. Magic isn't something I can rush.

But knowing I'm a witch is an odd relief. All my life, everyone—especially my mother—treated me as if I were different. Now that I know how and why, it's pretty cool.

Except Marrok loathes magic.

And I still have so many questions about these people and my heritage... About my father in particular. I'm still shocked that Richard Gray was once Mathias's right-hand man.

Restless, I wander downstairs. My mate distrusts my father, and I don't blame him. I hate the thought that I might have uprooted my life only to find out my dad is a villain. But people can change, right? Richard must have or he wouldn't have chosen the right path. Besides, everyone deserves a second chance.

Still, I see Marrok's point. I should think things through before putting my faith in my father.

In the grand entry hall, I scan the gorgeous, expansive place. Surely a manor like this has a library.

“Down the hall. Second door on your right,” Sabelle provides helpfully behind me.

With a start, I turn to face her. “How did you know—? Oh...you read my thoughts.”

“Shielding them takes practice. I keep a song in my head—a very mundane one—especially if I’m in public. People tune you out if you’re mentally singing the alphabet. Or ‘Baby Shark.’ Off-key works even faster.”

I laugh at her mischievous streak. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Want help with the library? Dinner can wait a bit, and the family collection of books is imposing.”

“Sure.”

Together, we make our way to the open door. Once I peek inside, my jaw drops. “Holy cow! You weren’t kidding.”

“My brother pretends he’s a cavalier playboy, but he’s actually read nearly every book here and brings new ones home all the time.”

Wow, I never pegged Bram as a hardcore reader. “How many books do you have?”

“I stopped counting after eight thousand.”

My guess is the shelves are stuffed with double that amount. How will I ever find what I want? The uneasy feeling of a mental ticking clock I don’t understand tells me that I need to start now.

“Don’t panic. What are you looking for?”

Damn, Sabelle is reading my thoughts again. I start humming one of my favorite songs in my head. Will that really mask my curiosities about my father’s past, Marrok’s curse, and the diary itself?

“Not yet,” Sabelle supplies. “But those thoughts were harder to hear. Keep practicing. Which subject do you wish to learn about first? I can help you with the diary. Bram has already set aside some books he intends to reread soon.”

Despite the woman's nosiness—and breathtaking beauty—I like Sabelle. She's friendly, smart, funny, and seems genuinely nice. Easy to talk to. I haven't made friends since I moved to London, so I'm enjoying hanging out with her. "That would be great."

"I like you, too. I think we'll be great friends." Sabelle grins before she crosses the room to retrieve a stack of books on an enormous table. "Curses... You want to know about Marrok's?"

"If we get this diary open, how do we end it?"

"Valid question." Sabelle plops the books on the sofa between us. "Let's read."

We skim books for a good hour. I'm about to sigh in frustration until I find a passage that makes my eyes pop. "Here! Here's an account of someone who saw Morgana use the diary. She wrote in it. Which fits. It's a diary, after all. Marrok said she did the same with his curse. This passage suggests she could also uncurse someone with a stroke of her pen."

"She's not here."

"Yeah." I shrug. "But Marrok thinks I can do it."

"Since you're a Le Fay, perhaps."

I read a bit more. "This speculates that she set curses with conditions, so they could be broken once her terms were met."

"Curses often are. They're retributive in nature, but the caster wants the recipient to learn a lesson."

"Marrok's curse has an out-clause, but he doesn't understand it. Neither do I."

"Hmm," Sabelle hums as she skims another tome. Suddenly, she sits up straight, looking animated. "A man Morgana once cursed with the diary tried to steal it. He swore it dissolved in his hands and materialized back in Morgana's."

"What does that mean?"

"Some objects can't be stolen."

“This can. Marrok paid one of Morgana’s serving maids to steal it for him.”

“Really? Since Morgana was known for liking men as bed partners and disliking them in all other ways, maybe she merely blocked men from using the book.”

“One of my professors called it an object of feminine reverence. Maybe that’s what she meant.”

“It’s possible.”

Not that the theory does us much good. “Until we unlock the book, we can’t know if it only responds to women.”

Sabelle nods. “But if Mathias reached the same conclusion, that explains why he plans to capture you with the book. You’re female *and* Morgana’s descendant, which would likely make the book more potent.”

That scares the hell out of me. After the attack at Marrok’s, I have no doubt Mathias will go to great lengths to capture me. “Maybe any witch would do.”

“From what we’ve read, no other woman has ever tested it. You’re the most likely to succeed. Mathias is too smart not to realize that.”

That’s bad. Worse is wondering if the psycho could coerce my father into winning my trust for his nefarious purposes. Or if he’s already coaxed Richard back to the dark side. “If Mathias can make humans into Anarki, can he mind-control a wizard, too?”

“Not for long. Not without taking their soul.”

“And anyone without a soul would look like those undead things, all rotting and stuff?”

She nods. “But you’re straying into territory so dark that most of magickind’s knowledge is limited.”

So that’s a maybe, just like Richard being coerced in nonmagical ways.

“Either is possible.”

Maybe I should be annoyed that I forgot to sing and the witch keeps reading my thoughts, but it's getting us to good questions—and maybe even the right answers—faster. I need to find something that can tell me exactly what kind of man my father is.

“Richard Gray?” Sabelle stands and strolls to the giant section of the library she introduced as history.

I nod. “Do you have a book that explains his role in bringing Mathias down?”

“Absolutely. I wasn't alive when he and the original Brethren foiled D'Arc's plan, but I remember your father's name from school.”

“Is he remembered as a hero?” I hold my breath.

“To most. He's definitely been written that way. I'll show you.”

Sabelle pulls a few books free and hands them to me. I take them greedily and sink against the back of the buttery leather sofa.

Within a few minutes, I slap the book closed with a smile and pick up another. Then another. Each time, my grin widens.

“Well?” Sabelle asks. “Great rendition of ‘Old MacDonald,’ by the way.”

“Thank you. You didn't hear my thoughts?”

“Snippets only. You sounded pleased.”

Nodding, I stand with nervous energy. “This book, like the others, says that when Mathias began abducting the children of Council members, my father secretly contacted their parents and promised the younglings'—that's the term, right?—safety. The previous Brethren were gunning for Mathias, and my father gave them the location of Mathias's hideaway, led them past the magical protections, pretending he had captured them. Then, together, the Brethren and my father ambushed Mathias and, after a brutal fight, vanquished him. The Brethren celebrated my father, the parents revered him...and the wizards of the Anarki hunted him. But many of the new

friends he'd made concealed him, some for years. According to these sources, he came to the party late, but he was a hero."

If these accounts are true, maybe Richard's decision to keep distance during my childhood was the right one.

But if magickind is anything like mankind, history is always written by the victors. "Do you have more about him? Anything...not so flattering?"

"Yes, but most was written by Anarki-sympathizing trash grumbling that your father had cost them their leader. The versions you've read is what magickind teaches in school."

So now I have a decent semblance of the truth. Maybe that will help Marrok trust my father, too. Maybe, together, we'll get the book open faster.

If we do, what will happen when Marrok's curse ends?

"What do you mean?" Sabelle frowns.

"He's been immortal. If that's no longer true, will he..." I can't bring myself to say it, to even think about Marrok dying.

"I don't know. Usually mate-bonds are stronger, since mating is the most powerful magic of all. But then, I've never seen a curse as potent as Morgana's."

So Marrok may not survive the end of his damnation. Even if he does...he wants to die.

My agony at the thought tells me how dangerously close I am to falling in love.

I want to call my father, talk, try to figure out who he really is, and see what he knows about Marrok's curse. A restless urgency to hear his voice swells inside me.

"May I use your phone?"

Sabelle snaps her fingers and produces one, then hands it to me.

Richard answers on the third ring, sounding winded. "Who is this?"

Dad? Richard? "It's me, Olivia. Are you all right?"

“I’ve been running from the Anarki since leaving your cottage. They were awaiting me when I returned home.”

My heart stops. “But you got away?”

“For now.”

“Do you have a safe place to go?”

He hesitates. “No.”

Biting my lip, I turn to Sabelle. “My father needs help. I have to go to him.”

“I heard—with my ears. You can’t leave. It’s too dangerous.”

She’s right. Going out alone is like a neon sign to Mathias to abduct me. And if my father is being coerced or does have any lingering allegiance to the creep, I’m playing into his hands.

Now what? “I have to help him...”

“Invite your father here. I’ll let him past our protections for the day. We can help him find a secure location to dodge the Anarki.”

I squeeze Sabelle’s hand. “Thank you. You don’t know how much this means to me.”

“I heard it. You forgot to sing.”

CHAPTER
FORTY-FOUR

Marrok

Minutes after commencing training, I shake my head. The wizards are terrible. Their fisticuff skills are deplorable and their sword fighting laughable. Firearms...I fear attempting that. No telling what—or who—they might shoot. Clearly, anything as complex as martial arts, much less explosives or modified weaponry, must wait. But as I doff my sweaty shirt and the surprisingly strong October sun beats on my back, I find myself surrounded by men committed to becoming great fighters...and feel a kinship I haven't in over a thousand years.

I enjoyed the brotherhood with Arthur and his army. In some ways, Bram reminds me of my king: shrewd, fair...deceitful when it suits him. I suspect he has a secret plan beyond our alliance, but that was often Arthur's way. I hate to admit thus, but my opinion of Bram increased this day. The spoiled, attention-seeking coxcomb is actually a leader.

Still, I trust him not. Well, not completely. He is magical and used to manipulation to win his way. At the moment, his goals align with mine.

For now, that is enough.

Afternoon rolls into early evening. Hours after nightfall, the sweating, exhausted wizards head inside. Massive amounts of food are consumed in minutes.

“You poor nonmagical bastards.” Ice rolls his shoulders, working through unaccustomed soreness. “You did this every day for years to master that rubbish?”

Duke groans. “This makes waving a wand look damn easy.”

“Hell. I’m not sure I’ve got legs anymore,” Shock complains.

“You will feel them tomorrow,” I quip. “The lot of you is pitifully out of shape. You *look* fit...”

“We aren’t meant to lift fifty-pound swords for five hours or knock off one another’s heads with our fists.” Lucan grimaces, stretching his tightening neck.

“Think you of how much better prepared we will be to meet the Anarki,” I reply.

Bram rolls his eyes. “That’s the only thought that’s kept me moving for the past two hours.”

Lucan snorts. “Precisely. I’m motivated by not allowing some soulless, flesh-rotting bastard to mop the floor with me again.”

“More, gentlemen?” Sabelle calls from the far end of the obscenely long dining hall, lifting a platter laden with food.

Duke and Lucan both thank her and decline. Shock follows suit, rising to his feet with a vicious curse.

“Naught more for me,” I add. “My thanks for a wonderful meal.”

“Anytime. I just wave my wand...” She shrugs. “I have it pretty easy.”

Bram tries to shoo her out. Instead, she smiles and turns to Ice, who stares back.

He looks as if he wants to consume her whole.

“We haven’t met. I’m Sabelle.”

He shoots to his feet, towering over her and closing what little distance lay between them. His green eyes burn into her

as he sticks out his hand. “Isdernus Rykard.”

The smile falls from her face.

“Most people call me Ice.” He tries to gentle his guttural growl.

She steps back. Ice follows, hand still outstretched.

Glancing between his palm and his unwavering stare, Sabelle licks her lips and inches her hand in his direction.

Bram lunges for them until his big body shadows his sister’s. “You’ve performed your duty as hostess. Go.”

She glares at him. “You’re being rude. I’m a full-grown witch, not a dog.”

“You’re still my sister and my ward. *I* decide whose hand you shake. Out. Now.”

“You’re straining my affection,” she warns.

“And you’re pushing your luck.”

When Bram’s expression turns to unbendable steel, Sabelle heaves a sigh of frustration, then stomps from the room. Thick silence falls until the door closes behind her.

Bram whirls on Ice. “I need you as a fighter. I’ll provide you training and feed you at my table. Do not *ever* touch my sister.”

Hatred spits from Ice’s cold eyes. “I’m not trying to shag the perfect princess.”

From where I sit, that is a lie.

“You will not use my sister and the word ‘shag’ in the same sentence, or I will kill you,” Bram threatens. “Are we clear?”

Ice snorts. “Hold your shotgun. I have no designs on Sabelle. Talk about nightmare in-laws.”

’Tis the end of their exchange...yet not. Whatever hostility lies between Bram and Ice is deep. Nor, I fear, is it over.

“This feud cannot continue,” I warn. “We *must* work together, build trust, and believe that every warrior has the

others' backs—at least on the battlefield. Or we will fail.”

Ice and Bram share a quick glance. After a moment's stare-down, they both nod. Mercifully, neither speaks again.

As a unit, we leave the dining hall. Night spills in through the manor's huge windows. At the end of the long walkway, Bram throws open the double doors. What was once the ballroom I vaguely recognize from his party has been converted into our evening training facility. Every light in the expansive room burns brightly. Someone—servants?—moved all of our equipment inside. Weapons and protective padding litter the elegant floor.

And in the center of it all, Olivia stands, talking to her father.

I see red.

How did the sneaky lout find her here? Who invited him inside?

The older wizard grips her hand and pats it, but I glimpse the urgency in his motions. Even at a distance, I discern a rush of mumbled words. Then Gray sees me. He falls silent, his expression blanking.

Ah, guilt. 'Tis so strong, I can almost smell it. Acrid. Alarming.

Unacceptable.

Every protective instinct I possess rumbles to the surface as I tear across the room in long-legged strides. When I reach Olivia, I wrap an arm around her, glaring at the unwelcome intruder. “Gray.”

Olivia tries to wriggle free. “I'm glad you're here. I asked my dad to visit so we can all talk.”

I refuse to let her go.

She allowed him into this lair. Does she plot a deeper betrayal to win the bastard's approval?

“Olivia called to make certain I survived the Anarki attack. I was glad to be assured my daughter is unharmed.”

“As you see, I protected my mate. While you...what? Disappeared? Methinks you did little to prevent the Anarki from capturing her.”

Olivia gasps. “He helped defeat Mathias by tricking him—at great personal risk—because it was the right thing to do. I read about it.” She grabs a book from a nearby table abutting the wall, and shoves it in my hands. “Why don’t you do the same?”

“I know how events look, but I’m no ally of Mathias,” Gray insists. “Do you realize how badly he wants me dead?”

I grunt. “He would keep you alive long enough to lead him to the Doomsday Diary.”

“I deeply regret that I was ever part of the Anarki. Once I figured out his scheme, I did the best I could to eradicate him from magickind. All I want now is to know my daughter. Please see reason. Mathias will look for her here. By now, he knows who helped you defend your cottage, so he will deduce where you hide.”

Bram snorts, suddenly beside me. “I would love to see him try to invade.”

“He knows better,” Gray assures. “He’ll find a more subtle way in. But rest assured, he *will* find it. He needs the book, and I’m sure he suspects Olivia is most likely to open it. Let her come with me. I know how to protect her. She should not be—”

“*No!*” I grab Gray by the throat and back him to the wall. “You dare come here when your very presence is a threat? When the Anarki could be right behind you? You are a fool if you think I will let her leave with you, even for a second. Try to separate me from my mate again, and you will find out how unforgiving my wrath can be.”

“Marrok!” Olivia tugs at my arm. “Let go.”

“Nay.”

Bram clears his throat. “If Gray wanted to, he could rip out your entrails with a spell.”

“Not before I knocked a few screws loose in his head.”

On Bram’s right, Shock laughs. “Pound him. I know all about Mr. Gray. Smarmy bastard who tossed the Anarki over when shit got too deep. After betraying his boss, the coward ran and hid like a rat in a hole.”

That sounds accurate to me. I disliked Richard Gray on sight. Naught has changed.

“Let him go.” Olivia stamps her foot. “Right *now!*”

She refuses to see the threat her father presents. It infuriates me, but I dare not push her toward him.

As I release Gray, he clears his throat and rubs his neck, milking the injury for her sympathy.

“He’s just trying to protect me in his way, like you are,” Olivia insists. “You’re being an asshole. This is *my* choice.”

“You wish to leave with him?”

“No, we’re safer here. I know that. I just want you to *listen.*”

“Mayhap I will, once he stops trying to part us.”

“He’s talking to me about the diary. He has information that might be useful. You dismissing him doesn’t help.”

I turn a sharp glance to Gray.

“The diary is locked, yes?” he asks.

If the shifty wizard has information, I must play his game. “Aye.”

“According to my great-grandmother’s writings, the diary requires someone special to open it.”

“Who?”

Gray shrugs. “You knew Morgana far more...intimately.”

I appreciate not the reminder.

Olivia tries to smooth over the moment. “One of my history professors called the diary an object of feminine reverence. I read something today that made me think it’s

more powerful in a woman's hands. Maybe that's what she meant."

"Morgana's writings never say explicitly, but it would be like her to create a powerful object only for the fairer sex. And it would likely be its most powerful in the hands of a Le Fay woman."

"And no others remain besides my mate?"

Gray shakes his head. "None."

My protective instinct surges again. It takes all my restraint not to pick Olivia up and carry her away.

"Tell me about the two halves of the key," I bark at Gray, suspicions forming. "Do you have them?"

"I was a young man when my mother died. You saw her painting?" he asks Olivia.

"The young woman with the symbol around her neck was your mother?"

"Indeed. The painting was completed before her mating, long before my birth. Upon her death, she left me that necklace. But as I said, the key is in two parts. We need both to unlock the diary."

Olivia frowns. "And you only know where to find one?"

Gray swallows, looking away. "I-I gave mine to Mathias two centuries ago. He demanded a show of fidelity and—"

"And like the sniveling yes-man you are, you gave him half the key to the end of the world," Bram cuts in.

"I believed in equality. At the time, I didn't know he was actually hurting people and—"

"How think you Mathias intended to enforce his will, if not through coercion and bloodshed?" I demand.

And how did he think anyone but Mathias would ever open the tome again? No wonder my every effort was thwarted for centuries...

"I was young and idealistic and—"

“Daft.” I itch to put Gray out of everyone’s misery. I have smelled stinking heaps of refuse with a more pleasant stench. “What happened to the other half of the key?”

Again, Gray turns to Olivia. “I left the other half with your mother for your protection. I told her that if the Anarki knocked on her door, she should give it to them to save you.”

Olivia pales. “W-what does it look like?”

I grip her shoulders to ensure she sinks not to the floor.

To my surprise, Ice zips past me, lifts the older wizard by his shirt front, and shoves him against the wall again.

“You might be able to zap our immortal friend if the mood strikes you, but no such luck with me. I’m an Anarki-hating bastard from way back.”

Bram might dislike Ice, but at the moment, I appreciate the hell out of him. Menace rolls off the green-eyed wizard. Only someone stupid would cross him.

I hope Gray proves himself a half-wit.

“What troubles you?” I wrap my arms around Olivia.

She wriggles free in exasperation and marches for Ice. “Let him go. He can’t answer us if you’re choking him.”

Drawing her back, I glare at Gray. “Spit it out. What does the necklace resemble?”

“The piece hangs from a chain of twined silver and gold.” His voice wobbles as he stares at Ice like someone confronted by the grim reaper. “It-it’s half of the symbol. The half beneath, which is an ornately scripted L with rubies—”

Olivia blanches even paler.

My mate has seen the key. Does she have it among her possessions? Is she broadcasting that very thought? If so, the last thing I need is for Gray to “hear” it.

If he does, I suspect the Anarki will know, too.

“This conversation is over.” I lift my mate, toss her over my shoulder, and run.

“Wait!” Gray calls after Olivia. “Do you have it?”

“Get him gone now,” I snarl at the others, racing for the exit before she mentally or verbally answers.

But as I reach the door, she cries out one high-pitched but unmistakable word.

Olivia

“Yes!” The word echoes in my head as Marrok clamps his hot hand around my thighs and carries me down the long gallery before taking the stairs two at a time. The hard bulge of his shoulder rams into my middle. Blood rushes to my head—and not just from being carted around like a sack of flour.

“Put me down!” I squirm furiously. “Damn you, now!”

Marrok doesn’t respond, merely keeps on, his sneakers stamping across the marble floor. He smells like sweat and man and hard work forged in steel.

I try to ignore his musky, toe-curling scent, along with my view of his great ass. Better to focus on my rage.

“How dare you drag me out like a child!”

“Did you think before you spoke?” he grunts with each step. “Before you blurted out secrets that could help Mathias?”

“Mathias?” I shout at his back. “Richard isn’t his right-hand man anymore. He assured me.”

“So, of course, you believe him?”

“I’ve been reading magical history books all afternoon. He became a hero! And he’s worried about me. He’s not going to sell me out to someone that evil. And he knows more about opening the diary than all of us put together. Before you barged in, he promised to help. How are we going to figure out how to end your curse if we don’t listen and share information?”

“We need him not. We will discern what we must.”

“Really? You’ve had fifteen hundred years with the diary. How did that work out for you?”

Predictably, Marrok doesn’t have an answer.

“You haven’t made a lick of progress, so maybe we should try it my way. I understand trust is hard for you, but my father apologized for the past. You have no reason to not to trust him now except circumstantial evidence and your stubborn need to be right. I have actual proof that he stopped Mathias. Why not give him a chance?”

My pissed-off mountain of a mate pauses. “Because he was once Anarki. And he never bothered himself to find you until Mathias resurfaced. That does not inspire trust, and I will never risk you.”

I see Marrok’s point, but can’t believe my own father would intentionally put me in danger. “Those history books describe my father as Anarki enemy number one.”

“Deceit is in his blood. I smell it.”

“Um...his blood is my blood. Does your little proclamation include me, too? I asked you before, and I never got an answer.”

“Only you can say. I know not whether you and your father are hatching a scheme to take the diary from me.”

Pain rips through me, so sharp I can’t breathe. “Hatching? You really think...” I tear up. “Go to hell, you obstinate immortal! You’re too suspicious to trust even the first woman to give you an orgasm in centuries. You abducted me just because I reminded you of Morgana and—”

“I was more right than wrong. You are Le Fay.”

“Which doesn’t make me an evil bitch. But you don’t believe me. Let me go!”

“Never.”

Now he’s *really* pissing me off. “I’m serious. You’re never touching me again.”

“I am. In less than five minutes you will be screaming my name in climax.”

Like hell. “Not happening, buddy.”

“I am not your friend; I am your husband. I will touch you as you need. As is my right.”

“Nope. You have no rights to my body.”

His hand perched on my thigh creeps up until he’s grabbing a palmful of my ass. “’Tis wrong, you are. Your sweet cunt, like the rest of you, is mine to feel, to taste, or to fuck as I wish.”

“I’m not letting you anywhere near my girl parts after you threw me out of Bram’s office, refused to answer my questions, then separated me from my father. If you don’t trust me, you don’t get to touch me.”

His grip tightens. “You seek your father’s affection, but not at the expense of your safety.”

“Oh, please. The diary is the real issue. You only ‘protect’ me to keep me away from Richard so I don’t tell him what I know. And you only want me because you need me to open the book. You don’t give a shit about me.”

Marrok snorts. He might be bigger, but I’m not taking his crap, especially while hanging upside down.

I shove my hands into his sweatpants, groping for the waistband to his underwear. I might not be able to fight him with my fists, but a really vicious wedgie would bring him to his knees.

My hands only find smooth, well-muscled cheeks. “You’re not wearing underwear?”

“Never wore them in the Dark Ages. Why start now?”

Seriously? “You aren’t putting me on ‘time-out.’ It’s *my* emblem, *my* father, and *my* decision.”

“You are *my* mate, talking to someone who wishes to steal *my* book, which controls *my* eternity.”

We're at an impasse. Left with few choices, I take one of my few remaining options: shove my hands beneath his shirt and dig my fingernails into his muscled back.

Marrok barely tenses, just keeps sauntering the hall to our bedroom door. "Is that meant to hurt?"

Oh, the jackass! I dig harder into his skin.

No response.

These are desperate times. I drag out the desperate measures.

I slip down his back, until he's forced to grab my knees to stop me from falling on my head. Grinning, I reach around his middle and grab for his balls. If I can reach low enough to twist them, he'll fall to his knees. Yeah, he's a tough guy, but he's still got a man's vulnerabilities, right?

Instead, when I maneuver myself to reach his front, I miss his testicles.

And find his massive, stone-hard cock.

"This drag-me-to-the-cave stuff has you all torqued up?" I gasp.

"You hold the answer in your hand."

And then some.

Fine. I'll just use his arousal to my advantage.

I nip at his hip with an erotic lick and stroke his erection.

"You play with fire, witch."

Maybe...but his steps slow. He falters. I'm getting to him.

Unfortunately, touching him is getting to me, too. I'm achy and wet. Why does just being near him do that to me?

Suddenly, Marrok hoists me back up on his shoulder and swats my ass with a broad palm. A sting fires across my butt as he jerks me against his body and sets me on my feet, my back against a wall.

My shirt flies over my head. My bra is no match for his determined fingers. Despite my batting hands, he flings both to

the floor.

He stares at my breasts, his eyes dark with lust. “I warned you.”

I swallow hard. I’m half-naked in a hallway anyone could wander down. And all I can think about is having this hungry sexual beast inside me.

What the hell is wrong with me?

He grabs my wrists and pins them to the wall. My heart forgets to beat. My belly flips over. A dam bursts between my legs. I shiver.

“Shouldn’t you be training Bram and the others?”

His eyes narrow. “After you and I...talk.”

His mouth crashes into mine, flattening me against the wall with his body. My anger goes up in flames. I’m helpless to resist the heat flaring between us.

I don’t think there will be much conversation.

He kisses me like he’s ravenous, as if he hasn’t been inside me for twelve years, rather than twelve hours. I feel the same. I can’t stop it. I’m aching. He’s determined to make me whimper and beg for him—and I crave it.

He lifts away from my lips just long enough to strip off his shirt.

“Marrok...this is talking?”

He braces his elbows against the wall and pants, his hot breath steaming across my skin. “Aye. Eloquently.”

Yeah, but we aren’t communicating, and I shouldn’t let him sweep all this under the rug, no matter how my body wants to. “You think my father is helping Mathias and that I’m conspiring with him, don’t you?”

His fingers tighten on my wrists, pressing them harder against the wall. “He is your blood and you have longed to meet him, but we do not know him or his motives.”

“Answer the question, damn it. Is that what you think?”

CHAPTER
FORTY-FIVE

Marrok hesitates.

“I deserve a goddamn answer!” Torn between fury and tears, I shove against the mountain of hard muscle trapping me in place.

But with his musky heat enveloping me and his skin burning mine, I can’t find the strength—or the will—to push him away.

“As do I. He visits the morn after you meet, and suddenly an army of Anarki floods my door—”

“Whoever read my mind at Bram’s party betrayed the location of the diary to Mathias, not my father.”

“And now I discover you possess some emblem that unlocks the diary? You mentioned it not to me, but you told him straightaway. Have you anything else to hide?”

“I’m not hiding anything. I didn’t know what the damn thing was until he described it. It never occurred to me—Never mind, asshole.” Trying to ignore my weak-kneed lust, I do my best to wriggle away. “No matter what I say, you don’t believe me because I’m Le Fay.”

“Why confide in him?”

Seriously? “We won’t get the book unlocked and you uncursed unless we work *with* him. Don’t you get that?”

Marrok answers with a stony stare.

Whatever. I’m done arguing. “Let me go.”

“Nay.”

“Aye,” I mimic. “You can’t keep accusing me of Morgana’s sin. It’s not fair.”

“Honesty from her is something I neither needed nor wasted my breath asking for. You...” He swallows. Pain shadows his face as he stares at me with stark gray eyes. “Betray me not. You will rip out my heart.”

His whisper dissolves my anger. His words are an admission that I have power over him.

Could I really bring this big, fierce warrior to his knees? Me, the girl no one has ever wanted?

Marrok could be feigning this anguish for his own ends. After all, when we met he was hardly looking to make me his “wife.” When he mated with me, it definitely wasn’t for love. But when he looks at me with that torment, I believe him.

Tears prick my eyes. “I know what heartbreak feels like. Why would I intentionally hurt you?”

“Mayhap you forgive me not for abducting you.”

“I understand why you did it.”

“Mayhap you resent me mating with you.”

“Marrok, I spoke the words first.”

“’Tis possible you would hurt me merely because you can.”

“No, I can’t. Ever.”

A stark possessiveness stamps Marrok’s expression. He presses against me—chest, belly, hips, thighs—as close as he can without being inside me. Then his lips follow, swooping down to consume me.

I should stop him, sort out this tangle of emotion before giving in. But I need to be close to him. I need to show him I’m his. I want him to know he can trust me.

He delves into my mouth. Instantly, I incinerate. My nipples burn. My pussy goes up in flames.

Stopping him is beyond me.

He pulls away, drilling me with a consuming stare. “I am desperate to be inside you.”

His whisper makes me desperate, too, killing what’s left of my anger and inhibitions. And when his lips brand their way across my neck and his big palms cup my breasts, I can only say one thing.

“Yes.”

With a growl, he pushes his cock between my legs. I spread myself open for him and kiss him, pouring out my need. I give him my heart.

He’s unrelenting as he takes everything I offer. The contrast of his soft lips and rough touch unravels me.

“Mine. Forever.” He challenges me to deny it.

Yes.

But does he feel that way because he actually cares about *me*...or because magic decreed us mates?

I look for the answer in his kiss. He takes my lips as if I’m his everything. His callused palms burn my breasts, his strong fingers alternately grazing and pinching my aching nipples. I gasp at the pleasure-pain.

Marrok unsnaps my jeans. “Take them off.”

It’s not smart, but I comply with a thundering heart, managing to push the denim to my knees. With an insistent foot, he shoves them down my calves, then kicks them away with a snarl. Before they hit the floor, he inhales my sensitive nipple in his mouth, first one, then the other, back and forth. Until I tremble. Arch. Gush. I bite my lip to hold in my begging.

Smart or not, I offer him all of myself.

Marrok pushes me back. I gasp at the cool wall on my bare skin.

The reality of the situation hits me. I’m completely naked. In Bram’s hallway. Where anyone could happen upon us. And

I'm panting for the immortal warrior, hoping he'll fill me with every hard inch he has and praying he doesn't stop until I forget the chaos my life has become. Until he bonds with me forever.

He nips at my breasts with his teeth, then licks the tips softly, making me shudder.

Tingles deluge me as Marrok kisses his way down my body, finally kneeling between my spread feet. He glances up at me with a raised brow and a filthy smile. My heart thuds even harder. Would he really do *that*? I feel his desire and his breath right there, but...

He inhales me, and I know. Yes, he definitely would.

Marrok licks his way up my slit, settling on my clit. A cry slips from my lips.

He latches on and consumes me, pushing my legs apart with insistent hands and sucking me against his tongue. "Who does this cunt belong to?"

My knees go weak. I don't have anything to grab except his dark hair while he sears me, and I lose awareness of everything but his touch.

"Who?" he barks.

He's going to make me say it? "You."

"Tell me again." He breathes against my sensitive flesh, withholding until I answer.

"You."

"Aye. Only me. Always me."

"Yes!"

He rewards me by lapping at me ruthlessly. My need soars, my heartbeat roaring as my fingers tighten.

"Marrok," I whimper, seconds from orgasm.

How did he ramp me up so fast?

When have you ever been able to resist him?

He nips at my thigh, rises to kiss my belly, then sucks again on my nipples while he rolls my clit under his thumb. The stimulation keeps me on edge...but isn't enough to send me over.

He can't leave me like this. I'm dying. "Please..."

"Not until I fuck you. Once I am deep inside you, release all your need unto me," he breathes while he tugs his sweatpants down his hips, and he takes his imposing length in hand. "Open for me. Take my cock."

"Yes."

He lifts me against his hard body, his arms bulging, and settles my back against the wall, his expression hot with resolve. Feverishly, I wrap my arms and legs around him as he aligns his crest to my slick opening and shoves me onto his stiff cock.

He burns through me. I toss my head back, pleasure melding with the sweet pain of his sudden intrusion. I open my mouth to scream, but Marrok covers it, driving me higher with his hungry demands.

His kiss lays claim to me, all-encompassing and never-ending. He swallows all my cries, as if he insists on keeping my sounds for his ears alone.

Quickly, my body softens to devour every inch of him. Blood rushes straight to my swollen clit. I squeeze him, craving everything he gives me. My ache heats, threatening to combust me.

Marrok hoists me up, then tugs me down his hard shaft again and again, intoxicating me with the delicious friction that finally sends me tumbling, clenching, and screaming into heady, dizzying orgasm.

As I squeal into his kiss, he opens his eyes and continues to pummel me. And he's insatiable as he heaps on the kind of ecstasy that threatens my soul.

"Come for me again."

The warrior in him demands I surrender. He'll settle for nothing less than me waving my proverbial white flag.

With one relentless thrust after another, the tension tightens once more. He groans against my lips. I dig my nails into his back. The rasping sensation of his skin melding with mine begins to undo me. Need and pleasure flow between us, strengthening our connection. With every moment we're joined, it expands, overtaking my will and stripping my self-control, cocooning and disintegrating me at once.

He breathes me in and growls against my skin. "Remind me who you belong to."

"Marrok..." I plead, terrifyingly close to giving him my soul.

My begging doesn't soften him. He stops thrusting. "Who do you belong to?"

Instantly, my body tightens and twists in protest. "Marrok!"

"Say it." His determination to own me fills the empty spaces in my heart. "Scream it!"

"You!" Pleasure rips the word from me.

He swells inside me again as he fucks me with a molasses-slow stroke. "Only me. Hear me well."

I claw his back. My desire is strong, and he makes me so weak. "Yes."

"Will there be another?" he demands.

I try to resist, but it's futile. "Never!"

As I cry out that vow, I toss my head against the wall. With my neck exposed, Marrok plants his lips just below my ear. "Never, love. Come for me again. Give everything to me."

At his command, my bliss gathers. Tingles swirl. Delicious pressure coils. I come again in a cataclysm of fiery sensation. Ecstasy pours over me, filling my veins and slowly cooling my hot ache before leaving me boneless with satisfaction.

Marrok bites into my shoulder as his body tenses. He jerks, smothering his cry of ecstasy as his passion gives way and he jets deep inside me.

Together, we melt into the wall. I sigh. He murmurs soft words I'm too staggered to hear. All feels right between us again. It probably shouldn't. I'm not sure I'll ever be more than the means to an end for him.

I'm still contemplating the conundrum when, halfway down the stairs, clapping shatters our damp, panting hush.

CHAPTER
FORTY-SIX

Marrok

With a snap of my head, I jerk around as Olivia gasps in my ear. I stare over my shoulder. Bram. Covering my mate's nudity with my body, I snarl at the wizard. "What the hell do you want?"

"You dragged Olivia from the ballroom. I wanted to be sure you hadn't strangled her. But clearly you had something else in mind."

A dazzling smile, a flash of white teeth. Mayhap that rubbish works on the ladies, but it infuriates the piss out of me.

"Naught that Olivia and I share is for your eyes." Every instinct I possess screams at me to charge Bram and beat him to a bloody pulp for witnessing even a moment of her pleasure.

Bram backs down a stair with raised palms in a gesture of surrender until we're out of his sightline. "I heard more than I saw. Sorry if I disturbed you. I thought you might like to know that Gray left."

"Left?" Olivia stiffens. "But the Anarki are after him. He has nowhere to hide."

Of course the cur would play on her tender heart. "He has hidden for over two hundred years. He will manage."

"But—"

“There is naught we can do for him now without putting you in danger,” I point out. “You come first. Always.”

Bram clears his throat. “Sorry to take Marrok’s side, Olivia, but he’s right.”

“So you two are just going to leave him to die?”

“You are concerned, and I understand.” I stroke her shoulder to soothe her upset. “But he is an experienced wizard in a situation of his own making. I would not have him risk you. If he is any sort of father, he would not want that, either.”

“I know, but—”

“Would you have him risk everyone here?”

Bram chimes in. “And risk the Doomsday Brethren, magickind’s only hope of defeating Mathias?”

“Of course not, but he knows where to find half the key to the diary...more or less.”

“If he does, we will address that with Gray in the future,” I vow. “But this day has been far too eventful.”

“If he lives that long!”

“Have some faith, love.” I press a kiss to her forehead. Her concern pulls at my heart, but I will not relent. I would much rather have her tears than her death.

“I know you don’t trust him—”

“I do not.” Parts of his story are too convenient. During the times of Mathias’s absence and relative peace, ’twas too dangerous to find his daughter. But now that his former master has been resurrected, he is all fatherly concern. For Olivia’s sake, I hope I am too suspicious...but I fear I am right. “But tonight is not about my feelings for Richard Gray. *You* are my mate. *You* are mine to protect. *You* are my future.”

You are my heart.

Olivia sighs. She is not happy, but she concedes my point. “Fine.”

“Since that’s settled, do you plan to continue training tonight?” Bram ventures. “Shock disappeared after we ate. Should I send the others home?”

Bloody hell! I want to stay with Olivia, protect her, feel her body writhe against mine again, and cement my claim. But Gray knows exactly where the Doomsday Brethren and I are training. Coupled with the staggering information about the diary keys, I fear we have not a moment to lose.

War is coming.

“Nay. I will resume with the lot of you in the ballroom. I’ve seen young girls wield a sword with more acumen.”

“Sod off.” Bram descends the stairs with a laugh.

With him gone, I turn my attention to Olivia. Reluctantly, I slide from her cunt. She winces, and something vulnerable steals across her face. I am three times her size. Did I hurt her in my haze of fury and lust?

I curl my hands around her shoulders. “Olivia?”

“That was humiliating,” she mutters.

“’Tis sorry I am. I meant not for anyone to find us. I bear the fault.”

“I care a lot less that Bram saw your bare ass pinning me to the wall than I do you carrying me out like a child in front of my father and everyone else. You accused him—to his face—of still being involved with the Anarki.”

In her shoes, I would have been infuriated to be carted off like a sack of potatoes...but I would not have allowed my emotions to cloud my judgment in the first place. “Love, I worry deeply, for I know what Mathias would do if he caught you. If I were cavalier with my trust and simply embraced Mathias’s former underling, you might pay with your life. My body might still walk because Morgana decreed it, but everything inside me would die with you.”

“Marrok.” Tears tremble at the corners of her eyes. “You say these things...”

“Because I mean them.”

“I would never betray you to help my father.” She draws in a shuddering breath and wriggles out of my embrace. “But it feels like you’ll never believe me. And I don’t know what I’m supposed to do about that.”

Before I can reply, Olivia gathers her clothes and disappears into our room, shutting the door behind her.

Fuck. With a sigh, I right my clothing and trudge downstairs. Our discord is not over.

Olivia resists seeing Gray’s dishonesty. The miscreant will put a wedge between us, should I fail to tread carefully.

At the bottom of the stairs, Bram waits.

“All ready?” I glance into the open doorway of the ballroom down the hall.

“We are.”

Together, Bram and I approach the others. He is but a temporary ally, far too crafty and magical to call friend. Still, I want to understand how he sees the situation.

“You trust Gray. Why?”

Bram raises a cunning brow. “Who says I do? His past concerns me, but he seems totally reformed. And he’s a very concerned father.”

Frustration claws at me. Does no one understand? “What reason has he given us to trust him?”

“None, which is why I’m giving the man enough rope to hang himself. If he’s conspiring with Mathias, accusing him will only make him cling to his facade more tightly. If he thinks he’s fooling us...”

“He will grow lax and turn sloppy.” I sigh. Bram is right, and I have allowed my protective instincts to overshadow my common sense. I have ignored tested tactics and revealed my suspicions to Gray too early.

“Precisely. On the other hand, if he’s guilty of nothing more than a terrible past, how will you make amends? By the way, some might lob that same accusation at you.”

I snort. “I never plotted to make war with the enemy.”

“No, you just did the horizontal mambo with her.”

Exhaustion weighs on me. I stab my eyes with my fingers and rub furiously. Why does Bram have to be right again?

“Let’s pretend that Gray is actually trying to make amends and is the only person who knows a damn thing about the diary,” the wizard continues. “Reverse your positions. If you were her father, what would you tell you, her overprotective mate?”

The annoying lout continues to dole out logic. “Fuck.”

“You’re getting it now. Personally, I don’t trust the wanker. But until he gives me a reason to *distrust* him...”

“Giving him leeway makes sense. I have handled this poorly, alienating the father and infuriating the daughter.”

And making my immortality more likely to last forever.

“We’ll write your behavior off to the excitability of a new mating,” Bram says. “The rush, especially in someone who’s never experienced magic, makes newly mated men a bit mad. Hopefully, Gray will accept your apology.”

’Tis likely I will choke saying it, but say it I will. Will Olivia accept it?

Lucan dashes up a set of stairs behind us, stopping in the hallway. “Zain is gone.”

“Gone?” Bram thunders.

Lucan nods. “His cell is empty. There’s no sign of him anywhere in the dungeon.”

“Bloody hell!” Bram explodes. “After you and Duke captured him, I left him below for questioning later. I haven’t even talked to the bastard. How did he escape in scarcely twelve hours?”

“He didn’t escape alone. Someone freed him.”

“*What?*”

“The wall was blasted from the outside.”

Bram clenches his fists. “When?”

“Must be in the last hour. I saw no hole in the wall while we practiced outside.”

“Fuck. No one can step foot on my property uninvited.”

“Richard Gray was here an hour past,” I point out.

But I cannot voice this suspicion to my mate. We would only argue again, and as deliciously as our last spat ended, I have no wish to upset her. I must think smarter.

“So he was,” Bram drawls.

“Should we track Zain down?” Lucan asks.

Bram shakes his head. “He’s long gone. To think, after you brought him here and he pissed himself, I almost felt sorry for him.”

“Think you anyone here would be persuaded to help Zain besides Richard Gray?” I ask.

“Shock would,” Lucan spits.

Bram sighs. “Don’t start that again.”

“Zain is his *brother!*”

“Shock has been here all day and never once asked about the bastard.”

“Because he’s too crafty to call attention to himself. He was just waiting for the perfect opportunity to free Zain! Now they’re both gone. Shock also failed to appear for the guard duty he volunteered for when we captured his brother,” Lucan points out. “Maybe he was a no-show because he was too busy telling Mathias that Marrok had the book and where to find him.”

“Coincidence.” Bram shrugs. “I don’t think he’s our villain.”

“You’re my friend; I know your shortcomings. Your worst is that you always want to be right, and you’re dead wrong about the crotch stain.”

“The crap between you two over Anka?” Bram growls. “Bury it. You’re as bitter as he is. Why? She’s your mate. He’s endured a century of celibacy, stealing or skimming energy from half-encounters to survive. He must be starved for a full charge. What’s your excuse?”

Lucan looks pissed. “You know his bloodline. If the rumors are true, he doesn’t have a right mind to be in. Whole families tend to join the Anarki, and Zain has followed in his kin’s footsteps. How do you know Shock hasn’t as well?”

“Without a doubt? I don’t. But he’s been more helpful than you know. If it will ease your mind, I will send Duke after Shock and see if he’s harboring Zain.”

“My gut tells me this is Gray,” I add.

“Of course you think he’s guilty. You hate the dodgy prat,” Lucan pipes in.

“The way you hate Shock?”

Lucan smiles. “Touché.”

“The lot of you need training, but now methinks ’tis imperative to retrieve Olivia’s diary key. If Gray is Mathias’s man, he will hoodwink or force Olivia into surrendering her emblem. If she and that key fall into the wrong hands...”

Bram nods. “The three of us combined should provide her sufficient protection while she retrieves it. I hope.”

CHAPTER
FORTY-SEVEN

Olivia

“O livia?”

At Marrok’s knock on the door, I tense.

The man confuses me, accusing me of betraying him to please my father one minute, then telling me I’m his everything the next. I kind of get why he doesn’t trust my father, but he doesn’t even trust *me*. Yet the minute he lays his hands on me, I can’t deny him anything.

Where does that leave us? I need his touch to survive. But more and more I ache for him in a way that has nothing to do with magical bonds and everything to do with my heart.

“Olivia?” He opens the door.

Since we had sex against the wall, I’ve showered and donned my clothes. But pinned under his gaze, I feel not just naked but bare. “What?”

He eases onto the bed beside me. “’Tis sorry I am. Baring you in the hall was thoughtless. No matter how badly I wanted you—”

“I don’t care about that. I’m angrier that you were rude to my father and that you’d think, for even an instant, that I would betray you.”

“’Tis sorry I am for that, too. Though Gray is your sire, he seeks to separate me from my mate. Adjusting to our bond

takes time.”

I turn his words over. If that’s true, he’s guilty of nothing more than an overdose of concern and some poor judgment. How am I supposed to stay mad at that?

He takes my hand. “Love, time is ticking against us. With Mathias on the loose again, we must secure your diary key. Opening that book can change the world, and not for the better.”

“But it helps you, too. Don’t deny that.”

“I would never try.”

Biting my lip, I look away. I’ve been so busy worrying about my feelings and all the changes in my life that I didn’t think big picture.

“You’re right.”

He lets out a sigh of relief. “Where is your emblem? Your flat?”

I shake my head. “The shop.”

“We should go now. If Mathias learns you have the other half of the key, ’tis but a matter of time before he breaks in to find it.”

“We can’t waste a minute,” Bram says from the hall, peering through the slightly open door. “If we run into trouble, Lucan and I will do our best to dispense with anyone magical. Marrok can handle the zombies.”

I sigh. Stress weighs on me. When did my life become so complicated?

When I met Marrok. From the moment he walked into my gallery, everything has been, as the Brits say, topsy-turvy. I’m damn sick of it all.

“Let’s go.” I stand.

“Another bloody car ride?” Marrok grumbles.

“Or teleporting. Your choice,” Bram quips.

Marrok glares. “Drive.”

We pile into one of Bram's fifteen cars, this one a Hummer. Sleek, black, looking as if it could hold a dozen people. But somehow when Marrok and the two testosterone-oozing wizards pour themselves inside, the interior seems cramped.

"Keys to your shop?" Bram prompts, palm outstretched.

I shrug. "They were in my purse the night Marrok took me to his cottage, and I never retrieved it before the Anarki... Wait, how has Sabelle been getting in?" I turn to Marrok. "I assumed you gave Bram the keys to pass on to his sister."

"You had no magical protection around the shop, so it was easy to break in," Bram supplies.

"Nice," I huff.

"Sabelle locked the door behind her."

Yeah, he's totally not getting the point. Then I frown. "Wait. I *had* no magical protection around the shop?"

"You didn't think Sabelle would leave it wide-open, did you?"

Honestly, I haven't pondered the question at all. "So how can you just break in?"

"Being Sabelle's trusted relative, she shared the counterspell with me."

"While we're here in the city, do you think we could stop by my flat and pick up my clothes? I'd like to have my own things to change into."

Bram scans the interior and consults the others without a word. "It would be better if you found new clothes."

"I'm partial to my things. I'd like to have my own toothbrush, a damn bra—"

"I can guess what happened to your last one." Bram laughs.

"Can it." I cross my arms over my chest because he's not wrong. "And take me to my place."

Cruising the streets of London with three hulking men—one of whom is my “husband”—running from a band of evil wizards, knowing that a trinket I possess might be the key to saving the world from doom... It’s a lot to handle.

Mile after mile slides past the tinted windows of the monster vehicle, the interior illuminated by neon and streetlights.

I have plenty of energy, but I’m mentally sapped. Beside me, I feel Marrok’s stare.

How did I fall so hard for a guy who did the horizontal bop with my great-great grandmother? Who mated with me for reasons that have nothing to do with his heart? The sex is fantastic—not gonna lie—but we can’t get along for a whole day. Even if he wasn’t set on dying, how can we possibly last?

A few minutes later, we arrive at the curb and pile out. On my left, Marrok palms a Glock. His free hand hovers over the hilt of a serrated blade strapped to his thigh as he stares watchfully into the night. On my right, Lucan is no less focused, wand at the ready, his entire body tense.

This isn’t a mere precaution. They expect trouble.

In front of me, Bram approaches the door cautiously, his gaze scanning and rescanning the area. He lays his palms over the glass of the door and draws in a deep breath. I open my mouth to ask what the hell he’s doing, but Lucan warns me with a shake of his head.

“It’s undisturbed.” Bram eases the lock on the door, breaks his sister’s enchantments with a quick whisper. Then we are inside.

“Could anyone concentrate like that and get past Sabelle’s protection?”

“No,” Bram assures. “If Sabelle hadn’t told me the specific counterspell, I’d still be scratching my head. She’s a particularly powerful witch.”

The rest of the “mission” is uneventful. I retrieve the emblem in quick silence, the sharp edges and large rubies heavy around my neck.

We file out. Bram secures the door and mutters a few quick words. I can't discern them, but after he finishes speaking, I absolutely feel the invisible iron bars around the building, preventing me from even getting close. Though this is my place of business, I feel as if I'm trespassing and should move down the walk immediately.

"Neat trick."

Bram winks. "Next, I'll bounce a ball on my nose."

"Will you bark like a seal, too?"

Lucan laughs.

"If anyone can make me, it's you, gorgeous." Bram flirts like he was born doing it.

Marrok grips his Glock tighter. "Stop trying to charm my mate. You would dislike seeing me angry when weapons are so close at hand."

Bram backs away from me. "I'm not in the market to have random holes blasted through my head."

Grinning despite the grim situation, I pile into the Hummer, and at my urging, we make a quick stop by my flat.

Again, the guys flank me as we enter. But as soon as I open the door to the shadowy apartment, I freeze.

Something is wrong.

As I flip the switch, I second-guess myself. Nothing looks out of place. A stack of mail still sits unopened on the kitchen counter. The remote control is still half-buried between the cushions of my brown cast-off sofa. The plate I used for breakfast the last morning I was home still litters the kitchen counter as if my life here was merely paused.

But the vibe in the flat screams that my space has been violated.

"Does anyone else feel it?" I whisper.

Lucan shrugs. "My magic doesn't work that way."

"Mine does," Bram murmurs. "I feel it, too."

Marrok hovers without a breath between us as we stride down the hall to my little bedroom, the wizards flanking us. My bed is still unmade. My clean laundry still rests in the basket, waiting to be hung in my postage-stamp closet. The sense that my space has been invaded is stronger here.

“Mathias is working faster than I thought,” Bram mutters.

“Any chance my landlord finally came to fix my leaky sink?”

But I know the answer.

If the Anarki came here, were they looking for me or the emblem? If the latter, how can Mathias possibly know who has it...without my father telling him? The possibility rips at my heart.

Tension hangs thick as I shove the last of my belongings into a small bag. As a group, we make our way back down the hall and out the door. Bram magically seals the flat with a wave. I’ll worry about how to get back in later.

Outside, cold prevails. Fog, leafless trees, an odd still. They all rattle me. The night feels eerie as we pile into the Hummer and pull away from the curb, Bram’s head-banging alternative music making the vehicle throb and thump.

As we round the corner, Bram starts to floor it back to his manor in the high-rent part of town. But he starts rubbernecks at something on his left. “The Witch’s Brew, you say?”

He stomps on the brakes.

I glance at the sign. Ironic now, I guess. “Yeah. Typical pub. I’ve been once or twice. Decent food. Why?”

Bram taps his thumb on the wheel, ignoring the cars honking behind him. “Fuck it all. We’re popping in.”

“Now?” Lucan scowls. “Are you mad? We’ve got the”—he points to the emblem around my neck—“thing, and—”

“Can the five of us alone truly fight Mathias and the Anarki?”

“No, but—”

“According to my sister, the Wolvsey twins spend their time here.” He pulls the massive vehicle to the curb and parallel parks with finesse.

“The Wolvesey twins?” Lucan sounds incredulous. “Ronan and Raiden? Those twins?”

Bram glowers. “Don’t look at me like that. Yes.”

“They’re young. Their father is probably still wiping their noses and backsides—when he’s not chasing tail.”

“They’re a few years older than Sabelle. Is anyone wiping her nose or backside?” Bram challenges. “From what she tells me, they’re the ones chasing tails now, often here. I don’t think convincing them to join us will be easy, but we might as well start.”

“Now?” Marrok challenges.

“Waiting isn’t going to make this situation better. And this is a human pub. Even Mathias isn’t so stupid as to reveal magickind to the public at large yet. We would all be forced into hiding or face an inquisition that makes the Spanish version half a millennium ago seem like a treat. Everyone and everything magical would turn against him.” Bram shakes his head. “He won’t do it.”

“I don’t suppose you’d let me wait in the car.” I look bedraggled. I caught sight of a hickey on my neck, and everyone will probably be able to tell I’ve had passionate sex against a wall in the last two hours. Since Marrok will hover like an overprotective husband, no one will have to guess who “marked” me. And the London Eye proved that, as soon as he opens his mouth, he doesn’t blend in.

On the other hand, Bram is right. They’ll need more fighters for the Doomsday Brethren if they’re going to survive Mathias and his undead army.

“Nay.” Marrok scowls.

Bram steps out of the vehicle. “This won’t take long.”

Everyone else piles out and heads to the door, filing in one by one.

The place is busy for a Sunday night. I'm surprised to find the tables and barstools inhabited by more men than women... until I catch sight of the blonde behind the bar. Tall, willowy, gorgeous, flashing both a little leg and a big smile, she has rapt admirers.

Instantly, I'm envious. I've never walked in a room and commanded male attention like that. But I can't dislike her. In fact, I suspect she's someone I might like.

"Fuck," Bram spits out as he scans the place.

"What's happening?" I ask. "What's wrong?"

"My sister characterized this as a human bar...but most of the clientele are wizards."

Slowly, gazes turn our way. Some scowl at Bram. Several give him the side-eye. Others sneer outright.

"Why are they hostile?"

"Let's just say they're not big fans of the Council."

"Or the class we come from," Lucan mutters. "Where are the twins?"

Bram scours the room again, then nods toward a dark corner of the pub. "Raideen is keeping a brunette company."

The big blond wizard isn't even trying to hide the fact he's kissing a human woman senseless while inching his hand under her skirt. When they pull apart seconds later, he murmurs something to the flushed, dazed woman, who nods enthusiastically. They slip out the back and disappear into the alley.

Bram sighs. "Like father—"

"Like sons," Lucan finishes, tossing his head toward another wizard, this one with black hair brushing his broad shoulders. He crowds around the bar, his unblinking stare on the barmaid.

As she pours and schleps drinks with good-natured jokes and flirty winks, she steals glances at Ronan. So the feeling is mutual.

“If Raiden is any indication, humans and magickind can hook up, right?” I whisper.

“Absolutely. Variety is the spice of life.” Bram grins.

I roll my eyes. Typical male. If Karma is real, I hope he meets his match someday—and that she’ll bring him to his knees. “But are there any laws or taboos preventing humans and someone magical from mating? I mean, Marrok and I did, but we had no idea—”

“No...it’s just a lot of explaining to a human why they don’t need Botox or funeral planning for another few hundred years.”

“Do you think she knows Ronan is...you know?”

Bram shrugs. “Probably not. I doubt she knows about any of these blokes. Or if she does, she’s taking it in stride.”

“We have stood like statues near the door long enough. I like not the way stares are beginning to linger. Speak to the twins and let us go,” Marrok mutters, glowering to the room.

“On second thought, maybe now isn’t the best time for this conversation,” Bram admits. “And here is too public for what I have to say.”

“Kari,” calls a man who looks forty-something with a salt-and-pepper beard. “Another ale to warm my bones?”

“You got it. Never let it be said I let you leave the Brew unhappy.”

“I’d be a mite happier if you’d come home with me, lovely.”

She laughs. “You may be, but I doubt your wife would.”

Most cackle around him. Ronan sits stiffly, looking half-ready to come across the bar and beat the man to death.

“We’ve come this far,” I murmur. “Obviously a bunch of people know who you are, but what if I tried to talk to him? He might be less hostile since I’m not going to proposition his girl.”

“You might be on to something,” Bram muses.

Marrok scowls down at me. “You will not leave my side.”

Is he serious? “It’s twelve feet across the room.”

“I care not if ’tis twelve inches. Nay.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” I jerk away from him and march down the handful of stairs to the pit in which the main bar sits, then slide onto the stool beside Ronan.

He turns to me, his expression somewhere between irritated and displeased. For a second, I just stare. He’s freaking gorgeous. In fact, all these guys are—Lucan, Bram, the strangers at the bar... Does magickind just make prettier men?

“What?” Ronan snaps.

Yeah, I should stop staring and start talking. “Um, I came to...um, talk to you about—”

“Not interested, American.” He turns his gaze back to Kari.

“I’m not propositioning you.” I drop my voice. “I’m mated.”

He whirls back to me and gives me another once-over. “And untransitioned. Who let you out of the house?”

“I’m an adult!”

He scoffs, peering at me like a zoo animal in a glass enclosure. “Does your mate know where you are?”

“Yes. But I’m trying to tell you—”

“Wait. Your signature... You can’t be—”

“She’s a Le Fay!” The bearded man across the bar points to me.

All heads turn. Everyone magical looks stunned. Everyone else seems confused. But all eyes are on me, and I swear if someone dropped a pin, I would hear it.

I don’t think I can have a productive conversation with Ronan, either.

“How are you possible?” Ronan asks. “How are you here?”

“Come, love.” Marrok offers me his huge, upturned palm as he glares daggers at Ronan. “Stop staring, or I shall skewer your head from your neck.”

As much as I hate to admit defeat, tactical retreat is best. I take Marrok’s hand, slink off the barstool, and race for the door to find Lucan and Bram already outside, firing up the Hummer. Marrok wrenches the back door open, and I dive in just as wizards pour out of the bar behind us.

Thankfully, Bram burns rubber away from the curb and takes off down the darkened street. “Well, that didn’t go as planned.”

“Indeed not,” Lucan drawls. “No more impulsive, half-baked side trips. It’s getting late, and I want to go home. I gave up a very promising morning with my mate for—”

Midsentence, Lucan stiffens as if every muscle in his body is suddenly zapped by a live wire. He crashes back against the plush leather seat, curls his fingers around his thighs in a crushing grip, then lets out a piercing scream of pain that makes me shudder down to my soul.

CHAPTER
FORTY-EIGHT

Bram flips the music off and glances at Lucan beside him.
“Oh, fuck!”

I lean forward from the back seat to find the wizard clutching his chest as if agony burns a brand right through his heart. “What is it?”

Bram gapes in disbelief as he clutches the steering wheel, zipping the tanklike vehicle through London’s dark streets. “The yellow and pink in his signature... They’re fading out. Fast.”

Lucan screams again, clawing his chest viciously, as if trying to dig into it with his bare fingers. “Anka... No!”

“Deep breath, friend. We’ll get you—”

“Home!”

“Probably not a good idea,” Bram mutters almost to himself.

Lucan’s sudden freakout is scaring me. “What’s going on? What are you saying?”

Grimly, he presses his foot to the accelerator and hurtles the Hummer faster down the lane, but the engine sounds are drowned out by Lucan’s growls and screeches.

Again, Bram glances at Lucan, who’s thrashing, gasping, and shouting. “He’s losing the light from his magical signature.”

It's terrifying. "I don't understand. What does that have to do with Anka?"

"She was his light."

Horror dawns, curling and roiling like an acrid ball of bile in my stomach. "Are you saying...she's dead?"

"That, or she's broken with him. Either would cause this agony."

"Broken with him? Their mate bond?"

Bram nods. "If she severed that, he would lose his light, which would alter his signature irrevocably."

"She can break their bond voluntarily? Like divorce?"

Bram sends me a curt nod. "It doesn't happen often in magickind, but it's possible."

Mating isn't forever?

Shock rips through me as the ramifications burst through my brain. I turn to Marrok. He's clearly worried...but not surprised. "You knew this?"

If ever a man looks as if he wants to lie, it's Marrok. He hesitates, then catches Bram's reflection in the rearview mirror. "Aye."

My blood begins to boil. "When did you find out?"

"When you fell ill."

Is he fucking kidding? "And all this time you neglected to tell me because...?"

Because he wants to bind me to him until he ends his curse. All his tenderness and caring, lies? The possibility is like a dagger to the chest. Deep down, I've feared he's using me, that he doesn't care about me. I let myself hope...

And I shouldn't.

Marrok casts an uneasy glance at Lucan. "'Tis not the time for this argument."

I want to disagree, but Lucan screams again, anguished and blood-curdling, his elbows thudding on the door, his knees

banging the dash. The impact doesn't slow him at all, as if the only torment he feels is inside.

"Fuck." Bram rakes a hand through his hair. "His signature is nearly black."

I can't see it.

After another glance at Lucan, Bram shakes his head. "We've got to restrain him."

"Restrain him?"

With a wretched howl, Lucan tears away his shirt, then begins to claw at his face. His cries sound so furious and anguished, the hair on my arms stands up straight.

"Before he kills himself. If his signature turns totally black, his soul may be lost forever."

I suck in a breath. Sabelle said mating was the most powerful magic of all. She wasn't kidding.

"I can't hold him down." And Marrok is behind Bram—too far away.

"You're right. Talk to him. Soothe him with your female voice." As I nod and lean forward, Bram grabs my wrist in a harsh grip. "Don't touch him. He may try to, um...ravish or kill you."

"Why?"

"He's no longer in his right mind. When he realizes you're female, he'll assume you're Anka, and try to reestablish the bond by force. If he's gone feral, he'll smell you and know you're not his mate. He'll perceive you as a threat."

Holy shit.

Marrok takes my hand from Bram's grip and holds it in his own. "Careful."

With halting words, I begin to whisper to Lucan. "You're okay. I'm here. Everything will be all right..."

He pauses, craning his head toward me, listening to my crooning. I think it's working. My hope climbs.

Then he opens his eyes. His usually electric blue irises are nearly black.

I gasp. “Oh, my god.”

Thunder gathers on Lucan’s face.

“Shit! Get back!” Bram shouts. “He’s too far gone. The light has nearly left him, and who knows what he’ll do. We’re almost to my place.”

Marrok hooks an arm around my waist and pulls me against him.

What the hell? “Was he like this before he mated with Anka?”

Bram shakes his head. “When a wizard loses his mate, it can destroy him. The stronger the bond, the heavier the loss. Whatever darkness and instability were in his soul before the mating rushes to the fore and multiplies the pain. After a time, it retreats. Well, usually. But if it takes over, if he becomes feral...”

“Anka?” Lucan demands. His voice rasps as if he’s been possessed.

No one answers. Lucan sniffs and growls, his agitation obvious. Then he grabs Bram by the neck. And squeezes.

Marrok tosses me behind him and lunges forward to stop the crazed wizard.

“No!” Bram manages to get out. “Not in the car. Olivia...”

Bram has a hand crushing his throat while he’s driving, and he’s worried about *me*?

“We can’t just leave you to be strangled. Can you stop him with magic?”

“No,” he gasps out. “His shields are up. The confines are too close...”

So any spell Bram might wield could...what? Bounce off Lucan and hit someone else?

“What can I do? I am at the ready to help.” Marrok positions his massive shoulders protectively between Lucan and me.

“Same. I don’t know what I can do, but I’ll try.”

The wizard releases Bram and cuts his dark-as-hell eyes at me. “Female? My Anka?”

I freeze. Tell the truth? Lie? Which is least likely to make him crazier?

In the rearview mirror, Bram shoots me a warning glance.

“Friend,” I murmur.

His eerie eyes widen. He leans closer, sniffs me.

“It’s okay.” I tell him the polite lie.

Suddenly, his eyes narrow with menace.

“Back up! Back up!” Bram shouts. “His signature has gone completely dark.”

The words have barely left his mouth before Lucan lunges at me, looking determined to tear my throat out with his bare hands.

Bram brings the Hummer to a screeching halt in front of the manor and darts out while Marrok tries to pull me to safety, but the whacked-out wizard has a death grip on my arm. His fingers bite into me cruelly. I’ll have bruises tomorrow.

Lucan hurls his big body between the vehicle’s seats to reach me, his free hand outstretched toward my neck. Then he’s on me. Marrok punches and pushes, drawing Lucan’s attention.

“Go!” he urges me as Bram opens the back door.

I hesitate. I want to help, but the two men are having a difficult enough time containing Lucan without worrying about my safety, too.

The crisp evening air whips me as I jump out of the car and run for the manor. “Help!”

Ice answers my summons first, filing outside in seconds. “What the hell? Why are they beating the piss out of Lucan?”

I babble a frantic recounting of our trip home. I barely know Ice, and Bram doesn’t trust him, but he and Marrok are losing the battle to contain Lucan, who seems super-humanly strong. A face hits the window. Bram. He pulls away a moment before Lucan’s fist smashes through the glass.

Blood runs down the clear pane. Ice tears off the Hummer’s door. I gasp as Bram wrestles to pin Lucan to the back seat. Marrok sits behind the feral wizard, holding down his arms. But Lucan escapes, letting loose a spine-chilling war cry, and punches Bram in the gut.

“My female!”

With a curse, Ice peels Bram off Lucan, despite the bloodied wizard’s protests. Then he cold-cocks the crazy man with a mean right hook. Lucan’s head snaps back.

Finally, he goes limp.

Ice looks up at Marrok with a grim smile. “Good thing I learn fast.”

Together, Ice and Marrok lift Lucan out of the Hummer. As Ice trudges past, hauling the unconscious wizard, Bram claps a hand around his arm.

Ice glares back with murder in his eyes. “Don’t fucking touch me.”

Bram releases him. “Just wanted to say...thank you.”

“Don’t. If only you were at risk, I would let Lucan tear you limb from limb while I made popcorn for the show. But Marrok and Olivia are too important to our cause to let your fucking friend dismember them.”

Ice nudges Marrok along as they carry their burden into the house. Silence falls.

Regret tightens Bram’s face.

“What’s that about?” I ask.

He dabs blood from his mouth, then winces. “Ancient history.”

Maybe, but time isn’t healing the wound that clearly isn’t open for discussion.

Beside me, Bram shoves a hand into his pocket, tosses a white rock into the air, then mutters, “Aunt Millie.”

A few moments later, a sprightly little woman with a hundred pounds of pale hair in a bun appears in the driveway and hurries with spry steps in our direction.

“Again, boy?” She stands on her tiptoes to receive the very dutiful kiss Bram plants on her cheek. Then she turns to me. “Oh, hello, dear. I see you’re recovered. Lovely.”

As Millie walks into the house, I turn to Bram. “She came when I was ill?”

He nods. “She told Marrok why you were unwell and gave him the choice of breaking your bond or keeping it and... serving you as you need. I should—” He gestures toward the manor house rising with stately glory in the moonlight.

“Of course. See to Lucan.”

Mind awhirl, I fall in behind him.

Marrok chose to stay with me, rather than break our bond. I wish it was because he feels something for me. But I’m afraid I’m kidding myself.

Inside, we follow the screams. Lucan has come around again. His wailing echoes through the house. It’s like nails on a chalkboard.

By the time Bram and I find the group, they’ve commandeered one of the guest rooms. Someone has located or conjured up a set of restraints that look right out of a BDSM club. Ice and Marrok struggle to shove Lucan’s arms into the cuffs. Duke grips one of his ankles. Lucan’s free leg flails. Bram dodges a lashing kick, grabs the wizard’s ankle, and forces it to the bed.

Lucan snarls, a sound threatening murder. Finally, after a lot of grunting and effort, they restrain the rabid wizard.

Bram drags a hand down his tired face. “Aunt Millie...”

The little woman approaches the bed, settling a hand to Lucan’s damp brow. He howls, but she ignores him and makes quick work of the buttons down the front of his shirt. Her little hands roam his chest with eyes closed. She breathes in and out.

“His mate is not dead. Distantly, I feel her alive in the bond.”

“Injured?” Bram asks, puzzled.

Millie pauses, then frowns. “No. She...simply broke with him.”

Astonishment reverberates through the room.

Duke breaks the silence. “Did Shock somehow convince her, after all these decades, to part with Lucan and accept his Call?”

“No,” Bram insists. “I’m sure Shock wants that, but Anka has been devoted to Lucan for nearly a hundred years.”

“Then, why...?” I gasp. “Oh, god. Do you think Mathias captured her and forced her...?”

“That’s precisely what I think.”

Horror washes over me. “We have to find her!”

“It’s probably too late.” And Bram looks sickened by that reality.

Marrok thunders toward him. “You know what that motley-minded miscreant will do to Anka.”

Bram flinches. “I do.”

“We cannot leave her to suffer such a cruel fate.”

“He’s right. And if you bring her back, Lucan will be whole again,” I argue.

Bram turns to us. “If you were Mathias and the three things you needed most—you, the book, and your key—were in one well-protected place, what would you do?”

Marrok swears. “Stage a distraction.”

“Exactly. You said yourself, Olivia must be protected, no matter what it costs or how many die.” He sighs. “I just never expected that statement to be tested so terribly or so soon.”

CHAPTER
FORTY-NINE

Hours pass. After the unhappy admission that she can't do anything more to help Lucan, Aunt Millie leaves. Once she's gone, only his raw screams shatter the thick silence. Sleep is impossible. As the sun rises and people stir, tempers flare and nerves run thin.

Everyone is on edge.

Despite the fact I was chased by Anarki out of Marrok's cottage, somehow this danger feels more real and menacing.

Marrok takes Ice and Duke outside to resume training—and to avoid their fellow warrior's anguished screams. Apparently, beating the crap out of each other has calming qualities.

From a chair in the corner, I watch Bram struggle to hold himself together as he hovers over Lucan's pale, tense form. I've never had a best friend, but I'm sure it's agonizing to see someone you care for lose their mind. My guess is, it's ripping Bram apart.

I shift in my seat, almost afraid to break the momentary hush. "Will he make it?"

"My mate?" Lucan scratches in the demented growl that never fails to make me shiver as he bucks against his restraints. Then he sniffs the air. His eyes fly open, crazed and black and ready to tear me apart. "No! No! Where's Anka?"

I'm afraid of the answer to my question.

The anguish on Bram's face tells me he harbors the same fear. "I don't know. What happens next isn't my decision. His condition is far too serious. We must call his next of kin."

I don't know Lucan well, but a vivid memory of him and Anka at Bram's party—was that a scant two days ago?—haunts me. They looked so in love.

"Are you sure Mathias forced Anka to break their bond?" I mutter even more quietly. "Maybe Lucan cheated on her."

"Never. Once mated, a magical man relies on his other half for his emotional sustenance and energy. He will reject all others." He sighs. "Unfortunately, Lucan will run out of energy soon, and if I cannot reach his family..."

"Energy? Doesn't he eat for that?"

"For his body, yes. To power their magic, witches and wizards require connection with another, an exchange of strong emotion, if you will. We store up the energy gleaned during sex. For the unmated, if the experience is not a powerful one, we must recharge often. With a mate, the sex is more meaningful, so the energy charge is stronger. It will last longer. If anyone magical goes too long without repowering, they fade into their nextlife."

So Bram and Duke and all the unmated guys are frequently hooking up with random women? "Oh. I—I thought..."

"That you and Marrok cornered the market on needing sex? No, you need it more often because you're storing up energy for your coming transition. After you come into your powers, you still need to...um, be plugged in fairly often."

"How much energy do you think Lucan has?"

Bram shrugs his massive shoulders, worry dragging at his noble features. "If he had a good charge recently, perhaps a few days, a week at most. But all this thrashing is expending energy, and the darkness inside him will drain him faster."

"What if we can't find Anka? Is there another way to give him juice?"

“If he engages in anything that brings extreme anger or joy or—”

“Fear?”

“That’s a possibility, too. I worry it won’t be enough, though. And nothing lasts as long as the sexual connection.” Bram sighs. “But if I can’t contact his next of kin in time, I’ll have to try something.”

“Is Lucan coming around?” Sabelle appears in the doorway.

Bram shakes his head. “I’m sending Duke with you to Lucan’s house. You two see if you can find anything that explains what happened with Anka.”

“Good idea, but I can manage alone.”

“No. It’s too—”

“Dangerous? That’s exactly why he needs to train with Marrok far more than I need him to babysit me. I’ll pop in and be back directly. I won’t take unnecessary risks.”

Bram sighs like he hates to admit that his sister is right. “Fine. While you’re there, search for a way to contact Lucan’s brother. His parents are too frail to handle this.”

Sabelle scowls. “Isn’t Caden quite young?”

“I don’t think he’s even reached transition. But he’ll be stronger than magic folks in their nine hundreds.”

“Can’t argue with that. I’ll return shortly.” On that grim note, Sabelle disappears.

I look at Lucan, still thrashing wildly on the bed.

“If we never find Anka, can he heal?”

Bram doesn’t answer for long moments. “With extreme will, perhaps. I have only theoretical knowledge of this. It happens so rarely. First, we have to stabilize his energy. Maybe I’ll contact a witch who can serve him and pray he doesn’t kill her.”

I blanch, very glad I won't be that woman. "There are witches and wizards who sell energy exchanges? Like magical...prostitutes?"

Despite the grim situation, Bram smiles. "We think of them somewhat like nurses. In this case, such witches would tend him without intercourse. It's what unmated men who have Called to another and have been rejected must do."

"Why?" I'm completely lost. "If they're rejected, they aren't married."

"Magic works differently. If a wizard Calls to a witch, he has mated in his heart, regardless of whether the vow is accepted. If he is refused, henceforth he must rely on alternate forms of energy to survive. Shock would know more about this than me."

Because he Called to Anka, and she chose Lucan. Shock has been without sex all that time? He looks so capable, so virile—if scary as hell—that hardly computes.

Sabelle pops into the doorway again, interrupting my thoughts. She's shockingly pale, and her hair is all askew, as if she survived a tornado. And she looks haunted. "Lucan's house is utter destruction. Anka put up a valiant struggle."

Bram closes his eyes. He's probably wondering if her disappearance is literally going to kill his best friend. "Anarki?"

"I'm almost certain, yes."

"Fuck. Find anything about Caden?"

"He's untransitioned, as you suspected."

Bram's eyes narrow. "Did you teleport to the States and bring him here?"

"Texas. What else was I to do?"

Sabelle materialized across the pond and back in a matter of seconds? Despite the grim situation, I'm totally impressed...

"You should have waited for an escort!"

She sighs. “I’m perfectly capable—”

“Caden could be compromised. Or dangerous.”

“Dangerous how?”

“For all you knew, he was in transition frenzy.”

“I’m not, thank God,” drawls an unfamiliar man behind Sabelle. “Where is my brother?”

I turn as the newcomer steps into the bedroom wearing gray sweatpants, a wife-beater, and nothing else. No surprise since it’s the middle of the night in the States. Light brown waves frame blue eyes so like Lucan’s they break my heart. They’re built alike, too—lean and ripped with more than a hint of good breeding.

“Caden MacTavish. How do you do?” He thrusts his hand toward me.

“Olivia Gray.” I shake it.

“An American girl, here? Magical?”

“Not yet.”

“Keep it that way. Nasty business, magic. I’m hoping I escaped the gene.” He turns back to Sabelle. “Thank you for the escort.”

She nods tiredly, her golden hair hanging limply around her shoulders. All that teleporting must have consumed a lot of her energy.

“Sabelle has to find a partner to recharge now, right?” I whisper to Bram as the other two approach Lucan’s bedside.

Bram recoils. “We’re *not* talking about this!”

Sabelle giggles. I take that to mean yes, and Bram’s horror is typical big-brother stuff.

I wander closer to the bed.

“Lucan?” Caden murmurs close to his dozing brother’s ear.

The wizard thrashes to life, opening his wild black eyes and howling until the ceiling rattles.

Horror bleeds into Caden's expression. "Dear god. Where the bloody hell is Anka?"

"We don't know."

"What's been done to find her? Sabelle said you believe she's neither injured nor dead. She must have been coerced into breaking their bond. She and my brother were inseparable..."

"Except by Mathias, I fear," Bram answers. "Do you know who he is?"

Caden's jaw drops. "A monster. We must recover her immediately before..."

"As you can see, it's too late. I'd like to send someone to search for her, but Mathias and the Anarki are an imminent threat to all of magickind, especially if he gets his hands on Olivia. We need trained soldiers now. Even if we locate Anka, Lucan may be lost forever. I can't spare the time or wizard-power—"

"My brother is more than a pawn in your bloody war!" Caden snarls.

"You're right. He's my best friend, but that changes nothing. We fight a foe with an army much larger than ours. If I stop preparing for this bloody war, there will be an annihilation of magickind. Thousands will die."

Caden fists his hands at his sides. "I fucking hate magic. Humans can end a relationship, drown their sorrows in whiskey for a few weeks, then carry on. Lucan..."

"I'm sorry. We brought you here to decide what should be done. We can't keep him restrained like this for long."

"Are you suggesting we put him down like a sick animal?"

"That's your decision. I'm merely stating that you may never get back the brother you know."

"You pompous bastard. He *will* recover. I'll make damn certain of it. Do we have any clues on Anka's whereabouts?"

"Other than we think the Anarki took her, no."

“Where is Mathias’s lair?”

“He’s not a comic-book villain, and I doubt he’s stupid enough to stay in one place. If you want him, you’ll have to hunt him. But I don’t advise it. He’s one of the most powerful wizards of all time. If you go it alone, your parents will have your life and your brother’s sanity to mourn at once.”

“I refuse to sit here and do nothing.”

“Then help your brother by fighting with us. Together, we stand a better chance of finding Anka. Lucan told me you’ve had human combat training in the American military.”

“I was a marine.”

“You can be useful to both the cause and your brother. A huge portion of Mathias’s army is impervious to magic, so we must fight them through human means, which the rest of the wizards know little about.”

He scowls. “I practice shooting at a range in Texas. I box regularly. I’ve taken up martial arts. I learned to fence years ago.”

“Perfect. Join us. We need all the combat-ready fighters we can get if we’re going to save Lucan and magickind. When we’re not training, I’ll send one of the others out with you to look for Anka.”

Caden glances at his writhing, snarling brother, then back at Bram. He sticks out his hand. “Until we find Anka, you have a deal.”

Minutes later, Bram gathers Ice, Duke, and Marrok in his office and introduces Caden to the lot of them. The warriors all offer their concern for Lucan but no solutions.

Bram attempts to contact Shock. If he’s mated in his heart, though not in fact, to Anka, he should care that she’s missing. But the big, leather-clad wizard doesn’t respond. More than one face among the Doomsday Brethren shows the suspicion

that Lucan may have been right about Shock's loyalty to his family...and Mathias.

After that, training commences with grim purpose.

I watch for hours, checking on Lucan periodically. I never get too close to the man-turned-beast strapped to the bed, but I worry for him. And for Marrok. Will this be his fate if we ever end his curse and he breaks our mate bond? Maybe not. Ours isn't the century-old union Lucan and Anka shared. Marrok isn't magical. And he would gladly embrace death.

The thought nearly crushes me. Selfishly, I want Marrok to stay, but of his own free will, not out of obligation or fear of Lucan's fate.

In less than a week, our connection has grown. Real emotion fills my heart. I want his devotion...and I fear it's because I'm in love with him.

Yes, I've been craving someone to love me my whole life. But my yearning for my parents' devotion pales in comparison to my need for Marrok's.

When watching Lucan's agony becomes too heartrending, I leave his room, only to realize night has fallen. Vaguely, I remember Sabelle calling me to dinner, but I wasn't hungry.

At the end of the hall, Bram and Marrok climb the nearby stairs, deep in conversation. Despite their obvious exhaustion, they make a solid wall of testosterone as they look up.

Marrok scowls. "Why are you not in bed?"

Acutely aware of Bram watching, I swallow all the worries in my heart. "Not tired. Training go well?"

"The wizards are improving faster than the average human."

"Praise?" Bram gasps mockingly.

Marrok snorts. "Do not accustom yourself to it."

"Wouldn't dream of it." Bram turns away and strides down the hall toward his quarters.

With a hand at the small of my back, Marrok leads me to our room. Despite his shirt damp with sweat and the wet hair plastered to his head, I'm tempted to lean into him. I'm drawn in by his manly, earthy scent. By the veins standing out in his massive hands and forearms. By the weary satisfaction of a job well done. By the man himself.

How much will I suffer when he breaks his curse and dies, leaving me alone? After seeing Lucan, I'm afraid.

When we push the door to our room wide, pandemonium awaits. Our clothes are scattered and ripped to shreds. Drawers hang limp from the nightstand and dresser. Chairs are overturned. Blankets and sheets are puddled at the end of the bed, the mattress hacked into. The ticking is scattered in a white dusting everywhere. And the window had been thrown open, allowing a brisk breeze to whip in.

Marrok takes in the destruction. "Did you have a fit of anger?"

The room's only mirror is shattered, but I don't need to see it to know incredulity is etched on my face. "No."

"Someone has been here, searching for the book!" He slides into the carpet and gropes under the bed.

His look of relief says it all.

"Your carving is still holding the book in place?"

"Aye." As soon as I undo my simple cloaking spell, he pries the hunk of wood free and clutches the diary. "Whoever came destroyed our things but did not steal what we must protect."

"Thank God." I close my eyes and focus on a lingering presence. "Someone *was* here not long ago. They came and left through the open window."

"What happened?" Bram barges in. "I heard Olivia gasp and— What the fuck?"

Marrok fills Bram in as he approaches the window slowly and looks down. "'Tis too far to fall to survive."

"For most magical people, that's a hop."

“Fuck.” Frustration and fury resonate in Marrok’s voice.

“What he said,” I huff as I begin righting the room.

As Marrok joins in, I try to block out the sense of being hunted, of having my space violated yet again. But the reality is, Mathias is coming hard and fast for me. For the first time I’m truly afraid there’ll be no outrunning the bastard.

“Stop, you two. I got it.” With a wave of Bram’s hand, he rights the clothes and knickknacks.

I appreciate him saving us the trouble. I haven’t done much all day, and despite being terrified, I’m exhausted. “Thanks.”

He nods. “No problem.”

I sink into the nearby chair and skim the magical spell book Sabelle loaned me. I locate a simple repair spell, which patches up the mattress. The seams are a bit jagged, but I cover them with the sheets and blankets, trying to push down my anxiety.

If Marrok sees it, he’ll only worry. As it is, he’s watching me, arms crossed, with an unrelenting stare.

“The number of people capable of doing this is incredibly finite,” Bram says. “It must be someone Sabelle or I invited to enter the grounds very recently, because none of my protections have been breached.”

“Obviously, it cannot be Lucan,” Marrok points out. “Nor ’tis Caden, Ice, or Duke. All have been training.”

Now I know where he’s going. “You think my father did this.”

“He was here earlier tonight, and we do not know if he left the manor’s grounds, only that he left our sight.”

“The same could be said of Shock—and his escaped brother! What if Lucan is right, and Shock is Mathias’s spy?”

“Either way, you must be cautious. Certainly, you see how desperate Mathias is to reach you and the diary.”

Yeah, it's like a big neon sign. God, what could possibly happen next?

CHAPTER
FIFTY

A day passes, then another, a third, and a fourth... Every night I go to bed alone. Every morning, I wake up beside Marrok's still-warm pillow. The man himself is gone.

No one has located Anka—or Shock. Lucan has slipped further into black madness as his frenzied thrashing and piercing howls have faded to heartrending whines.

The mood at the manor is grim.

Bram finally caves to Caden's demands that they find an energy source for Lucan. But given the horrified screaming on the other side of the door, I doubt there's much sexual healing going on. Bram and Duke station themselves inside in case Lucan attacks the poor woman. The rest of us wait in the hall, watching Caden pace with clenched fists.

Less than a handful of minutes later, they escort the rattled woman out. She's trembling and looks as if she's been dragged through a war zone.

Dear god, what happened?

I rush to the bedroom door with Caden. Lucan's coloring has improved. That's the good news. The bad? He looks as crazed as ever. No one wants to say that if Anka isn't found soon, then Lucan may actually have to be put down...but I suspect everyone has thought it.

Adding to the tense mood, Marrok has become a demented drill sergeant since the break-in. He piles on hour after hour of physical rigor. Usually near midnight, he eats a mountain of

food, showers, curls his body around mine in our bed, then collapses and sleeps like a coma victim.

We've barely spoken in days. I know he still suspects my father. My head knows it's possible. My heart refuses to believe it.

I'm so tired of being torn.

It's still possible that Shock—who can hear mental broadcasts, who failed to guard Marrok's cottage when the Anarki found us, and who disappeared at the same time as Anka—is the guilty party. He fits the profile, and it isn't hard to imagine the huge, scary wizard is corrupt. His family has Anarki ties. Bram invited Shock to the manor. He could have broken into my bedroom looking for the diary.

Why won't Marrok at least consider all that?

Finally, Lucan falls silent, probably passed out from exhaustion. My dinner with Sabelle is almost silent. Since she's usually upbeat and chatty, I take her pensive mood as another bad sign. After we both push food around on our plates, she excuses herself to the library. I don't have the focus to read. My thoughts are in a million places.

What am I going to do if Marrok is right and my father is guilty? If he's merely pretending to care because I can help Mathias open the diary?

I don't have an answer.

As the clock ticks, I retreat to the bedroom. I'm losing energy fast...but that's not why I'm waiting up for Marrok. I need him for more than magical sustenance. When we're not together, I miss him so much.

But I don't just want him to desire and adore me. This empty feeling without him? Shit, I think I'm in love...

And after everything that's happened—that's still happening—I don't know what to do.

When we shared passion against the wall and he begged me not to rip out his heart, was that real? Or were his words

just a careful strum on the strings of my pity to hold me at his side?

And why is this so confusing?

Because I have no experience with love—of any kind. How should I know if he cares...or if I'm just the means to his freedom? And how can I ask a man who may not really love me to make love to me?

The idea of being a burden, like I was to my mother, is gnawingly painful...

In the wee hours, I doze off. Finally, Marrok slides between the sheets and pulls me into his arms. Magic made us mates, but he's my ideal husband in so many ways. He's protective, smart, fierce, and stubborn. I love all that about him, yet I admire the fact that, despite being immortal for centuries, he didn't lose his humanity.

And the dizzying way he consumes my body... I crave the sense of belonging I find in his arms.

But what does he feel? I hate not knowing.

"You shiver, love. Cold?" he whispers.

"No. Sorry to keep you awake." I roll away so he can sleep—and instantly feel my energy drain.

I close my eyes and brace against a wave of dizziness. Damn, I'll be forced to ask him for sex soon. Tomorrow. I can't right now. I'll cry if he touches me purely out of duty.

As a child, I would have been grateful for my mother's embrace, whatever the reason. But Marrok's touch, without affection, will destroy me all the way to my soul.

More weakness assails me. I dig my fists into the sheets. It's going to be a long night.

Suddenly, Marrok rolls me to my back and positions himself over me. With a scowl, he lifts my nightgown as his hard thighs spread mine wide. "You need me, and you did not say so. Come to me anytime you need. I will care for you."

My heart wants to weep. I close my eyes so he won't see the tears shimmering there. "I'm fine."

"Lie not to me." He smooths the hair from my face and kisses me.

Everything inside me tangles. When he touches me, I'm up, down, and inside out. But I don't ask about his feelings. I'm not in a hurry to break my own heart.

Instead, I nudge his lips apart with my own. Marrok grunts in surprise, then settles into the kiss as if he plans to stay all night. Long, languorous slides of his tongue, soft brushes of his lips, a melding of breaths and mouths and needs.

Something about tonight is different. I can't put my finger on it except that he's so...tender.

"Olivia," he murmurs. "I have been busy, and we have been at odds of late. I dislike that."

I hate feeling as if he can read me because I've left my heart exposed, knowing he can either embrace or trample it as he pleases. But that doesn't stop me from responding when he sinks into my mouth with another soft kiss, spreading the sweet burn of desire throughout me.

"If I have hurt or upset you, forgive me."

He can never apologize for what hurts me most: not loving me. Nor should he. The stupidity is all mine. I knew better than to fall in love with a man whose heart has been untouched for a millennium and a half. I'm not beautiful or lovable—even if he makes me feel that way in his arms.

Instead, Marrok apologized for the fact he still suspects my father. And I can't bear the thought that he might be right. A confrontation about my father or my Le Fay blood is inevitable.

Maybe Marrok and I are just doomed to be at odds.

I barely finish that thought before he kisses me so possessively, my toes curl. My belly tightens. Maybe our end is near, but I can melt into him now and ignore tomorrow.

Long, slow strokes of his tongue imitate what he'll soon do to my body. The fire blazes between my thighs. I surrender. He wends his way down my torso, pushing up my nightgown until he strips it off and tosses it to the floor.

As soon as I'm bare, he latches on to my sensitive nipples, one after the other. Back and forth. Sensations heat my blood and make me whimper with need. I hiss in at the delicious pull and sting while I hold him tight.

Down lower, his hands travel, divesting me of my panties. A tug and a rip, and they're gone.

He covers my pussy, rubbing and circling, before his fingers spread to explore every slick fold with unhurried touches. When he thumbs my clit, I gasp and nearly arch from the bed. He urges me back down, holding there as he heaps pleasure on me.

Need burns. I writhe, frantic. Marrok murmurs his approval. Stupid or not, when it comes to this man, I have no pride. I crave him...even if this means nothing to him at all.

Over and over, he rubs maddening circles on my clit. I gasp and keen out. Almost there... I'm so incredibly close I could weep. But he's clever and patient, turning his attention to my hips, my thighs, even the oddly sensitive backs of my knees, cooling me down before he unerringly finds my clit and revs me up again.

Soon, I'm begging, pleas falling out of my mouth. I don't care how they sound. I want him inside me. I'm desperate for him to fill the emptiness I feel when he's not inside me. "Please, Marrok. Please... Oh, my god. Yes! I need— Ah, right there, just...no. Don't stop. I can't take it."

"You will. For me," he vows in a low voice that makes me shiver.

He still doesn't allow me to climax before he climbs up my body and aligns his steely-hard crest against my slick opening, his expression somewhere between possessive and determined as he takes me in one rough thrust.

Sensation surges, hurtling me over the edge into a morass of ecstasy that unravels me. But he isn't done.

As I'm drowning in ecstasy, Marrok holds my thighs wide and pummels me in unrelenting thrusts. Our bed shakes in time to the growl of his rough breaths. Before my first orgasm even ends, he's ramping me up for a second. Incoherent words roll off my tongue, pleas for mercy, needy sounds that echo off the walls.

I bottle up my cries of love. He won't want to hear them.

Abruptly, he withdraws, flips me over, and lifts me to my hands and knees. Before I can do more than gasp, Marrok surges inside me again, his chest covering my back, his harsh breaths in my ear as his fingers settle over my pussy and drive me wild. In this position, I feel every vein and ridge of his sex. The friction of every thrust enflames me more.

"Come for me again," he growls. "We will release together."

His voice alone sends me surging. Shivers tingle down my spine. Sensations converge in my belly, gathering between my legs. Pressure builds. Then my desperation gives way to a huge explosion and renders me breathless. My vision fades out. I sink to the bed in a heap as Marrok pumps inside me, then shouts my name.

When he stills, he covers my body with his. "God, woman. What you do to me..."

He does the same for me and so much more. As he presses hot lips behind my ear, I struggle to keep my feelings dammed. The pleasure we share is...beyond, but I care less about energy and more about his feelings. About his love. But why would a man who hasn't loved anyone in fifteen centuries fall for me, a no one even my mother couldn't love?

Stop. It doesn't matter if he doesn't love me. He wants to be uncursed. He wants to die. And I don't want the man I love to suffer, so I'll do everything I can to help him. If we break the curse, his torment will be over.

And I'll be on my own again.

Slowly, Marrok withdraws with a kiss and pads to the bathroom. The door closes. Water runs. I gather a pillow against me, sink my face into it, and sob. God, why didn't I listen to my head before I lost my heart?

Chirp, chirp.

The odd sound comes from directly above me. I open my eyes to the sight of a little white bird. Freaky. How did a bird get into the room when the windows are closed against the November chill?

"Olivia," the bird says. In my father's voice.

Even freakier. Am I supposed to speak to it?

"Yes?"

"I'm outside. Invite me in. I've got something to share that will help Marrok. I want to prove you can trust me."

I glance at the bathroom door. Marrok is in the shower. And my father is outside, waiting for me. Marrok would insist I be careful. He's been working tirelessly to keep me safe. "I don't have the power to invite you in."

"All right, then. I'm just outside. Come quickly! This will only take a moment."

How much can really happen within spitting distance of Bram's house?

Tossing on a T-shirt and jeans, I creep downstairs. At the front door, I hesitate. Why is my father here in the middle of the night? Why can't he share whatever he's got in the morning?

On the other hand, if my father has something that would help Marrok, why wait?

Cautiously, I open the door. My father stands in the distance, at the edge of the property, breathing hard, as if the hounds of hell have been chasing him. Biting my lip, I look back to see if Marrok has followed. He's not there. But maybe it's better this way. He and my father only ever fight. Besides, if I need help, it's only a scream away.

Wrapping my arms around myself to ward off the cold, I head for Richard Gray, then scowl. As I close the distance, he looks really pale. If he was running or fighting, wouldn't he be flushed and sweating? "Are you okay?"

He grabs my arm and pulls me close. "Are you alone?"

He's jumpy and jittery. Stiff. What the hell has gotten into him?

"Yes." I shrug free of his grip and rub my hands over my suddenly chilled arms.

"Look!"

As he extracts something from the pocket of his slacks, I lean in to glimpse the glinting thing in the moonlight.

My jaw drops.

CHAPTER
FIFTY-ONE

The other emblem!

Ruby-encrusted, this half is shaped like an M. And suddenly, I understand the symbol on the front of the diary. M and L overlapping—Morgana Le Fay.

“How... I thought Mathias had this? What did you do?”

“I filched it.” His smile stretches from ear to ear. “I waited until most of the Anarki were gone and snuck in. I knew where Mathias once hid it. I feared he had moved it, but no!”

“You know where Mathias is hiding?” And he didn’t tell anyone?

He nods. “He’s ensconced in the same lair he’s always kept. I was shocked, but he hasn’t changed the location or erected protections against me.”

Seriously? “Where was Mathias while you took the emblem?”

“I don’t know. Out creating mayhem, I assume. So I grabbed it and ran.”

I don’t know what to say. “That was incredibly risky. Were you seen? Did anyone chase you?”

“No problems at all. Since we need this piece badly, I’ve been planning to take it for days. I’ve let you down your whole life. I couldn’t let you down anymore. You can trust me. I want Marrok to know that, as well.”

Richard suddenly envelopes me in a big hug. He's cold, but wrapped in his embrace, my heart stutters with something bittersweet. He cares about me, my happiness. I feel his acceptance. Yet...I no longer yearn for it the way I crave Marrok's.

When he pulls away, I smile. "You risked so much, but now we're in the driver's seat with the diary. We can do anything."

"Exactly. So let's get the diary open and end your mate's curse."

"Do you know how?"

"I believe I do. Bring me the book and your half of the key. We'll do it together."

Marrok's warnings about my father whip through my head. As much as I want to believe the man...I really don't know him well. Sure, what I read in the history books reassures me. And since our first meeting, my father has tried to show he cares, despite Marrok's interference.

"Why are you frowning? This is cause for joy!"

He's right, and I can't be selfish. Marrok will be happy to finally leave this life. I need to let him go. Besides, if the man doesn't love me, I'm better off without him. It just doesn't feel that way right now. But I'm stronger than I used to be. Knowing I've helped Marrok achieve his deepest wish will give me comfort.

I manage to nod and paste on a plastic smile. "I'll go get Marrok."

Upstairs, I push our bedroom door open wide. In the middle of the room, Marrok stands tall and damp from his shower. At the sight of him, my breath catches.

He looks so vital. His nose casts a bold statement above sensual lips, edged by his goatee and sun-bronzed skin. His body ripples after spending all day training wizards so they'll help him protect me. His long black lashes frame blue eyes smudged by dark circles. Moonlight shadows fan down his cheeks.

The man needs rest, and if all goes well, he may have it—eternally. The thought chokes me up.

I wish I had the courage to tell him I love him. But our magical mating aside, he probably doesn't want his enemy's great-great granddaughter for anything beyond a lay and freedom from his hex. Besides, I know from the past how this goes. Blurting out my feelings will only put him on the spot. The awkward hemming and hawing as he retreats will hurt too much.

Fighting the prickling of tears that stab my eyes, I retrieve my half of the diary's key from the pocket of the jeans I wore earlier and sling it around my neck. Dread multiplies in my gut.

He watches my every move. "What are you doing?"

"My father is outside. He brought the other half of the key. He has the means to open the diary and end your curse."

Marrok freezes. "He said that?"

"I saw it. I know you don't trust him, but he's put himself at great personal risk to help you."

"Have you asked yourself why?"

I don't want to have this argument again. "Because you're my mate. I'm his daughter."

"A fact that meant precious little to him for twenty-three years. The only reason to free me from this curse is to end my need for the diary. After which he assumes I will give it to him. What do you imagine he plans to do with it?"

Marrok's suspicious tone says he's convinced my father is up to something sinister. "It belongs in our family. Since he's no longer a fan of the Anarki, maybe he wants to hide or destroy it. Ask him."

"Of course, he will tell me the truth."

"Sarcasm isn't helping. If you want to end this curse, you have to talk to him. What can that hurt?"

“Olivia, when it comes to magic, neither of us are experts. We know not what your father is capable of or where his loyalties truly lie.”

“I read the book Sabelle gave me. I know a little something about magic—”

“Basic spells, aye. What your father and Mathias can do is extraordinary.” He caresses my shoulder. “’Tis not my wish to crush your faith in him, but you must be wary.”

I pull away. “Wary won’t end your curse. If you want a normal life—and death—you have to let my father help. One of my ancestors hurt you, and I’m trying to give you what you want, but I can’t if you won’t help yourself.”

Stubborn, difficult man. I storm toward the door.

As I reach for the knob, Marrok hovers behind me, one palm slamming the portal shut, trapping me inside. The other curls around my waist. His agitated breath fans across my neck. “Shh. ’Tis right you are. Let us go together.” He kisses my crown. “And you will be very careful.”

As I suck in a ragged breath, I realize I’m crying. I swipe at the hot tears drizzling down my cheeks. Marrok holds me close, drawing me into his heat and comfort. So perfect, his soft words and touches. So insidious.

When he holds me like this, I’m flooded with emotion. My love for him, yes, but more. Sadness. Dread.

Opening this book will be the beginning of our end. If the curse doesn’t kill him, he’ll do the job himself. And after a millennium and a half, he deserves peace.

But I’ll miss him more than I have the words to express.

I turn and throw my arms around Marrok, hugging him so tightly, my arms ache.

I love you. It’s on the tip of my tongue. But I swallow it and hold on as if the world will end if I let him go.

But that’s selfish, so I pull back. Marrok isn’t having it. He winds his strong arms around me and hauls me close again.

“All will be well. I will do everything in my power to make it so. No more tears, love.”

I pull away and dry my face, wishing he wouldn't call me that if he doesn't mean it. “Let's go.”

He tosses on his clothes, grabs the diary from its hiding place, then turns to me. “What is amiss?”

“Nothing. Why should anything be wrong?” I misdirect, looking deep into his eyes and memorizing the sight of him.

“Tell me what you fear?”

Being without you. “Opening the diary is a big step.”

“Indeed.” He presses his lips to mine. A reassurance?

It feels like goodbye.

CHAPTER
FIFTY-TWO

Marrok

After dressing, I follow Olivia out of our borrowed bedroom, guiding her with a hand at the small of her back. I want to say something. She seems distraught. Because she may lose her energy source? Or does some other concern plague her?

Perhaps, like me, she likes not how this situation is unfolding. Gray's appearance is sudden, the time strange, and his plan rushed, not to mention the fantastical story of his "bravery" that resulted in precisely what we need.

On the other hand, 'tis possible that my accursed immortality will end tonight. But I am wary that 'tis far more likely to be Gray's ploy to get his hands on the book.

Either way, I refuse to face him unarmed.

I am not privy to the feats a wizard of his power and bloodline can perform. Though I have learned much in these few days, I have merely scratched the surface of magickind's abilities.

Bram, however, is a bloody expert.

"Wait here," I say at the top of the stairs.

At Olivia's nod, I trek down the long hall. In shadow, I turn to look at her, catching her unguarded expression. Sadness. Grief. Worry.

Energy aside, would she mourn me if I were gone from her life? I know not. But as I've concealed my feelings because I know so little of her heart, I wonder... Has she done the same?

Heaven help me, I am a fool, falling for the descendant of the very woman who sentenced me to a horrific fate. And yet...Olivia's innocence and pluck, her belief in everyone's innate goodness, is like inhaling a fresh breath for the first time in centuries.

I was dead inside until I met her. And if my life ends tonight, I will be grateful for the precious days we spent together.

But after centuries of pining for death, now all I want is to live—with her.

God's teeth, I sound like a sap in...love?

Disquieted, I hurry to Bram's quarters. Time to play this drama to its end. If Gray's claim is another hoax, I will deal with her father and whatever trickery he wields. If I never break my curse, I will stay with Olivia until she understands we are meant for each other. And when her days are through, she will live on in my eternal heart.

At Bram's door, I raise my fist to knock. The wizard opens it first, fully dressed and freshly showered. Odd, given the hour.

He grins wryly. "I saw you were coming for me."

"In the shadows?"

"In a vision."

That takes me aback. "Know you Richard Gray has come?"

Bram walks into the hall with a sharp nod. "I'm aware."

In his tone, I hear something he says not. I grab his shoulder. "What else?"

"Earlier, I tracked down one of the former Brethren's younger brothers who had the misfortune of meeting Mathias in battle before the dark wizard was defeated. He warned me

that Mathias can perform magic no one has ever seen. Let's hope we don't encounter anything in my vision."

Dread settles into my gut. "Tell me what you saw."

"No time. I'll do everything I can to prevent disaster. But when we're with Gray, do what I say; don't argue."

Normally, I would refuse his command. All my life, I have served but two authority figures—God and Arthur. In every other way, I have been my own man, bowing to no one. My trust in Bram has been shaky since our initial meeting decades past. Recently, he has proven himself tolerable. For a wizard, anyway. And we both want Olivia and the diary safe. For now, that must be enough.

I nod.

"Ready?" Bram asks Olivia when we reach her.

She sends him an unconvincing smile, sadness seared into her expression.

What if Gray breaks the curse and I die? What if these are my last moments with Olivia? I cannot leave this mortal life while danger surrounds her. Who will protect her?

I scoop her up in my embrace. "We need not do this. If you wish, I will send Bram to discuss Gray's plans for the diary. Perhaps they can dispose of the blasted book rather than open it."

"You deserve to be uncursed. For centuries, that's all you've wanted. I won't stop you." When I open my mouth to argue, she cups my cheek. "Mathias will soon realize my father swiped his half of the key, and the Anarki will come. It's now or never."

What? Am I to believe Gray managed to sneak into enemy territory, knew exactly where to find the emblem, and took it from Mathias, under the nose of the Anarki army, without once being detected? Without anyone pursuing him?

My gut churns. My hackles rise. This feeling has served me well in battle.

Based on his expression, Bram is skeptical, as well.

Still, Olivia makes a point. If we are to prove Gray is up to no good, we cannot delay. “We need a strategy.”

Bram nods. “You guard Olivia. *Never* take your hands off her. I will ensure that nothing peculiar happens with Gray or the Doomsday Diary. Deal?”

I still question whether I can trust Bram—of course he puts himself in charge of that which he seeks most—but I see no better alternative. Besides, Olivia is far more important to me. “Deal.”

Together, we descend and cross the expansive foyer. Bram opens the protections around his estate to allow Richard Gray inside before closing them once more.

Olivia escorts him to the library. I watch them unblinkingly. The pale wizard nervously clasps his key in his hand. The ornate pendant is encrusted with gleaming rubies in the shape of an M, except where Olivia’s L should lay atop.

“Hello, Marrok. Oh, and Bram.” Gray sounds less than happy.

Bram sends the wizard a counterfeit smile. “Gray. Glad you came. Odd hour.”

“Most likely not to be caught.”

“How do you plan to proceed with the book? Do you know what will happen if it’s unlocked?”

“Not precisely, though I have a good idea.”

“Until we’re sure, rushing may be unwise. I’m happy to guard your key,” Bram offers. “Without an invitation to enter, these grounds are a veritable fortress.”

Gray shakes his head emphatically. “We must open the book now. My plan was to use the key, uncurse Marrok, and return it before Mathias realizes it’s gone. Before he realizes I’ve crossed him again.”

“I’d rather not put my father in extra danger, and there’s no reason to drag out Marrok’s misery.” Olivia turns to me. “I know you would prefer to study and strategize and ponder

and...whatever, but Richard risked his life to bring us his emblem and—”

“What about you? What do *you* want?”

Olivia falls silent, but she implores me for something with those haunting violet eyes.

“A happy future with a mate free of a curse you should never have been forced to endure, I’m sure. She’s suffered for too long, as have you.”

Gray’s blatant tug on Olivia’s heartstrings annoys me, even more than him paying lip service to my centuries of torment.

“We know not if I will live after this curse is broken.”

“Sabelle said that mating was the most powerful magic of all, so maybe that means...” Olivia’s expression falls. “Then again, maybe not.”

“We don’t know,” Gray admits. “It’s possible Marrok will continue on, though as a mortal. The curse preserved his body, and reversing the hex should begin a normal aging process. Well, normal for a witch’s mate.”

I trust Richard not...and I cannot leave Olivia without a defender. It matters not that I may never have another chance to break my curse. In fact, that notion does not distress me as it once did, and I cannot pretend I know not why.

Olivia.

Still, we have little choice but to play along until Gray shows his hand. “Bram, what say you?”

“A curse of this nature is beyond most magical knowledge. When riled, Morgana was capable of great, terrible feats we’ve not seen before or since.”

Olivia faces me. “Why are you hesitating? You deserve to live or die as you see fit, not as Morgana commanded.”

“Precisely. And with an open book we have far more sway over Mathias,” Gray insists.

“Meaning?” I care not about magickind. Well, I should not care. But the thought of harm coming not only to Olivia, but to

the dedicated wizards I have trained these past days vexes me much.

“Isn’t it obvious? Once we open the book and learn to harness its power, we can banish Mathias forever. He will never target you or Olivia. If you don’t, he’ll hunt you. Neither of you will be safe. No one will be.”

Gray’s words turn in my head. I dissect them, but I can find no flaws in Richard’s logic, save one possibility. “If we open the book, we destroy his impediment to using it. Every magical megalomaniac will pursue us.”

“Not necessarily,” Olivia counters. “Since the diary is an object of feminine reverence, it may be more powerful in the hands of a woman. It’s possible a man might not be able to use it at all.”

“Very good,” Gray praises. “You may well be correct.”

“And as a Le Fay, Olivia—and perhaps only her—will have the ability to destroy the diary once she transitions,” Bram argues. “If it no longer exists, the book will cease to be the cause of murders and wars. Until that day, we will tell magickind the book is in cinders or some such and guard it with our lives.”

They make good points. I simply like them not. “We should wait until Olivia has the power to destroy the diary.”

Her father shakes his head. “It’s been over a millennium since we’ve had all the necessary components to open the diary together. We may never have this opportunity again.”

Outside, thunder claps. Inside, my gut roils. I glance at the little red book—so innocuous looking—then stare at Olivia.

She swallows. “Maybe...it’s better for us, for magickind. With an open book, we have power.”

Aye, and with a closed book, Olivia and I have little more than a dangerous life on the run. And I am still uncertain where Gray’s loyalties truly lie. My “wife” deserves to know.

Gritting my teeth, I send the group a sharp nod. “What must we do?”

CHAPTER
FIFTY-THREE

Bram sends me a last glance. “All right, then. Gray, you will hold your key in your right hand. Olivia will hold hers in her own. Marrok will stand between you. I will steady the book on the table. No one else is to touch it except to insert their key. We will discuss next steps once the diary is open. Are we clear?”

“Indeed.” Richard nods eagerly.

Dread gnaws at my gut. Though Richard says naught that sounds outright suspicious, and I see the logic of acting before we are attacked by the Anarki, none of that eases my worry.

Outside, rain begins to fall, wind lashing branches against the window. During my boyhood, the weather would have been perceived as a bad omen. The old superstitions are not always wrong.

I blow out a steadying breath and situate myself between Richard and Olivia, wrapping my arm around her waist and pulling her tight against me. I like none of this and seek for any way to ensure Gray can do her no wrong. Olivia meets my stare. The fear and sadness there wrenches me before her gaze skitters away.

Whatever upsets or disturbs her, I cannot let it continue.

“Give us a moment,” I insist to Bram and Gray.

“We can’t wait,” Olivia’s father insists. “I feel Mathias breathing down my neck.”

In case these are the final ticks of the clock with the only woman I have ever given my heart, I will not leave her without saying goodbye.

But Olivia shakes her head. “There’s nothing to say. Marrok, you need and deserve this. Just do it.”

Bram nods. “Gray, on the count of three, you will latch your emblem onto the front of the book, into the fitted grooves. Olivia, once he’s finished, you will lay yours on top. She—and no one else—will open the book. And I will stun anyone who breaks protocol.”

Gray nods. “Let’s hurry. I’m on borrowed time.”

“If you really did steal that key from Mathias, I’m surprised he’s not already beating down my door. One...”
Bram begins.

I clasp Olivia even tighter. “Stay close to me. I will not let you go.”

She tenses. Her lips quiver as if she tries—and fails—not to cry.

“Love—”

“No.” She shakes her head.

“Two...” Bram continues as I growl under my breath at my stubborn “wife.”

As Gray leans forward, emblem in his outstretched hand, Bram clutches the book in a white-knuckled grip.

“Three.”

Olivia’s sire lays his emblem into the sunken track. The key falls into place with a barely audible click.

“Good,” Bram mutters, then turns. “Olivia?”

Lips pursed in concentration, she repeats the process, latching her half of the key into place. With a soft snick, it fastens over Richard’s M.

Suddenly, the book lurches into Olivia’s hand, pulsing with an energy all its own. It beats in a rhythm, like a heartbeat.

Beside her, the power that once cursed me slams into my body. The surge scalds my skin as she wrenches the book open.

The smell of old paper fills the air as the spine cracks with age. Yet the pages hum with undeniable life. A sudden wind blasts the room. Page after page—most of them blank—flap in an inexplicable gust.

“Unreal...” Bram breathes.

“I feel a spark. It’s a rush. My veins are on fire.” Olivia grips the volume as if she’s afraid to let go.

I stare, mesmerized. I have long known the Doomsday Diary held awesome power, but seeing it for myself... Bloody hell!

Suddenly, a blast of light flashes on my right. A fireball of pain hits me between the shoulder blades, setting my whole body ablaze. I stagger under the agony searing my skin, burning away my joints. My next breath becomes almost impossible to draw in. Is this Morgana’s way of punishing me for daring to open the book and end my curse?

Bram shouts as if at a distance. I sweat as I funnel every bit of my strength to grip Olivia.

But as the torment continues, I lurch, my head knowing not up from down. I struggle to stay upright. My fingers turn numb. My knees all but melt.

My pain multiplies, unrelenting, slashing through muscles, gouging into my bones. My neck no longer supports my head, and my chin falls to my chest as I strain to control my body and maintain my grip on my mate.

What magical treachery is this?

“Gray!” Bram shouts.

Why is he so angry?

That matters not. I must focus.

Must...protect...Olivia.

A second blast comes, this time in the back of my skull. My head jerks. My muscles twitch. I sink to my knees as my

body threatens to dissolve into the floor. Still, I refuse to let go of Olivia, clinging to her waist. But never in my most harrowing battles or my centuries of war have I felt such excruciating pain. The torture infects me like venom, scorching my system, freezing my muscles, and searing my lungs. My heart stutters and—for long, agonizing moments—stops.

I remain conscious by sheer force of will. Vaguely, I hear Olivia gasp at my side, and I force myself to look up. I gather all my strength and stumble to my feet.

Richard comes into view, teeth bared, fury distorting his face. His violet eyes flash with hate as he levels his wand at Bram.

“Nay!” I try to shout.

Pain renders me voiceless.

Olivia’s father raises his wand. The bolt of light bursts forth again and a fresh wave of agony slashes me unlike anything I’ve ever felt. I brace myself for the spread of torment and remind myself that I am immortal. But my consciousness is slipping. I wonder if having the book open and a Le Fay strike me with magic is enough to end the curse and kill me, all in one fell swoop.

I lose my hold on Olivia and slump against the table.

She releases the book and grabs my shoulders, screaming my name, but she sounds far, far away. I cannot possibly tell her that I am well. Such a terrible lie.

Bram growls something, and a ping of magic sounds to my left where Bram tries to stun Gray.

Still Olivia’s touch gives me the will to fight. I will not leave her to her father’s evil whims.

With a battle cry, I shove away from the table, sweating, bleary eyed. I push Olivia behind me and swing a mighty arm at Gray. Before the punch connects, he leaps aside, grabs Olivia, and points his wand at Bram.

A burst of energy flashes, this time across the table. Bram feints and staggers forward, slamming his hands on the surface in front of him.

After a vicious curse, another ball of dark power flares around us, killing the lights in the room. I reach for Olivia.

I feel nothing but air.

CHAPTER
FIFTY-FOUR

“Olivia!”

She does not answer. I’m terrified to the bottom of my soul.

In the pitch blackness, Bram snaps his fingers. The lights blaze on again. The book lays on the table under the wizard’s palm, saved from Gray’s desperate grab. But frantically scanning the room only confirms what I feel in every corner of my heart: After showing his true colors, the maggot is gone.

And he has taken Olivia with him.

I whirl to Bram, anxiety clawing my composure. “Where are they?”

Regret crosses the wizard’s face. “I don’t know.”

“You have no way to trace their location?”

“I’m not a GPS tracker. Listen, it’s no secret Gray wanted to part you and Olivia. But—”

“To what end? He tried to steal the book, too, did he not?” When Bram remains silent, it takes all my will not to upend the table and fling him about the room. “You suggested giving the knave enough rope to hang himself. He has.”

“He won’t hurt Olivia. At the very least, he needs her to use the diary.”

“And after that?” Horror and frustration swell. “Without me, she will lose energy quickly. The lack will kill her if Gray

does not. And if he is again in league with Mathias, as I suspect, you know what that monster will do.”

The very thought shreds me.

“We will find her before then.” Bram pauses. “You love her.”

I flinch. I have fought this feeling in vain. Almost from the moment I realized Olivia was not Morgana, I began seeing her. I began falling for her. Her compassion and her willingness to help. Her strength and her vulnerability. Her sparkle, her beauty, her acceptance. And what did I give her in return? Anger and distrust, along with my stiff cock. I withheld the love she has sought all her life because I feared she would use it to hurt me. I punished her for her bloodline, which she couldn't help. I denied her affection. Oh, I craved her, so I took her as often as she allowed. But I was too cowardly to tell her of my feelings.

And now I might never have that chance.

“Aye.” I scrub a hand down my face, my pulse a wild thing in my chest. “I cannot live without her. I must find her.”

“*We.*” Bram claps me on the shoulder. “And we have a bargaining chip, something Richard desperately wants, badly enough to deliver a trio of killing spells at you.”

“Those blasts of pain were killing spells?”

“Puts a new spin on terrible in-laws, doesn't it?”

“I am in no mood for levity.”

Bram holds up his hands. “That also tells me you're still immortal. His treachery is unforgivable, and he'll pay for it. He's either a coldhearted bastard willing to manipulate his daughter to acquire a weapon against his own people, or he's in bed with Mathias, who has the same wish and is ten times more powerful.”

“What good does having the diary do us, unless we ransom it? And still, we must discover where Gray hides.”

“There is...another way, perhaps.”

My patience gives way, and I slam my fist on the table. “Every moment she is gone, I feel our bond straining and twisting. ’Tis painful, like dull blades gouging my soul.”

Bram’s brow furrows. The wizard is pondering something—but far too slowly.

Though I hate magic, at the moment, I wish I was filled with it. If it would bring back Olivia, I would hoard magical power until my own is so strong, I glow.

“Tell me!”

Bram lifts the book and flips through the pages, starting at the beginning, turning from one to the next—and whipping past the page that holds Morgana’s curse on me.

Grabbing the book from Bram, I try to breathe past my panic as I thumb back to Morgana’s damning scrawl. Can I find some answer here to change the balance of power against Gray?

I expected a wisecrack from Bram, an arched brow—something upon reading Morgana’s words. Nothing prepares me for what the wizard says.

“What are you staring at? I’m looking for the page where Morgana cursed you. So far every damn page is empty.”

“What nonsense do you speak? Can you not see the words before you?” I point.

“What words?”

“I know not what game you play. Stop now and find my mate.”

“Maybe we can find her using the book.”

My eyes narrow. “Should we toy with something so powerful?”

“Can you think of another way?”

I cannot. “Fuck.”

“We don’t know precisely how the book works, I admit. Legend says whoever possesses it can write whatever they

wish, and their words will come to pass.”

“I watched Morgana curse me with a few strokes of her quill.”

“Then perhaps it’s that simple.”

Nothing about Morgana had ever been simple. But I have no other ideas. I *need* Olivia in my arms before I lose my mind and begin a rampage and burn down the world to find her.

Sweat drips, and worry thuds. This could go horribly wrong, and I could be cursed forever. I care not.

“Whatever needs to be done, do it now.”

Bram nods, reaches to his desk for a pen, and poises it over a naked page. “Does the diary require a special writing instrument?”

“The night she cursed me, Morgana grabbed something of Arthur’s.”

Bram sighs. “We’ll hope for the best. Magical experiments are always...interesting.”

Interesting and magic are two words I want not in the same sentence. But I will risk anything—everything—to have Olivia returned to me alive and whole.

Brows furrowed in concentration, Bram settles the pen to the page and quickly scrawls BRING OLIVIA BACK TO HER MATE. BANISH THOSE WHO TOOK HER AND TEMPT FATE.

“I don’t know if it needs to rhyme, and I’m not a poet, but...” Bram shrugs as he dots the last period with a flourish.

I hold my breath, anticipation clenching my gut. This *must* work. Across our bond, I feel Olivia’s fear. I am moments from losing my patience—and my mind.

Time ticks on. I scan the room frantically and stare out the windows. I see no sign of my beloved.

Frustration replaces worry. When I glance at the book, I stagger back, eyes wide. “The page—’tis blank.”

Every word Bram wrote has disappeared.

“What the bloody hell?”

I have no clue. “And you cannot see Morgana’s words on the page beside?”

Bram lifts the book closer. “There’s nothing.”

“The diary holds more secrets than I imagined.” Like Morgana herself.

Regret etches itself in Bram’s face. “You try.”

I forget that I lack magic or that Morgana would consider this sacrilege. I take the book from Bram, then realize... He’s giving the most powerful of magickind’s weapons to me voluntarily? Though my hope of using it to save Olivia is slim?

“Why are you waiting? Do it,” he urges.

Later, I will consider the implications of his choice. Now, I care about naught except Olivia. Horror now replaces her fear. I feel it like an icy blade hacking at my heart.

Trying to steady my hand, I stab the pen to the blank page and write words similar to Bram’s.

With the same results.

Once the words fade from the paper, I slam the book shut. Useless. “What now?”

“Perhaps Olivia was right, that the book responds to witches, not wizards. I’d call for Sabelle, but she’s still weak from her journey to Texas.”

I toss the diary on the table and turn for the door without a backward glance. The accursed tome was the source of my torture for centuries. Why did I expect it to save the only person I care for—and thus my soul?

Worry eats at my composure. My bond with Olivia... I feel her even more strongly. Fear consumes her. Fighting it drains her. And now a growing disbelief afflicts her. In the next instant, her shock blanches me, like a thousand leaps into an icy winter lake. Then suddenly, the echo of Olivia’s terror burns through me.

I cannot wait.

“Where are you going?” Bram shouts as I dash for the door. “Let’s think this through.”

“I must save Olivia now.”

Or I fear I will be too late.

CHAPTER
FIFTY-FIVE

Olivia

A blur of light. A whirl of noise. I'm tossed end over end. My stomach turns. The arm around my middle threatens to cut me in half.

Suddenly, I land in a heap on the floor. Finally, the vise around my middle recedes, and I can breathe again.

As I drag in a breath, I scan the completely unfamiliar place. It's dark with heavy curtains. A dim light illuminates the aging space. A beige sofa colored with mystery stains sits a few feet away. I doubt even Goodwill would take it—or anything else in here. A narrow bed with a gray spread I bet was once white sprawls haphazardly, tangling with equally dingy sheets. An open pizza box with a half-eaten pie inside litters a cheap linoleum table. Styrofoam cups of cold coffee sit forgotten. And cigarette butts fill ashtrays on every surface, choking me with their acrid scent.

The smells, combined with whatever means we just traveled, makes my stomach pitch once more. I nearly heave and stare at my father, who scowls like I'm a speck on his shoe. What's going on?

"Where are we?" *Besides someplace that looks like a Motel 6 reject?*

"My room. At least for now."

I suppose he changed them often to outrun the Anarki. “What happened? Where did you take me? Where is Marrok? What was happening to him before we...poofed out of Bram’s house? Where is the book?”

“Full of questions,” my father chides before he levels me with a glare. “That will cease. The book, blast Bram Rion, is still clutched in his sodding fist, no doubt. And your mate isn’t coming. If he wasn’t immortal, he would be conveniently dead.”

I step back as dawning dread slides through me. “I-I don’t understand.”

“Of course you don’t, you stupid witchling. I perform magic no one has even conceived of, so you can’t possibly understand.”

“What—”

“Shut up,” my father snarls before his head snaps back. He pales, losing all color and animation. His skin turns an otherworldly shade of gray, while his eyes lose their life, dulling out like the rest of him. A ghostly leg kicks out from the side of his calf, almost as if another being is emerging from my father’s body. But that’s impossible.

Isn’t it?

I thought so until an arm protrudes from my father’s shoulder. Another head seems to surface from his ear. Then a whole separate body steps forward. My father falls to the floor, lifeless, like a marionette with its strings cut.

Terror ices my veins. With a frantic stare, I look between my father’s slumped form on the dingy floor and the new man in front of me.

He looks younger than my father by at least twenty human years. Dark hair brushes the bronzed tops of his bulging shoulders. His torso is bare except for a thin coat of sweat that accentuates every ripped muscle. Biceps bunch and flex as he hooks his thumb into the waistband of his leather pants, hanging so low I can see his hip bones and follow the treasure trail leading down. Who the hell is he?

I'm afraid I know the answer.

"Olivia?"

I look up and gasp. I was so distracted by the fact a half-naked stranger manifested from my father's body, I didn't look into his eyes. What I see makes me recoil.

An icy blue so chilling, I shiver from six feet away. Rimmed in a black fringe, they threaten and seduce at once. He embodies compelling menace with his slashing cheekbones, strong jaw, and wide mouth. The man is completely sexual, with a presence that's impossible to ignore and without a shred of warmth in his soul.

I'm repulsed.

"W-what have you done with my father?"

"I made sure he will rest." He smiles benignly as he saunters closer. "In peace."

Horror overwhelms me. My heart stops. I take an involuntary step back. "You killed him?"

"He served his purpose and was becoming tiresome. Suddenly, he sprouted morals and fatherly concern." The man yawns. "What use have I for those?"

The father I barely had a chance to know was murdered defending me from this...creature without humanity or heart. The closer he comes, the more my skin crawls.

"You may be happy to know that his dying words were about you. He never pleaded for his own life, but he begged quite convincingly for yours. Your mother as well."

I gape. "*You* killed her?"

"Let's say I persuaded her to end her misery. It was so interesting to watch her struggle with her will to live as she put a gun to her head."

I'm going to throw up. The magic my mother feared all her life ultimately ended her. And she died protecting me? On some level, she must have loved me...and I never knew or appreciated her.

I'm sorry, Mom.

“But humans are simple,” the stranger says off-handedly. “Your father had to be dealt with more directly.”

In other words, murdered. “When?”

“Directly after he helped you fight off the Anarki at your mate’s cottage. I had him followed—and his mind read—prior to that. As soon as he teleported away from you and back here? Well, I no longer needed your father alive, just his corpse to inhabit. So I gave him everlasting slumber.”

I tremble. This craziness is happening so fast, I can’t wrap my head around his rapid-fire savagery. “Why kill him?”

“He intended to ruin my plan.” My parents’ murderer drags his knuckles down my cheek in a caress that, for all its gentleness, scares the hell out of me. “I couldn’t have that.”

I shudder with revulsion and jerk from his touch. “Who are you?”

CHAPTER
FIFTY-SIX

But who else can he be?
“Mathias d’Arc, of course.” He executes a very courtly bow.

His name ricochets around my head. I stumble back only to encounter a wall. He laughs softly, the sound every bit as icy as his eyes.

Again, Mathias reaches for me. I have nowhere to retreat as he sinks his fingers into my hair, letting it slide between his thumb and fingers before he grabs the strands in his fists. “My fiery American witchling. So lovely.”

“Don’t touch me.” I bat at his hands. “Leave me the hell alone!”

Mathias pins me against the wall. “I could break your mate bond, you know? But you might not survive. Or I could simply take you against your will and disregard your pain. Though you might not live through that, either, and I have no use for a dead Le Fay witch. You’re quite lovely. More’s the pity.”

Mathias yanks on my hair, pulling me closer. I stumble against him with a gasp, my gasping mouth just beneath his.

“I would enjoy fucking you,” he whispers against my lips. “Your moans and pleas would provide me so much energy and immeasurable pleasure.”

I try to shake my head, but he holds me too tightly. “No.”

“Yes. If I wished it, you couldn’t stop me. But you reek of that immortal human,” Mathias growls. “And I’m in no mood

to smell him while you scream in ecstasy.”

Ecstasy? How could he imagine that I would, for even a moment, enjoy his touch?

“Your expression is deliciously easy to read. You would feel pleasure because I would will it so. Watch.”

Suddenly, he releases me and steps into the middle of the room. After a snap of his fingers, a woman appears, mussed and naked. With her head bowed, her pale curls shield her face, her shoulders, her breasts, and flirt with her navel. But even without seeing her face, I know she’s gorgeous.

“Come,” he calls to her.

Without looking up, she walks to him.

“Kneel.”

Automatically, she does as she’s told. Knees apart, hands clasped behind her back, centerfold breasts thrust out.

My jaw drops. Why would this beauty subjugate herself to a monster? Just watching him lick his lips lasciviously as he eyes her makes me sick.

Absently, Mathias brushes the woman’s hair from her shoulder, then moves lower, fondling her exposed breast. He grabs her nipple and twists without mercy. The woman gasps, then begins to pant.

Oh, god. Time to run. I pray Mathias is distracted, and I can escape. If not...he may kill me for trying.

Barely two steps toward the door, I feel something loop around my neck and give a vicious yank. I pull and scratch, frantically feeling for whatever chokes me, but my nails only gouge my own skin.

What did he do to me?

Suddenly, my arms glue themselves to my sides. Against my will, I turn to face Mathias and his mind-slave once more.

“I insist you stay for the fun. This one gives me a great deal of energy. So full of anger I can translate into juicy enthusiasm for my cock. Isn’t that right, lovely?”

The woman whimpers, obviously disgusted and afraid. That poor witch. I want to run to her, help her.

I can't move.

“Rise,” Mathias demands of the blonde, then drops his voice. “You’re a minx. I’ll bet you liked it rough with your former mate as well.”

Former mate? Did Mathias kill him, too?

As that horrifying possibility spins through my head, he caresses the woman’s breast again. “Turn.”

She obeys without hesitation, though every line of her body tells me that she’s aching to run. I understand. It’s the same control this bastard has exerted over me.

“Good. Look at me,” he snaps.

She does—and the sight of her face has me gasping in a shocked breath. “Anka?”

“Ah, is that her name? I’ve been too busy fucking her to ask.” Mathias runs his palm down her stomach. Then he buries his fingers in the downy thatch between her legs. She looks swollen. She smells of sex.

“Spread your legs, whore.”

Anka trembles as if she’s trying to defy him. But she’s too under his spell. She complies. Her eyes, full of despair and horror, wrench my heart. The agony and torment she has endured is all over her face, being forced to submit to his touch even as her mind rebels.

Mathias’s fingers disappear inside Anka. She winces, pressing her lips together as if she’s holding in tears. But moments later, her breathing roughens. She flushes with arousal. Her inner thighs are slick with desire.

Mathias slants me a stare, his smile depraved. “Isn’t she—no, I must rephrase this—wasn’t she the mate of one of the Domsday Brethren?”

It isn’t a good sign that Mathias knows the Domsday Brethren exists. Did he get the information out of my father’s

head? From Shock? Or did he fuck it out of Anka?

“You forced her to break her bond?”

“I can be *very* persuasive.”

Anka’s red-rimmed eyes look panicked and traumatized, even as her thighs begin to tremble with impending release under Mathias’s lazy-fingered caresses.

Even at a distance, I can see he’s slowly destroying her. “Stop. She doesn’t want you!”

The evil wizard holds up his two very wet fingers. “Here is your proof otherwise.”

“You’re forcing her to respond.”

“Pleasure is pleasure.” He circles his free hand around her head. “There. She cannot hear us now. Don’t want pesky memories getting in the way. I never bothered to ask her mate’s name. Who was he?”

I refuse to say. Lord knows what the psycho freak would do with the information.

“Tell me.” He lowers his hand, hovering over Anka’s rosy sex. “Or she spends the entire night coming against her will—and not just for me. I’m sure the wizards of the Anarki would love her.”

As I recoil, a silent tear rolls down Anka’s cheek unchecked. She clenches her fists so tightly, I see blood running from her palms. The woman can’t endure being violated repeatedly.

My voice shakes when I answer. “Her mate is—”

“Was,” Mathias corrects.

“*Was* Lucan.”

His awful smile widens. “Splendid. No reason to abduct a warrior’s mate and force her to break their bond if it won’t cripple Bram Rion’s little rebellion.”

That explains everything. Mathias not only knows of the Doomsday Brethren, but since he was impersonating my father

when he interrupted one of their training sessions, he has a good idea who's in it, who is mated, and he figured out a shortcut to making them one key member smaller with Lucan's insanity.

He sends Anka a look of such evil amusement, chills shudder up my spine. "I know precisely what to do with you."

Whatever he has in store, I already feel sorry for her. I pray she survives and vow to myself that if I escape alive, I will find and help her.

With another snap of his fingers, Anka disappears.

Blinking, I scan the room. She's gone. "What did you do with her?"

"As much fun as she provided me, I sent her to a place where she can be far more...interesting."

Did he turn her over to the Anarki for some sort of gang bang? "Send her back to her mate. He's suffering and—"

"Anka no longer has a mate. So why would I return her to Lucan when my plan to both distract and weaken Bram's little group is working? Besides, where I've sent her, she'll be *very* much appreciated."

"Damn you! Don't do this to her or Lucan. Don't—"

"If I were you, I'd worry less about their problems and focus on your own, which have become grave, indeed. Now, either you cooperate with me...or I'll change my mind and let you experience what Anka has firsthand."

The very thought of Mathias touching me, of him forcing my body to crave what my mind rejects... I can't. And breaking my bond with Marrok?

Never.

"I see you understand me, witchling." Mathias sends me an unctuous smile. "Your decision. Shall we do this easy...or hard?"

CHAPTER
FIFTY-SEVEN

Marrok

Twelve panic-filled hours later, dusk is nearly upon us. I have neither word nor sign of Olivia. The worry that has gnawed at me all day now threatens to consume me.

“Stop pacing.” Bram swirls the whiskey in his glass before tossing the rest back. “Duke and Caden left a few minutes ago to continue their search. Ice is on his second outing, as well. One of them is bound to turn up a clue. I’ll put out more feelers. If the Anarki try to invade, I’ll mop up the wizards. You handle the undead. And we’ll keep praying.”

Grimly, I nod. Without a clue about Olivia’s whereabouts, we can do little more.

I know not who or what magickind prays to, but even if I have not paid my penance in the past fifteen centuries, I hope God will not punish Olivia for my sins. She has barely lived... I must maintain faith—in Him, in myself, in my mate’s abilities, and in the Doomsday Brethren, who have proven more resilient and determined than expected.

But matters look dire. Gray, the venomous, pox-hearted snake, ceased answering both his mobile and the enchanted white rocks. Since he evaded the Anarki for several hundred years, ’tis hardly a surprise he is difficult to find. But he knows me not. After thrice leveling killing blasts at me and abducting the woman I love, he will find me a formidable, tireless

enemy. I will not rest until I bring him down and Olivia is safe in my arms.

“What of Shock?” I ask.

Bram shakes his head. “I called him again two hours ago. I’ve neither seen nor heard from him since before Anka’s disappearance. For his sake, I hope he had no part in Anka breaking her mate bond. If Lucan survives, he will come for the bastard.”

“Would losing Shock truly be a loss?”

“For humanity?” Bram shrugs. “On the surface, I’d say no. But he isn’t quite like the rest of his House. Oh, he’s dodgy. And he doesn’t play well with others. No one knows much about him. By design, I think. But if you’re asking whether the Doomsday Brethren would suffer without Shock, that’s harder to say. He hasn’t helped much so far, but I have a gut feeling...”

“He is powerful.”

“In more than one way. That’s why I coerced him into fighting for us, despite the fact his family is full of Mathias supporters. But maybe Lucan was right about the bastard.”

“Time will tell.” In the distance, Lucan’s mournful howls echo through the otherwise silent house. “I grasp now why your friend is losing his humanity and soul.”

’Tis bad enough that Gray took my mate, but if he also persuaded her to break our bond... I could not bear thus. After mere hours without Olivia, I am on the brink of insanity. My bone-deep anxiety grinds down my hope. For the millionth time since her disappearance, I pace. What good is immortality if Gray’s spells felled me?

“I’ve always heard that losing a mate is—”

“I have no words,” I choke out.

Bram approaches. Our gazes connect. He claps my shoulder, and I feel him in my mind.

Normally, I would shove him out with a harsh word and an intimidating glare. But his face softens with regret. “Rion?”

“A week ago, I stood in this very room and convinced friends and foes alike to put aside our differences to join my ‘noble cause.’ I knew war would be a bitch, but I expected we’d last longer than a week before suffering losses like this. But here we are, and everything’s already turning to shit. Shock has proven as unreliable as Lucan feared. He’s my best friend, and I worry he won’t recover before his energy runs out. Anka and Olivia are both missing. And you...” He shakes his head. “You wanted this least, and I strong-armed you into it most. I’m sorry.”

The cocky, golden boy of magical royalty, Bram Rion, apologizing?

From the beginning, I wanted no part of him or his Doomsday Brethren, but if Rion can be honest, I should be as well. “The fault is not yours. ’Tis that of the Anarki. Had I remained hidden in the forest, Mathias would have found me. And I could not protect Olivia alone. This morn proved that.”

“None of us could have known Gray would—”

“I knew. Not for one moment have I trusted him.” Yet had I separated him from Olivia, she would only have run to him.

Now that he has shown his true colors? I will come for her sire relentlessly. He will learn the Anarki were—by far—the easier opponents to evade.

Bram nods. “And you were right.”

“When I get my hands on Gray, I will happily rip out his entrails with my bare hands.”

When Bram opens his mouth to reply, a little white bird whisks in, chirping beside me. “Bring the Doomsday Diary to a tunnel on the south bank of the Thames at two a.m. Come alone, or Olivia dies.”

I still. “That voice... ’Tis not Richard Gray.”

“No.” Bram sounds grim. “That is Mathias.”

So I was right, Gray *is* allied with the dark wizard. And he no longer needs Olivia to open the book. We foolishly did that for him.

Fear unlike any I have ever felt chokes me. I sink to Bram's stylish sofa, dread charring out my belly. "Jesu, Mathias has his hands on my mate."

And perhaps other things. Between Bram's vision and the pictures of Mathias's victims, I know precisely what he does to women.

Haunted by those images, I drop my head in my hands. The thought of him hurting *my* Olivia... Murderous doesn't begin to cover how I feel. "I must save her."

"We'll try everything possible."

"*Try?* Nay. I *will* rescue her." I leap to my feet. "The bastard can have the book. Tell the damn bird that."

Bram grabs my arm. "You can't give it to Mathias."

"You cannot stop me!"

"Surrendering the book won't spare Olivia, *and* there's every chance he could bring about doomsday. Innocents will die. Chaos will rule. Humans will be slaughtered. Magickind may not survive. And whatever she endures will be in vain..."

Once, I would have cared not about magical beings suffering. But the Domsday Brethren have become warriors in the most human—and best—sense of the word. Bram has become almost like a friend.

"What would you have me do? I will not let my mate die at the hands of that evil butcher." I scrub a hand down my face.

Strategy. 'Tis what I need. But after centuries of blaming magickind for so many of my problems, I know so little about these people.

"Can you"—I struggle to think of anything unexpected—"magically bind the book and make it impossible for him to use?"

Bram freezes. Then he smiles. "That's it!"

"You *can?*"

"Not exactly. But neither of us could write in the diary. There's a good chance Mathias won't be able to either. Give

me a minute.” Bram races across the room.

A moment later, a door materializes. He heads through it. Before I can follow, the wall solidifies again. Where the devil did he go?

Less than a minute later, the wizard appears again, this time holding an ancient tome. “Got it!”

“What?”

“Merlin’s old writings are more cryptic than helpful, but...” Bram flips pages, then stops near the middle of the book. “Ah, here Merlin says something about him being too much of a man to use the diary. All this time, I thought he was being a macho sod. But given what Olivia learned about the book being an object of feminine reverence and our own inability to use it, I began thinking... Morgana’s writings are loaded with rants about men and their ferocious desire for power.”

“She wanted to be a man’s sole focus. She hated that I had more desire to fight than to fuck her again.”

“Precisely.” Bram smiles. “Merlin wrote that she created something more powerful than wizards. Again, I interpreted this to mean that she crafted the book to be more awe-inspiring than her male cohorts. But I think he meant something else entirely.”

“She made it impossible for a man to use?”

“Indeed.”

I frown. “Why would Mathias seek what he cannot use? Or are you saying he does not yet realize thus?”

“That is exactly what I’m saying. After all, I have the benefit of Merlin’s writings, and I *still* didn’t realize the truth until we tried to use the diary. But I’m sure, in his head, once you give him the book, he’ll have everything he needs.”

“Or he means to hold Olivia, too. We must be careful, or he will have the world at his fingertips.”

Bram opens his mouth, then closes it to greet someone. “Sabelle.”

I whirl to find her in the doorway, looking disheveled, her swollen mouth lifted in a smile. “Gentlemen.”

“You’re looking...energetic.” He grimaces.

“I made sure my suffusion was quick but effective.”

His face pulls into a wince. “Don’t tell me who he is.”

“Wasn’t planning to. Notice I didn’t ask a few days ago where you got the bounce in your step.”

I have not the time for their banter when Olivia needs me. “We must hurry.”

Bram clears his throat. “Of course. Write in this.”

Sabelle plucks the pen, then blinks at her brother’s outstretched hand. “*This* book? The Doomsday Diary? Are you out of your bloody mind?”

“This may be our only means of bringing back Olivia.”

Sabelle hesitates and swallows. “All right, then. What shall I write?”

“A wish. Start with a simple one.”

With a skeptical expression, Sabelle does, jotting a quick line asking that the missing button on her blouse be fixed. A moment later, the button appears exactly where it should be, perfectly stitched. The words on the page disappear.

My relief is instant.

She blinks. “Astonishing!”

“Write that Olivia must be returned to me,” I demand. “Now.”

My heart pounds as she sends the pen scrawling across the paper, then lays the book on the table between us. The page turns blank, but Olivia is nowhere to be found.

Disappointment threatens to shatter me.

Sabelle frowns. “What happened?”

Bram curses. “I don’t know.”

“Maybe the wish is too big for my magic?”

“Or, like any other enormous spell, the wish must be your heart’s deepest desire.”

Sabelle sends a guilty glance to Marrok. “I’m sorry. I adore Olivia. I want her back with you. Truly...”

“But ’tis not the most earnest wish in your heart. I understand.” Even if I am dismayed.

“Marrok, this experiment proves that, even without Olivia, Mathias can use this book. He has female followers.”

I should be less surprised than I am. Women make war, too. Morgana proved that.

“But with someone who’s both female and Le Fay, it would be stronger, right?” Sabelle asks.

“For her, I suspect, the book’s power would have no limit.”

Sabelle gnaws at her lip nervously. “It would be wiser to keep her and the book separated, but Mathias can’t have either.”

“If I must choose, I cannot leave Olivia to that monster. I can give up the book, but never my mate.”

“If you surrender the diary, you lose all hope of ending your hellish immortality,” Bram reminds me somberly.

I care not. “Without Olivia, I will live a hell worse than any I have experienced. If she is safe, I can endure forever. She is worth any sacrifice.”

“All right, then. We’ll pretend to give the diary to Mathias. The rest of the Doomsday Brethren will ensure we make it back here with both the book and the woman.”

“Once Olivia is free, go. I would not ask you all to risk yourselves for me.”

“Uniting to defeat Mathias and protecting the book, regardless of the risk, are the very reasons I created this group. You joined—no matter how reluctantly—so that includes you. We’ll be by your side, no matter what.”

“Thank you.” I nod at Bram and utter a word I have not in fifteen centuries, a word I never thought would apply to him.

“Friend.”

“You’re welcome. Let’s save Olivia.”

All I can hope now is that the Doomsday Brethren and I accomplish that...before it is too late.

CHAPTER
FIFTY-EIGHT

Two a.m. I enter the low-ceilinged tunnel. Dim lights shine overhead, so ineffectual I cannot see my feet. Toward the middle, the illumination tapers off into complete darkness.

With a pounding heart and the Doomsday Diary tucked in a pack strapped over my leather jacket, I trek forward, one foot in front of the other. My boot heels echo as they strike the concrete. But I am hardly alone. I feel it.

Inside the tunnel, the stench is dank with a choking mixture of dirt, sewage, and the stink of rotting flesh. The thought of Olivia here and suffering twists my guts. I, who felt virtually nothing for centuries, am consumed with fury and concern. In order to triumph this night, I must harness this energy and decimate my enemy.

Bram, Ice, Caden, and Duke have my back both figuratively and literally. They linger behind me, concealed outside the tunnel.

“Stop there, immortal,” commands a deep voice in the darkness.

Mathias.

As I halt, an invisible presence barges into my brain, strong and destructive. Evil. Though the intruder tries scanning my thoughts, I blank my mind and give him a hard mental shove.

He laughs, the sound dripping with icy amusement. “I could push my way past your barriers if I wished.”

I care not what games he plays. “You want the book more. Show me my mate.”

To my right, a berobed Anarki ambles from the darkness, clutching Olivia.

“Marrok!” she cries out.

“Love...” I drink her in as relief pours through me. She looks pale and disheveled. Her dilated violet eyes tell me she is frightened. But she is alive and well. For now, I take solace in that.

“*Tsk*, Marrok of Cadbury. Of course she is alive. I don’t make a habit of killing women. Well, not right away. They serve far better purposes when they aren’t cadavers, particularly this one.”

So Mathias can read my thoughts now. I tuck all away except the ones I am willing to share. For Olivia’s sake, I must gather my control and channel my fear. And if the hell-born codpiece touches her, I will hunt him to the ends of the earth and destroy him.

“Your desire to avenge your mate is touching. How ironic that you fell for a woman from the very bloodline who cursed you.”

“Olivia is not Morgana.”

“If it pleases you to believe one Le Fay isn’t like the next...” Mathias mocks. “Let’s get on with business. Hand me the book.”

“Give me my mate.”

“A classic impasse.”

Suddenly, the disembodied voice steps into the light, and Mathias appears. He looks younger than I expected. Darkness and power roll off him, a calling card that would flatten a lesser warrior. I tower a good six inches above him and outweigh him in muscle by more than three stone.

But this man is magical down to his marrow. Energy vibrates from his very skin, reverberating through the tunnel. I fend off a shudder of foreboding.

Immortality works in my favor, but this enemy holds my Achilles' heel—Olivia—in his depraved grip.

“I am outnumbered,” I point out. “Nor am I magical. My mate and I will have to leave here on foot. While you could zap away the moment I surrendered the diary.”

“True. Are you alone?”

Before I can answer, I feel a stealthy tiptoe into my mind. Slick. Barely detectable. I purposely picture Bram in his office and Ice and Duke squaring off on the training field, foils in sweat-drenched hands.

“Of course,” I lie.

“I don't believe you.”

I shrug. “Bram saved me when the Anarki called upon my house uninvited. I repaid the favor by teaching his men to fight. We are not friends, but now we are even.”

Mathias appears to mull that over, then glances over his shoulder. “Is that true?”

A second figure saunters from the shadows, into the dim buzz of light beaming down. Black hair brushes his shoulders, leather all around, and dark sunglasses conceal his eyes.

“Shock,” I growl.

He dismisses me. “He and Bram are not friends. He's not lying about that.”

“Though Bram wants the book for his own?”

Shock confirms Mathias's suspicions with a nod.

“You beef-witted foot-licker,” I hurl.

Shock looks through me as if completely bored. “My family has ties to Mathias and his cause. I'm making Mummy and Daddy very proud. Besides, I owe Mathias for a recent favor. It was simple enough to repay him with a bit of information and the agreement to fight you on his behalf. Nothing personal.”

I take it very personally. I might be able to outwit Mathias since he knows me not. Shock, the traitor, knows enough to make that unlikely. Lucan tried to tell Bram, tell us all. No one listened.

“Escort our guest to her mate’s side and hold her there until he brings the book to me.”

“Nay,” I protest. “I will give you the book once she leaves the tunnel unharmed.”

“I dictated my terms. Take them or watch her die.”

When Olivia again wriggles and kicks to escape Mathias’s minion, the evil wizard waves his hand. A moment later, she stiffens and claws at her throat, mouth open, face turning red and panicked as she gasps.

“Let her bloody breathe!”

With a smirk that makes me want to pound him into the next century, Mathias waves his hand again. Olivia wheezes to drag in as much air as she can before exhaling audibly.

Mathias will pay for that—and any other harm he’s done to Olivia.

“Now, now,” he chides. “Cooperate, or your mate will stop breathing permanently.”

Shock grabs Olivia’s arm and crosses the decaying ground, then drags her forward. I would protest—and take Shock’s head off—if I didn’t fear what the wizard might do to her in retaliation.

Instead, I rush toward my mate. Two ground-eating steps later, I am in front of her, hauling her against me and crushing her in my arms.

“Are you well, love?”

She nods, then sobs against me. “He killed my father right after your cottage was attacked. Mathias was pretending to be him for days.”

So, I was right—and wrong—about Gray. But that brings me no comfort.

I tuck those thoughts away and focus on stroking Olivia's back, caressing her hair, offering her comfort with a brush of my lips against hers. Sweet and in one piece. Naught else matters.

"As touching as this is, I require the book. Now," Mathias snaps. "Bring it to me."

"Let Olivia leave the tunnel. All else is between you and me, and I have not the magic to fight you."

"Marrok, no!" She grips my arm. "Please."

"She may walk to the end of the tunnel, but she stays inside where I can see her. Wouldn't want her calling for backup now, would we?"

'Tis little concession, but it does position Olivia away from the impending fight. Slowly, I nod.

"No!" she protests, clinging to me. "Don't!"

"All will be well," I lie. "Go."

Releasing her is the hardest thing I have ever done, but I unwind my arms from around her and set her away.

She clings to my shoulders. "He isn't to be trusted. He will only take the book and do something awful."

"I will not let him harm you."

"I'm not worried about me!" She grips me harder. "He's dangerous. Unscrupulous. Please... Don't give up the book. If you do, you will never be free of the curse."

"'Tis no longer important. You are. Go!" I urge, shoving her toward the tunnel's opening.

Still, she refuses to budge.

Shock raises his hand. I protest and lunge for the bastard—too late. He blasts Olivia to the end of the tunnel.

She tumbles on her backside with a huff where moonlight creeps into the underground structure.

"You were given an order, witchling. Obey and stay there," Shock snarls. "Or do you think yourself too important because

you're Le Fay?"

I grab my blade from the sheath strapped to my thigh and raise it threateningly at Shock. I'd dearly love to sink the serrated teeth into the man's flesh. Repeatedly.

But he isn't my target. Mathias and his considerable undead army deserve all my attention.

"Now." Mathias tsks. "Let us conclude this business, shall we? I want the book."

I move not.

"Give me the damn book, immortal," Shock growls.

The wizard is all but begging me to slash his gut open.

After putting that on my mental to-do list, I stomp toward Mathias and Shock, stopping at the edge of the artificial light. "Meet me halfway."

"I'm in no mood to compromise. Give it over!"

"Fuck off, Denzell. I am not here to deal with you."

As I dismiss him, my mind races. What happens in the next few moments will determine the outcome of this event—and my eternity.

Deep breath. *Three, two, one...*

I wrench the book from the pack and fling it in Mathias's face. The tome hits him in the nose. Warm blood spurts, and he howls. Immediately, I follow that assault by sticking my blade in the evil wizard's gut and twisting hard.

"Run, Olivia!"

I don't dare look behind me to see if she complies, not when the book falls to the ground with a thud. Shock lunges for it as I do. But I am a moment too late.

The Doomsday Diary is in Shock's grasp. He gives me a superior smirk.

I am fucked.

"Stupid human. I planned light torture for you, since I cannot kill you outright. But now..." Mathias raises his hands

above his head. His blue eyes turn red, and his glower vows to inflict agony.

He's the devil in the flesh.

Quickly, I draw my Glock and shoot him between the eyes. I don't stop to survey the damage before I pull the trigger again, this time hitting the evil bastard in the heart. The rump-fed miscreant topples to the concrete, limp. Dead, I can only hope.

But I have not the time to check. Shock still has the diary.

When I turn to confront the traitor, he is nowhere to be seen. Bloody hell, did the bastard zap away?

'Tis likely, but my eternity is a small price for Olivia's freedom. To keep her safe, I will pay it gladly.

As I whirl, I pray she fled to safety. Instead, she hovers at the edge of the tunnel, gaping and wide-eyed as she points to something just beyond me.

I spin on the balls of my feet. Mathias unfolds his body stiffly and rises.

"Run!" I groan over my shoulder at Olivia.

"Stay," he demands as blood drips down his face, into his eyes, seeping on his already stained shirt and saturating it.

The bullet lodged in his forehead should kill any human. But Mathias is definitely more. That becomes obvious when he frowns and the bullet oozes from the wound, falling to the ground with a clink. The gaping hole heals itself instantly.

"You've ruined one of my favorite shirts, along with my night, and given me an enormous headache," the dark wizard complains as he flings his arm in a whiplike motion.

Something punctures my chest. It's enormous. Sharp. And venom-filled. The invisible weapon burns as it slices down my torso, threatening to gut me.

The pain forces me to double over. Mathias laughs, the maniacal sound bouncing off the walls, closing in on me. I curl my hands over my middle and come away with a fistful of

blood. I glare at Mathias in horror. Has the wizard used his magic to divert my immortality and kill me? Because I am rapidly losing my life. I feel my soul trying to float from my body.

“No!” Olivia shouts, running to my rescue. “Stop it! Leave him alone!”

Blackness narrows my vision. “Must. Go. Be safe.”

“I won’t leave you!” She wraps her arms around me protectively.

But nothing stops the fiery slice of my flesh, now cutting down to my hips. My guts will tumble to the concrete soon. Blood drips down my abdomen and seeps onto my thighs.

What is this sorcery? I am going to die. Is Mathias more magical than Morgana’s curse? Heaven help the Doomsday Brethren. I will not be here to assist them. I push aside my regret and focus on Olivia. She must be safe.

“Get on your knees, human.” Mathias saunters closer with menace carved into his face.

“Fuck. You.”

He laughs. “You’re the one who’s fucked. Let’s try this again. Get on your knees, or I will inflict the same death on your mate.”

I kneel instantly at his feet, wobbling as a hot pool of my own blood gathers around me. “Go, love. For me.”

“Marrok...” The tears in her voice wrench my heart.

Mathias laughs again. “That’s where you belong, where all humans belong, prostrated before me. You can do better than him, witchling.”

That I cannot deny. Olivia deserves someone befitting her bloodline and her beautiful heart. But no man—wizard or human—will ever be more devoted to her.

“I love you,” I choke out. I cannot leave her or this life without saying those words.

Then my world turns black.

CHAPTER
FIFTY-NINE

Olivia

As Marrok crumples to the concrete, I swallow back my scream and glare toe to toe with Mathias. Before, I'd been terrified of the dark wizard, doing anything and everything to avoid his wrath.

Now I'm just pissed off.

"Perhaps your mate isn't so immortal after all," Mathias drawls, his hands dripping blood.

He looks like an extra from a horror flick. Though he was shot twice, he doesn't seem hurt. I know magic makes that possible, but it's terrifying.

Still, timidity has gotten me nowhere with the wizard. I've played by his rules, and he gravely injured Marrok, whose possibly final words were that he loves me.

I love Marrok, too. So much. It gouges my soul to think of him dying, especially bloody and defeated. Why isn't he spontaneously healing?

Whatever the reason, I'm not giving up. Mathias is going down.

"Down, witchling? You haven't even learned to master your thoughts, much less me." Mathias cocks his head, looking amused. "Are you getting angry?"

"I'm already there," I snap.

Energy collects inside me, growing, glowing. Fury melds with determination. Fear fuses with my love for Marrok. It coalesces in my head, races through my body, a lightning-fast lava sizzles down my arms, into my fingertips. I'm vibrating. My heart roars in my head. An explosion I don't understand feels imminent.

A commotion behind me disrupts the sparks ricocheting through me. Bram, Duke, and Ice charge the tunnel, three abreast. Caden follows, wearing a feral scowl, backed up by the automatic weapon in his hand and wicked blades strapped to his hard thighs.

With a wave of his hand, Bram floods the tunnel with light. A sea of undead Anarki clusters behind Mathias, their eerie hooded faces gray and menacing.

Oh, god. Fighting them will be difficult and deadly. The Doomsday Brethren is outnumbered, four against hundreds. The guys don't want me fighting, but I won't stand here like a helpless damsel.

I've barely formed the thought when Mathias raises his hands, palms down. Is he gathering a flash of energy? It's the same motion I instinctively made moments ago. Was I attempting...magic? Before my transition? Can I even do that?

Though I'm afraid of the red-eyed fury on Mathias's face, I have to try. Fending off this asshole and his disgusting zombies is the only way to escape alive. To keep Bram, Ice, and Duke from becoming casualties. To keep Caden in one piece so he can help find Anka for Lucan's sake. So I can save Marrok.

Sparks fly from Mathias's fingertips—red, orange, and black—like something out of the bowels of hell. As one, the undead Anarki rush forward, charging our way.

“Duck!” Caden shoves me to the ground.

I spot Marrok sprawled across the concrete, unconscious. Deathly pale. He's too exposed, too vulnerable.

Quickly, I crawl to him and hover over his prone form protectively. He's bleeding out. Somehow, he's dying.

Ignoring the *rat-tat-tat* of machine-gun fire resounding off the ungiving tunnel walls, I press his shirt to his wounds, gratified when the first row of Anarki fall.

Unfortunately, another stands behind them to take their place.

Mathias staggers when another bullet strikes him, but seconds later, he's healed the superficial wound in his thigh, exactly like he did the gunshot to his head. Though paler, he stands tall, glaring down at me kneeling beside Marrok. "You can't win this battle. Already, you're in the position you'll occupy for the rest of your days, witchling: on your knees at my feet. Get used to it."

"Never."

"You're wasting your time trying to save your mate." He glances at Marrok. "He's not dead—yet. But he will be."

"Where the hell is Anka?" Caden demands.

Mathias turns an evil smile on Lucan's brother. "I'll never tell..."

Caden charges with a snarl. Mathias bats Lucan's younger brother back with a flick of his hand, as if he's batting away a gnat. Caden lands on his ass.

What is he thinking? He's not even sure he'll transition to a wizard, and he's trying to take on the darkest, most powerful wizard alive?

Bram and Ice come to the rescue, drawing nasty-looking guns and firing into the crowd of zombies. Duke hacks his way in with a blunt sword, dripping sweat and black blood as he steps over decaying bodies resolutely as they work together to beat back the encroaching army.

Mathias laughs at them, flicking Caden down again the moment he gets to his feet. He's toying with us. The fury and energy coiling inside me earlier, before the Doomsday Brethren rolled in, surges again.

Bram helps Caden up again, then fights to my side and stands between Mathias and me. "You shouldn't be here. Go!"

“I’m not leaving Marrok.”

“He wanted to die.”

“Not like this,” I argue.

“His last wish was for your safety. Don’t make his death in vain.”

Bram has a point. Marrok surrendered both his chance to break the curse and his life to save mine. If he was conscious now, he’d be shouting and shoving me to safety.

“I can’t just leave him. He’s not dead.”

“We’ll bring him back. I promise. But if he recovers and you don’t survive this battle, he’ll kill me.”

The wizard means that as a joke, but I can’t laugh. “Bram...”

“I can’t cover you anymore. There are too many. Go, so we can fight without the distraction of worrying about you.”

He has another point, damn him. With a sob, I throw my arms around Marrok and press a kiss to his lips, lingering longer than I should. This can’t be the last time I see him, touch him. “Hang on. D-don’t leave me yet.”

A spark of Mathias’s magic zips past my ear and takes a hunk from the concrete inches from my feet.

Bram curses and shoves me. My heart feels like it’s breaking as I dart toward the end of the tunnel, the chill of the undead Anarki looming too close behind me. Adrenaline charges my veins, mixing with that potent rush of energy I felt earlier.

Steps before I dash out of the tunnel and into the moonlight, a figure blocks my path. Leather, sunglasses, and bad attitude.

Shock.

CHAPTER
SIXTY

I skid to change direction, but the wizard snakes out a beefy arm and catches me against his chest. “Let me go, traitor.”

“Shut up,” he growls in my ear as he turns me to face the battle. “Take what you’re feeling and release it!”

“Bite me!” I strain for escape.

His grip only tightens as the melee of battle rages around us. “That energy inside you. Mask your goddamn thoughts and let it fly!”

Bram and Mathias focus on each other in a face-off, staring and waiting for the other to twitch first. Power hums in the air, clashing and crashing, frightening me.

“Do it!” Shock snarls. “Now.”

“Go to hell! You betrayed us—”

“Does your mouth have an off button?” He clamps my wrists and yanks my hands in the air. “Marrok is enduring agony after excruciating centuries alone—for you. If he pulls through, but you let Mathias take or end you, you’ll only be prolonging his pain. You want that?”

No!

Why does Shock give a shit? I swallow the question—along with my grief and despair—as the undead Anarki run at me. Energy screeches inside me like a crescendo, tight and keening louder and more emphatic with each ticking second. *Mathias, the bastard. The mate killer. The cruel asshole. The*

litany ramps up my anger, smothers my fear, and blasts me with a power I've never felt.

“Good. Then fucking listen,” Shock spits in my ear. “When I tell you, take that energy ramping up inside you and blast it.”

“I don't take orders from you.”

“Is this hissy you're having more important than your mate?”

It's not. I have to start masking my thoughts the way Sabelle taught me. In my head, I chant a sarcastic version of “Camptown Races.” *How many people want to kick some ass? I do! I do!*

Shock chuckles.

Bram and Mathias raise their hands and blast one another. Their energies collide, like two high-speed trains on the same track, crashing head-on. The resulting impact is terrible and awesome. Fire roars at the ceiling, then flames out toward Bram.

He ducks and feints, then hoists Marrok from the ground.

What is he doing? The chaos whirls inside me faster.

Shock grips me, fingers biting. “Now! Do it!”

As if his words are the match on a tinderbox, a lightning-like spark jolts through my body. Thunder follows, rolling to my palms. I shudder. The gathering energy sizzles my skin, zips down my fingers, and shoots from the tips. As it jets through the air, I see it, white, gold, and violet skeins shooting in a blinding spectacle of light.

But it's set to make direct impact on the wrong person.

“Bram!”

He can't hear me. He continues transporting Marrok, who's covered in blood and looks terrifyingly still. Oh, god. My blast will hurt Bram when it zaps him in the back. I might even kill him.

He won't be the only casualty when he drops Marrok.

I was stupid to let Shock crawl in my head. But when I close my fists and focus on calling my magic back...it's too late.

My blast reaches Bram. I scream, bracing for a tragedy that's milliseconds from unfolding in front of me. But it never happens. The bright stream doesn't strike the golden wizard. It bends *around* him like water flowing against the curve of a rock. Then it closes the distance between him and Mathias before bombarding the dark wizard in the center of his chest.

He staggers back and stumbles, gasping for air. His eyes flare wide in shock. Then he crumples to the ground, blood oozing from his nose, mouth, eyes, and pores. The undead Anarki follow like puppets who all had their strings cut at once, toppling to the ground.

“Bloody hell!” Shock heaves in my ear.

The Doomsday Brethren all stop, frozen. As one, they turn to me, incredulity all over their faces. Their collective amazement sucks the air out of the tunnel.

“Holy fuck. Remind me to never get on your bad side,” Ice mutters.

Caden whistles. “What the hell?”

I don't even know what I did. “Is he dead?”

Duke approaches Mathias carefully and crouches. “Devastating injury. It would kill most wizards.”

Shock finally releases me. “But this is Mathias.”

Right. The wizard healed his own bullet wounds, so it's possible I haven't finished him for good. But he isn't getting up. Or moving—at all.

“Get out of here,” Shock shouts, shoving me toward the exit.

“I'm not leaving without Marrok.” He's still levitating a few feet off the ground, thanks to Bram. “We need to get him to safety.”

When I rush toward my mate, Shock wraps a giant manacle of a hand around my arm. “Get. The fuck. Out. Of here.”

“Take your bloody hands off her,” Duke demands.

“Piss off, you posh twat!”

“Shock is right. Duke, take her and go. I’ve got a score to settle here.” With broadsword in hand, Ice stalks toward Mathias, his voice full of cold purpose. “Since the only good dark wizard is a headless one, I’ll do the honors.” The closer he comes, the more his steps slow. “What the... His signature is nearly blank, almost like he has no magic. Bloody hell!”

“Is it possible she eradicated his?” Caden asks.

“Normally, I’d say no. But she’s a Le Fay.”

They all turn to me, their expressions part awe, part fear.

I did that? Am I actually powerful? Not ordinary and plain after all?

Suddenly, the Anarki jolt from their collective unanimated state to swarm Mathias’s unmoving body protectively, shoving Ice back and resuming the fight with him, Caden, and Duke.

Bram stumbles under the weight of Marrok’s bloody form, chugging toward the end of the tunnel and the night beyond. The undead give chase.

One yanks on his shirt, decaying mouth gaping in a parody of a smile as he hauls Bram to the ground and delivers a blow to his face. Another Anarki grabs him by the hair with a skeletal hand and yanks back. Bram protecting Marrok leaves him unable to defend himself. One Anarki lands a brutal punch into Bram’s jaw that sends his head snapping directly into the kick of another.

They need help—now. The rest of the Doomsday Brethren have been all but swarmed. I wriggle against Shock’s cruel hold.

“Hold still,” he barks.

“Let go!”

“Stop wasting your breath.”

No matter how I flail or kick, I can't escape his incredibly strong hold. “I'm going to kick you in the balls the first chance I get!”

He scoffs. “Quit being daft. If you charge in there, the Anarki will kill you.”

“Why the hell do you care?”

Shock rolls his eyes. “Here, hold this.”

Reflexively, I grab the item he thrusts at me as he stalks toward the battle. I look down at the smallish square thing in my hands. Red. Leather bound.

The Doomsday Diary?

“Is this...”

But Shock is already gone, shoulders deep in the melee. Doing what? And why did he give me the book?

Caden empties bullets into the Anarki like a pro. The others, less versed in human combat, are fighting for their lives.

I tuck the book into the waistband of my pants and maneuver toward Bram, who's trying to crawl to the edge of the tunnel with Marrok clutched against him. The Anarki claw him back.

I don't know much about fighting, but I played a little soccer in school. I have a mean kick. And I have to do something.

The undead soldier camped on Bram's back has beaten him brutally. The wizard's gorgeous face is swollen. Blood drips from his nose and mouth, matting his hair and staining his shirt.

Still, he refuses to leave Marrok behind.

I kick the zombie. Its decomposing body's head snaps back, then tumbles off. Black goo spews.

Grimacing, I fight the urge to retch. Instead, I lock my fingers together and, with a battle cry, swing my fists like a baseball bat into the ribs of another Anarki attacking Bram. The undead's torso collapses.

"Get yourself somewhere safe!" Bram shouts.

"You and Marrok get somewhere safe. Please don't let anything happen to him. I'm fine."

I charge into the battle as Caden flattens another four Anarki with bullets. I sidle closer to him, grab one of the blades strapped to his thigh, and plunge it into the undead soldier headed for me. It crumples to the ground.

"Damn it!" Caden swears, shaking the gun.

He's out of bullets. Very bad news. Anarki still swarm everywhere, and we need all the firepower we can muster.

At least I don't see Mathias up and fighting. Yet.

Caden tucks the gun away. "Give me the knife."

"Don't you have another?" I ask as a fresh wave of zombies closes in on us.

"Fucking Shock swiped it."

Just like a traitor.

Suddenly, the lights flicker, then cut out entirely. Eerie silence falls over the darkened tunnel. Someone grabs me from behind. He stops my scream with a big palm over my mouth. Instantly, I know it isn't Anarki.

"Be still."

The whisper in my ear makes me shudder. Shock. He tried to capture me for Mathias's personal use earlier. What else could he be doing now, in the heat of battle, except trying again?

I stomp down on his instep. He spews a vile curse in my ear, hopping away.

Someone snaps then. I blink against the sudden lights illuminating the tunnel once more and whirl to find bodies of

the Anarki zombies littering the charred tunnel, oozing black slime. To my stunned surprise, Shock and all the Anarki who didn't fall at the Doomsday Brethren's hands are gone.

So is Mathias.

But the Doomsday Diary is still against me—exactly where I need Marrok to be. He's still safe with Bram, thank God.

“What happened?” I murmur, rushing to his side.

Frowning, Duke scans the tunnel. “They retreated.”

Caden nods. “They tucked their tails between their legs. We won the battle.”

Ice tucks his gun away. “Maybe, but time will tell if we win the war.”

Back at Bram's estate an hour later, I hover beside the bed, across which Marrok lies frighteningly pale and still.

On the other side, Duke, Ice, and Caden stare with bleak faces. No one has said a word, but I know by their expressions that my mate's condition is grave. Bram, keeping watch at the foot of the bed, called for a wizened old healer, magickind's answer to a doctor. In the corner, the old man mixes a poultice, says a few words, and waves his hands.

While we waited for the geezer to show up, I washed away Marrok's blood, carefully avoiding his jagged wounds. Sabelle helped me dress him in fresh clothes. He's resting now. But I'm terrified. The gaping slash from heart to belly is mending faster than the average human, but far slower than before.

Why isn't he insta-healing into his protective, pushy self?

As the old wizard examines Marrok again, Bram watches intently. I hold in a scream. The not-knowing kills me. Will my mate, the man who holds my heart, die for saving me? And how did he suddenly become mortal again?

“What’s going on?” I demand.

Still bloody and ragged, Bram looks as if he fought a pack of bears and lost. To his credit, he hasn’t once mentioned cleaning up or getting help for his own injuries. He hasn’t even asked about the diary.

“If he lives, it will only be through sheer will,” the old healer says finally as he returns his implements to his bag. “Most would have gone on. Something holds him here.”

I nod. “Immortality.”

The healer tucks away the last of his things, then turns to me slowly. “No. That’s why he’s so near death. He’s quite human again, so there’s little left I can do for him. I’ll be by to check on him later.”

His pronouncement sucks all the air out of the room. He leaves, closing the door with a quiet click.

Oh, god. If Marrok isn’t immortal anymore, he could truly die. He could pass from this life to the next and leave me forever.

At that realization, it takes all my will not to sink to my knees and grip Marrok tight, as if my arms can keep him from slipping into death.

“Don’t give up.” Bram squeezes my hand, then thumbs away the tears I didn’t realize were running down my cheeks. “I have an idea for healing him. Lay your hands on his chest.”

Why? I don’t know, but I’m not going to pass up an opportunity to touch my mate and feel his heart beat under my fingers. These moments with him may be my last.

Marrok’s warm flesh smooths some of the jagged edges of my worries. He’s so warm and rippling with muscle. Touching him feels...normal. I can almost fool myself into believing he’s merely sleeping.

But the angry gash that nearly cut him in two and his shallow breaths tell me that’s delusional. As pale and fragile—a word I never thought I would use to describe Marrok—as he appears, I don’t know if he’ll even survive another minute.

Turning, I frown at Bram. “What good will this do? And what if I infect his wounds with my germs? He needs a human hospital.”

“Imagine filling out that form.” He clears his throat and mimics a female nurse’s voice. “Patient’s date of birth?”

Good point.

“Just keep your hands on him, near his heart, and close your eyes. Good,” he murmurs once I comply. “Remember that burst of energy you had in the tunnel? How did you know to do that?”

“After Caden tossed me toward the exit, Shock grabbed me and barked at me to gather and focus my energy. Once I did, he demanded I blast it. I wanted to tell him to pound sand, but I was so angry I ended up spewing colored beams all over the place.” At the memory, I cast an apologetic glance at Bram. “But I almost hit you. Thank God, my magic skirted you and—”

“Skirted me? It went *around* me?” At my nod, Bram looks nothing short of stunned. “How did you do that?”

“I-I don’t know. I just kept hoping it wouldn’t touch you, and it didn’t. That’s not normal, is it?”

“By all rights, your blast should have hit me, perhaps killed me. Shock had nothing to do with your energy missing me?”

“I don’t think so, except he made me so mad and taunted me into blasting out all my anger. Once I did, he stood back and watched. Mathias was hurting you after he’d already—” I drop my gaze to Marrok. His stillness gouges at my composure and renews my fear. I sniffle back tears as I sidle closer. “Now that Marrok can die, what will happen to him?”

“You’re going to cure him by focusing on healing thoughts instead of anger, then pouring that power into Marrok.”

With a gasp, I jerk away. “No! I either killed Mathias or ripped out all his magic with that blast. I couldn’t—”

“You seriously wounded him, but the bloody sod is still alive and had at least enough magic to teleport from the tunnel and take the Anarki with him.”

“Maybe Shock did that.”

Bram shrugs. “I can’t say which side Shock truly supports, but only Mathias can control the Anarki. So unfortunately, he’s alive and well. But you debilitated him today, not forever, but for a while. I’m still calling that a victory.”

Is it? Power surged through me, and I wished Mathias dead when I blasted him. I stunned him enough to flatten him and make him bleed.

But not enough to put an end to his reign of terror.

Everyone, especially the Doomsday Brethren, are still in danger.

“Not much of one.”

“I disagree. Mathias was at death’s door. His signature was nearly blank. That indicates very weak magic. You damaged his power—at least temporarily. Maybe even permanently. Who knows? Any way you cripple him is beyond helpful. Mathias without power is no one.”

Maybe Bram has a point. “Isn’t it odd that I performed big magic before transition?”

“You mean that powerful?” Bram hesitates. “Yes and no. Your magic was both stronger and more complex than a witchling should be capable of. Even beyond what some mature witches can manage. You’ll be extraordinary someday. And everyone in that tunnel took notice.”

The unmistakable nods of agreement among the others in the room convince me he’s right. And I want to be reassured that I can pull off Bram’s grand plan to save my mate...but another glance at his pale face has fear squeezing my heart all over again. “Will my powers be enough to heal Marrok?”

“It’s worth giving a go. At the very least, your concern will transmit through your bond and bolster his strength.”

“W-what if I accidentally hurt him?”

“Do you love him?”

Isn't it obvious? “Of course.”

“Then you won't hurt him. You can't. Your love can only heal him.”

“You're sure? I'm inexperienced. I don't know what I'm doing—”

“Magic isn't merely about spells. You can learn those—and you must. Casting is about the power of the witch or wizard, which you clearly have. It's also about passion and intent. You *intended* to hurt Mathias, and you violently wanted it. So you did. Now, concentrate on healing Marrok, and pour yourself into the yearning for his recovery. I don't know if you have healing magic, but as I said, at worst, your touch will reaffirm your bond and strengthen his will to live.”

I stare at my mate, lying so still. His breathing has grown more ragged. He's paler than a deep winter snow. No more time to argue or worry. Yeah, Marrok wants to end his life, but I know my big warrior. Falling to Mathias in defeat will bug the shit out of him. I have to try bringing him back, then let him choose his fate.

Life...or death.

Closing my eyes, I settle my hands on his chest.

CHAPTER
SIXTY-ONE

One touch, and the power of our bond comes to my rescue. The weakness I've been fighting dissipates, infusing me with new vitality. I direct that power back to Marrok, providing a loop of emotional fuel.

Then I focus my thoughts on healing. My wishes swirl with my concern, warming and growing, gentle yet strong. I add determination. Then I douse it all with love.

Like a vacuum cleaner, my chest sucks up the energy from the rest of my body until it swirls like a vortex. It rolls together, straining for freedom. Then suddenly, it reaches critical mass and rolls down my arms and into my fingertips. The same sizzle and burn that happened in the tunnel accompanies this exchange of energy. It floods Marrok. He jerks, bucks, and groans, but no matter how I tremble or feel my consciousness slipping, I focus my whole being on healing him. I don't stop until I have nothing left to give.

But a glance tells me nothing changed. He's still at death's door.

Waning and exhausted, I sag against him, lay my damp forehead on his chest, and burst into tears. I've given him everything...and it's still not enough.

Because I'm never enough.

Marrok jerks under me suddenly. I pull back as he sucks in a deafening gasp and clamps a huge hand around my nape, jackknifing upright with a startled stare. His disconcertingly

silver eyes—eyes I wasn't sure I would ever see again—scan me with concern. “Love?”

“Oh, my god. I'm here,” I assure him, trying to shove off my sluggishness. I use the last of my strength to urge him back to the mattress. “Are you okay? Rest. You need rest. You...”

Finishing that sentence takes more energy than I have.

He sits up again with a scowl and yanks me onto his lap as if I weigh nothing. As if he's got all the strength in the world. “Shh. Cry not. I am here. I am healed.”

Healed? I glance between our bodies. The jagged cut bisecting him is gone. Poof. Like it was never there. No gaping wound, no puckered flesh, no scar. Not even a scratch. Nothing. I blink in disbelief, but no. He's whole.

Thrill and relief blend with his touch to buoy me. I throw my arms around him and absorb his strength. “Oh, my... You're all right! You're...perfect. I-I was so worried!”

He catches me in a fierce hug and presses a kiss to my temple. His soft stare says he's grateful...and more. “Thanks to you, I am mended. Even now, I feel you through our bond.”

“Really?” I smile through my tears. For that shining moment, I feel complete. I'll worry about tomorrow then. “How is that possible? How is any of this possible?”

“Your power, just like I said,” Bram supplies behind me. “Once transitioned, you won't simply be a great witch. You'll be a force to be reckoned with. You're special.”

It's probably silly since Bram is like the brother I never wanted, but his words make me *feel* special. My mom never treated me like I was. My dad? Most of the time I was with him, he wasn't my dad at all. But having found magickind—the people I belong with—and accepted the destiny of my bloodline, I feel not just special but exceptional. Significant.

Truly important.

It's something I've wanted my whole life...but where does that leave me with Marrok? Without him, nothing matters.

“He speaks true. Not only am I cured, but I feel pain again. I bleed. I am more human than I have been in centuries...for better or for worse.” Marrok smiles wryly.

Selfishly, I don't want to say my next words. Now that he no longer has a use for me, he'll probably leave. But I can't hold him back. I can't claim to love him and withhold what his heart desires most. “You *are* human again.”

Under me, he freezes. “Did you release me from my curse?”

Bram shakes his head. “Olivia's power is unparalleled for a witchling, but no. She only healed you, my friend.”

Marrok pauses as if scanning his memories. “My curse ended in the tunnel. I felt it. Mayhap 'twas some spell Mathias performed?”

“A curse like the one Morgana laid on you couldn't have been ended with a mere spell. Have you heard of such a possibility?” Bram asks the others.

“You know I have no idea. This bloody business of magic is shit I'm eager to avoid,” Caden assures. “Once we find Anka and restore my brother, I'll be returning to Texas.”

“Transition is hard on your heels,” Bram warns.

“Says you.”

“How long before you turn thirty?”

Caden scowls. “How long before you help me find Anka?”

“I've never heard of magic stronger than the curse Morgana laid on Marrok.” Duke gracefully changes the subject. “But my family is more human than magical, so...”

Ice crosses his arms over his chest. “We don't have a human gene in our bloodline for ten generations, and I've never heard of such magic, either.”

“If obscure dark magic could break a curse, Shock would know.” Bram cuts his glance in my direction. “You saw him last. Where did he shove off?”

“He disappeared with Mathias.”

Bram curses. “So we can’t ask the tosser. Was anyone able to retrieve the book?”

“Actually...” I rise on wobbling legs and open a dresser drawer, then hand the diary to Marrok. It belongs to him, after all. “Shock gave it to me before the tunnel went dark.”

Bram scowls. “He put it in your hands?”

“Yes.”

“On purpose?”

I nod. “He literally said, ‘Here, hold this,’ before he shoved it in my hands.”

Every magical warrior’s jaw drops.

Marrok’s hands dwarf the red volume. How awful that such a small, innocuous object caused one man so much agony.

He yanks the book open, thumbing through blank page after blank page, until he stops suddenly, his attention riveted on yet another blank page.

What’s he staring at?

“Do you see something?” Bram asks.

“’Tis...a miracle. On the very page Morgana once cursed me, new words lie here.”

I blink. “Seriously?”

“What does it say?” Bram demands. “Out with it!”

“For loving me not, I cursed you, your life, and your cruel black heart to live alone forever, unsatisfied, despondent, and apart. Only true love for another, given freely, could uncurse you. Your heart fully shared until you and your beloved became one, not two. Now you truly love, as my diary can see. Your sacrifice and caring have been noted. As such, I release thee.”

The silence around the room is deafening. Surprise ties my tongue. The thud-thud-thud of my pounding heart fills my head...along with one inescapable thought.

Marrok really loves me. No one ever has. Until now. Until him.

It's a revelation. It's a miracle. It fills me with joy like nothing ever has.

"That fits. Only something *you* did could end your curse," Bram explains. "Your sacrifice—saving Olivia instead of the only means of ending your hex—cut short your immortality."

"Aye. I threw the book at Mathias so she might escape, and a wave overcame me. A cold sweat and dizziness I chalked up to nerves. But I realize now 'twas the moment I began feeling human."

That's fantastic, but reality is setting in. Even if he relinquished the diary for me, after fifteen centuries I doubt he wants to hang around for another thousand just to be with me. He must be tired, and I don't blame him for wanting rest. His life is his choice, and I can't beg him to stay. It's hardly his fault that when I think about living out my magical life—or any life—without him, it's a stab to the heart.

"Now you can die," I manage to choke out. "I'm happy for you, Marrok. You can finally end this life and...and—" I swallow a sob, but I can't say more. I just can't.

I want to touch him, love him, beg him to live, but I won't cling, no matter how badly I want to. If dying will finally make him happy, I won't stand in his way.

Of course his death will break our bond. But I'm stronger now; his love has made me that way. I'll survive, thrive even.

For him.

"Rest in peace?" Bram finishes for me.

"That." Anguish tears me apart. I can't look at Marrok, so I focus on my last unhappy duty. "I saw Anka, Caden. With Mathias." I bite my lip. "He captured her and kept her naked. He...forced her to respond. She was protesting on the inside." It was horrible to watch, and after witnessing the anguish on Lucan's brother's face, I don't tell him.

“Dear god,” Ice mutters, looking pale and grim. “She endured Terriforz.”

“That will fucking kill my brother,” Caden breathes.

“If he survives the mate mourning.” Bram sighs. “Now that Mathias is weakened, we need to direct our attention to protecting the diary and rescuing Anka from his clutches.”

“She’s gone. Mathias waved a hand, and she disappeared. I don’t know if he sent her to be used by the rest of the Anarki or...” I touch a gentle hand to Caden’s shoulder. “I’m sorry I couldn’t help her.”

The big man’s jaw clenches, but he manages to shake his head. “You were in your own danger. Thank you for the information. It gives me a place to start.”

“I hope you find her.” But based on what I saw, even if Anka reunited with Lucan, I’m not sure the couple would ever be the same.

Bram nods. “We’ll split into teams. Ice and Duke, return to the tunnel. Take Caden with you. Lucan said once that you’re good with a camera?”

At the younger MacTavish’s nod, Bram instructs, “Take one and shoot photos. Maybe there will be some clue to Mathias’s hideout there. Slim chance, but we have nothing else. I’ll track down Shock. He might be playing for Mathias’s team, but he would never want any harm to come to Anka.”

Because he Called to her. Since she rejected him, wouldn’t that just piss him off more? “I want to help.”

“Nay,” Marrok barks.

“Too dangerous,” Bram says.

“You risked yourself today, too,” Duke says to the Doomsday Brethren’s leader. “In fact, Marrok probably wouldn’t be alive if you hadn’t raced into the battle to pull him from the thick of it.”

Bram shakes his head. “Olivia is the hero. She provided the magic that allowed us all to escape.”

“But you delivered me from danger at great risk to yourself.” Marrok sticks out his hand. “Thank you.”

The handshake lasts moments, but cements a bond between them. I never imagined they would truly be friends, but everything has changed in two short weeks.

Marrok turns his gaze to me, and my heart races. His stare says nothing and everything. He loves me...but I have to stop hoping that's enough to hold him to this life. It's already given him so much pain.

I hold back a sob and place a soft kiss on his mouth. “After everything my family put you through, I'm glad you're finally free. I know you have to...go. That you want to. I understand. I'll never forget you.”

Somehow, I get the words out before I choke on tears. But before I slip out the door, the Doomsday Diary catches my eye. I snatch up the book and put it in Bram's hands. “This caused Marrok so much misery. I don't want it. You and the Doomsday Brethren guard it.”

Bram accepts, not with the cocky smile I expected, but with a solemn nod. “We will. With our lives.”

“Thank you.” I send him a sad smile, then turn one last, lingering glance at Marrok, memorizing the strong angles of his beloved face before tears blur his image. “I'll always love you.”

I close the door behind me with a soft snick. The sound is so final. It tells me I'll never see Marrok again.

Marrok

Olivia leaves our bedchamber, resignation hanging off her slumped shoulders. And pain. God's blood, I cannot stand to see her hurting so.

I swing my legs off the bed, conscious of the Doomsday Brethren watching me. The men I trained and fought beside.

The warriors in whose hands I put my life hours past. Once strangers of a magical ilk I wanted to forget, now they feel far more like friends—the first I have had in over a millennium.

I could leave them all, cast aside all the connections I have forged since Bram interrupted my dream of Olivia and forced me to visit her gallery. I am now free to embrace death.

But now that I have so much to live for, 'tis the last thing I want.

“My mate is right. Keep the diary,” I tell Bram. “I alone am ill-equipped to guard such a valuable magical relic. But together, you are.” My gaze touches on Duke, Caden, and Ice.

Then I stride to the door.

Bram blocks me. “Are you leaving? Are you choosing death?”

“Nay.”

He releases the breath he's been holding. “Then we need you. Stay. Fight by our side. We'll be a lot better at kicking Anarki ass if you hang around. Be one of us.”

“I am not magical. I am not even immortal anymore.”

Bram claps me on the shoulder. “You're a warrior with a big heart, and we need all of those we can get.”

I turn, struck nearly mute by his show of not just camaraderie, but friendship. I'm even more stunned to see his feelings reflected on the faces of the others. “It would be my honor and my preference, if that is what my mate wishes.”

Duke clears his throat. “I hear quite well. If you wish to ask Olivia, you should do it quickly. She just arranged a ride back to London.”

The thought of her gone from my life is a stake in the heart. I will not let her go without a fight, without telling her that I seek not wealth, power, women, lands, nor titles—the things I craved the night Morgana cursed me. I no longer want solitude or death. But I will get on my knees and grovel at Olivia's feet for eternity to prove I want only her.

She is all I need.

“Thank you. Rest today, men. Tomorrow, be prepared to train until you can scarcely stand upright.”

I shut the door on their collective groans with a smile.

CHAPTER
SIXTY-TWO

I race to catch up to Olivia who stands in Bram's office, staring out the huge picture window. "Wait! Love..."

She whirls, looking stricken and bereft. Her wide eyes are a punch to the gut. Her tears reach into my chest and threaten to rip out my heart.

I seize her by the shoulders and haul her against me. "Cry not."

She closes her eyes for a moment, then composes herself and does her best to put distance between us. "I'm glad you came to say goodbye before you...seek peace. Since my family was responsible for your misery, I'm glad I was part of the remedy." She cups my cheek, tears now rolling down her cheeks. "I will miss you every day of my life and I will never forget that you taught me to love. Or that I am loved."

Olivia stands on tiptoes and leans in. Having her in my arms fills me with love. Yet my need to kiss her, to strip her, to fill her consumes me. Blood rushes through my body, engorging my cock.

Take her, possess her, claim her. She needs you.

But her decision to continue our mate bond or break it is one she should make of her own free will.

"You were not a mere part of the remedy, but the key. Always, I believed you were the necessary ingredient to break my curse. I was right...and wrong. The answer was not in forcing you to use your Le Fay power to reverse Morgana's hex, but in letting go of my bitterness long enough to fall in

love with you, regardless of your bloodline. You made me see that I wish to be uncursed not because I want to die, but because I finally want to live. You have no reason to stay with me, I know. What does a modern woman want with a warrior from an age nearly forgotten by time? If you desire your freedom and wish to break our bond, I will not fight you. But I will not sever our mating. Ever. I want you as mine, now and always.”

Her breath catches, and fresh tears roll down her face. “Y-you don’t want to die anymore?”

“Not when I have so much to live for. Not when I have you to cherish.”

“But you’ll match my lifespan. You’ll be with me another thousand years.”

“I want nothing more, my dearest sweet Olivia.” I brush my fingers over her cheek, then smile wryly. “I believe men still do this.” I drop to one knee and take her hands in mine. “Stay with me. Be my wife. Love me as I love you.”

Olivia gasps, and fresh tears fall in earnest. “You’re serious? Really?”

“I have old knees. Would I be upon them if I was not?”

She laughs through her tears. Happiness glows on her face, reminding me of just one of the many reasons I need her. She is my light. My future.

“I love you. I’m sorry I didn’t listen to you, and I believed my father,” she murmurs.

“’Tis understandable why you sought the parental approval your mother denied you. I cannot change what she did to you or give you more time with your father, but I can give you every bit of my heart and vow my best to make you happy.”

“I never thought you would genuinely return my feelings. I was afraid to hope—”

“Do you say aye? Will you be my wife? Wear my ring? Bear my children?”

“Yes. I would love to. Yes!”

“Thank God. I can wait no longer to touch you.” I vault to my feet and pin her to the nearest wall.

I kiss her senseless, breaking away once we both pant and ache.

Olivia looks up at me, not with mere heat in her eyes but love, too. “Are you going to make a habit of ravishing me standing up?”

“Do you like it?” I press my erection against her, dotting her soft, scented neck with kisses.

“Love it.”

“Then aye. I will love you in any way—in all ways—you wish.”

Olivia presses her soft mouth to mine. “Promise?”

“Always. Care to start now?”

She nods, her smile bright. “Don’t ever stop.”

“Never, my love.”

EPILOGUE

Friday night

November

The Witch's Brew

Bram

Friday night is rowdy at the pub, with an interesting mix of magic- and humankind. I can ignore the dirty stares from the wizards who aren't happy a Council member has once again invaded their haunt. In the important ways, this place is perfect for the celebration everyone has in mind.

I have my own agenda.

"'Tis unlike you to let the inmates run the asylum." Marrok tosses his head toward Caden, Ice, and Duke, all clustered around the crowded bar.

It's also where Ronan Wolfsey is planted on a stool, pint in hand, mooning at Kari, the bartender. Again. She's trying very hard to ignore him.

"Well, I have to amuse myself somehow," I quip back.

"Aye, but is this a good idea?"

He's smiling, so I grin back. "Probably not, but we've all been training our stones off, and some of us don't have a convenient mate beside us every night to readily restore all the energy we expend on your exacting drills."

“Even if you did, I have the best.” The big warrior catches his fiancée’s hand and lifts it to his lips, his grin widening at the sight of his diamond on her ring finger.

Olivia smiles. “Of course you do. I’m special. He said so.”

When she points my way, I raise a brow. “I take it back.”

“Nope. Too late. Besides”—she sends me a hopeful grin—“we haven’t heard a peep from Mathias in days. I’m cautiously optimistic.”

“I am, too.” Actually, I’m trying to be.

But the quiet makes me nervous. No threats. No attacks. No Anarki sightings. That’s the good news.

The bad? The Council was quick to pronounce that the Mathias threat was much ado about nothing. They’ve moved onto squabbling about the theme of the upcoming Rose Ball—as if the presentation of Privileged debutants is even important—and nagging me about finding a mate. I roll my eyes. Three hundred ninety-eight isn’t ancient, but they talk as if my biological clock should be ticking madly.

Tentatively, Olivia touches my shoulder. “Hey, I know we’re here to celebrate, and I don’t want to bring the mood down...but I’m sorry Lucan isn’t any better. Being here reminds me of...”

“The night he lost Anka. Me, as well.”

We have yet to find a single clue to her whereabouts. Worse, every surrogate we’ve hired to try to replenish Lucan’s energy has failed. He’s barely clinging to life, and I’m feeling desperate. I don’t know how much longer he can make it.

“You’ve done everything you can,” she assures me.

Unfortunately, it’s not enough.

“Aye. You deserve a pint,” Marrok says, wrapping his arm around Olivia.

“Could you grab me one?” I ask as I glimpse Caden storming in my direction.

Olivia gives me an empathetic stare as she and her mate head to the bar.

“Is Shock coming or not?” Caden demands, lunging in my face. “You said he would be here.”

“I said I asked him to come. I can never guarantee what he’ll do.”

Lucan’s younger brother huffs like he’s hanging onto his temper by the thinnest of threads. “Has the fuckwit answered any of your summons?”

“No.” Not since before he appeared shoulder-to-shoulder with Mathias in the tunnel...then returned the diary to Olivia.

“Goddamn it! I left behind a job and a life in Texas—”

“I’m well aware.”

The more Lucan’s condition worsens, the more agitated Caden becomes. I understand his worry, and it hardly helps that he’s approaching thirty...and all the change that comes with it.

“Have you tried to find Shock yourself? In case you haven’t noticed, I’m preparing for a bloody war,” I snap. Then I sigh. “Sorry.”

The coming conflict is precisely why I’m here. I want a word with the Wolvsey twins. I need more wizards willing to join my resistance.

Sabelle keeps insisting they’re fukbois not fighters, but if I could convince them to channel that passion into battle...

Ronan and Raiden are young, able-bodied, and not politically connected. Since the Council refuses to prepare for a possible Anarki return, I have to gather an army under their noses. Keeping the Doomsday Brethren under wraps will be impossible if I’m forced to recruit wizards like Tynan O’Shea, whose grandfather is a fellow Council member.

Currently, he’s staring into his mug at the far end of the bar, looking lost. Or grieving his mate-to-be.

Auropha MacKinnett's awful death at Mathias's hands not only ushered in this dangerous new era but changed Tynan's life forever.

Caden closes his eyes. "No, I'm sorry. Lucan is my family. My responsibility. I'm just worried—"

"We all are. Lucan is the brother I've never had. I wish I could do more."

"I know." He hesitates, his stare passing over the others as if he realizes the weight of my responsibility is almost bigger than one man can bear. "Since Shock didn't come and I don't feel much like celebrating, I think I'll head out and continue the search for Anka."

He deserves an evening off after all the bloody-hard training, but I respect his priorities. "Of course. We start in the morning at dawn."

Caden rolls his eyes. "Because our drill sergeant is a Dark Ages taskmaster."

"That he is."

"Thanks." With that, Lucan's brother turns away with an involuntary shudder.

As he reaches the pub's entrance, the door swings open. New patrons—and the November chill—sweep in. And he's sweating. I know what that means. I know the signs.

His transition is coming...whether he wants it or not.

The door has hardly shut again when Sabelle enters with a gust of wind, her hair tousled and her cheeks pink. Predictably, every male head in the pub turns her way, except Ronan who's still far too fixated on Kari to care.

Raiden immediately saunters in her direction, charming smile in place...until he catches sight of me.

"Wolvsey—"

With a shake of his head, he backs away and focuses the infamous Wolvsey charisma on a nearby human with fat, dark

curls and great tits. He barely says more than hello before he cajoles her out the back door.

Fuck.

Another glance at the bar tells me that Ronan—still brooding over Kari—won't be any more receptive to my recruitment speech tonight.

So much for my agenda.

Fuck.

Since surrogates aren't my thing—a bit too impersonal—I can at least seduce a willing bedmate for the night and charge up for the hard days of training ahead. There are plenty of women here—witches and humans alike. This shouldn't be difficult.

Sighing, I head to the bar where Marrok has my pint waiting. I stop short when I spot Ice sidling up to Sabelle.

She shoots him a nervous glance. He looks ready to devour her.

This isn't the first time I've seen the sod look that way at my sister.

Fuck.

Thankfully, a glower is all it takes to “encourage” Sabelle to back away from the bastard. With a murmur, she makes her way to Olivia, who's quickly becoming both a gifted witch and her good friend.

Ice glares at me across the pub.

He doesn't appreciate my interference? I don't fucking care. He's damn good in training. He's damn good in battle.

But he's trash, and if he wants to live, he will never touch my sister.

Before I can cross the room to stand between them, Duke swaggers in my direction, clearly more than one drink in. “Can't thank you enough for including me in all this. You could have passed me over, I know. I'm young.”

Forty-three. Quite young. His age gave me pause, but... “You’re good at navigating the human world. We may have need of that skill.”

Especially if Mathias comes back stronger.

Duke grins cynically. “My money doesn’t hurt, either.”

Despite the shitshow the night has become, I smile back. “I won’t lie and say otherwise. But if you’re enjoying all the torment Marrok is heaping on you, then I’m happy to provide it.”

He swallows back the rest of his scotch, wincing at the sting. “Indeed. Far better than being in the middle in my half brother’s wedding.”

“Too much pomp?”

“Most of my life is pomp. I can live with that. I can smile urbanely and act like I give a shit about the latest charity dinner or gala. What I can’t seem to deal with is this damn wedding.” He turns pensive. “Mason’s fiancée is too good for him. I have to stop thinking about her. Bugger, I shouldn’t have admitted that out loud. I need another scotch.”

With that, he leaves.

I’ve never seen Duke plastered. He’s usually controlled and polite, but I’m sensing another side of him...

Clearly, he needs a night away from family, duty, and her. Tomorrow, the drudgery and grind of preparing for coming bloodshed resumes.

Sighing, I finally make my way to the bar so I can celebrate with the Doomsday Brethren. They’ve been dedicated to the cause, giving up hours, sweat, and all semblance of a personal life to make sure that when Mathias materializes again, we’ll have a fighting force ready to keep him at bay.

And if I can find a willing female, I’ll call tonight a success. Drafting the Wolvsey twins will have to wait.

Suddenly, the door whips open again. In walks a petite redhead. Human. Fair. Eyes not quite blue or green. Stubborn

chin. Pillowy mouth. Gorgeous tits. Freckles splash across her nose. Confidence envelops her like the sexiest dress.

Our stares meet. Her cheeks turn pink.

Fire sears down my spine. My fingers itch. I need to peel off her clothes. I need to touch her skin.

Her.

I need to fuck her.

Right now.

My feet take me in her direction before I'm even aware of moving. She gasps, slender fingers covering her mouth. Then she turns away and darts out the door.

I chase after her, determined not to let her slip through my fingers...

But she's gone.

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Thank you for joining me in the Doomsday Brethren world. As you may have guessed, this series is just getting started. During Marrok and Olivia's journey, you've read about some other characters, and you might be wondering if I'll tell their story in the future. The short answer? Yes! Stay tuned!

DOOMSDAY BRETHREN

TEMPT ME WITH DARKNESS

Marrok of Cadbury and Olivia Gray

CAPTURE ME IN MOONLIGHT

Ronan Wolvsey and Kari Keswick

SEDUCE ME IN SHADOW

POSSESS ME AT MIDNIGHT

CLAIM ME AT NIGHTFALL

ENTICE ME AT TWILIGHT

And more to come! Stay tuned!

I have *so* much in store for you!

Hugs and Happy Reading!

Shayla

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ABOUT SHAYLA BLACK

LET'S GET TO KNOW EACH OTHER!

With over 25 years in publishing, SHAYLA BLACK is the New York Times and USA Today bestselling author of nearly 100 novels. Known for her ability to craft rich characters and emotionally nuanced stories, she has won awards, sold millions of copies, and been published in a dozen languages. But it's her spicy, steamy romances that have readers breathless for more. After two decades with major New York publishers, she now enjoys the freedom of being independently published.

As an only child, Shayla occupied herself by daydreaming, much to the chagrin of her teachers. In college, she found her love for reading and started pursuing a publishing career. Though she graduated with a degree in Marketing/Advertising and embarked on a stint in corporate America, her heart was with her stories and characters, so she left her pantyhose and power suits behind.

Shayla currently lives in North Texas with her wonderfully supportive husband, her daughter, and two spoiled tabbies. In her "free" time, she enjoys reality TV, gaming, and listening to an eclectic blend of music.

TELL ME MORE ABOUT YOU.

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