



THE THORN
AND THE
THISTLE

KENDRA CORBEAU

The Thorn & The Thistle

A BOUND BY BLOOD NOVELLA

KENDRA CORBEAU

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Contents

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[A Note From Kendra](#)

[If you liked this story...](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

Dedication

For Jess, and for Phil.

One



The forest whispered promises of trouble as night fell, so Heather prepared herself to go out into it. Trouble for others often meant an opportunity for her, though she had seldom seen the woods around her hidden cottage so full of portents. The caw of a crow, the felling of a tree at the edge of the clearing, and even the distant rumble of thunder in the cloud-blackened sky would have given anyone cause for caution, but when a dead squirrel fell from a tree at her feet, she went back for an extra onyx charm.

She shut the door to her cottage tightly behind her, tracing a rune of protection over the stout boards before she tucked her long red braid into her dark wool cloak and pulled up her hood against the cold.

This was not the first time that she had gone out when the wind brought her the promise of death on the road to town. The duke's guards were nothing but jumped-up thugs, drunk on their authority, and often dealt out violence to bandits or late-night travelers with equal amounts of enthusiasm.

She had no intention of dealing with any of them, however. She was more interested in their victims. Sometimes, she could help the people the guards left behind, often in exchange for a favor or some coin. Sometimes, she could only scavenge valuables from the bodies and curse the acts of powerful men.

The real trick was to avoid detection. Heather made her way out of the clearing along the winding game trail that led toward the road, waiting until she was in the deepest shadows of the forest to cast a spell of hiding. A drop of blood from her

hand (the back, obviously—cutting palms or fingers was for novices; the cuts were annoying for days), a raven’s feather, a hair from her head. The offering was released into the darkness and vanished before it hit the ground.

Dark magic was attracted to blood as surely as light magic was attracted to effort, and the forest shadows swarmed up and over her, curling close and protective. While she was not truly invisible, she’d be almost impossible to see, especially under the moonless sky. Meanwhile, the shadows also granted her the ability to see in the dark perfectly well.

If one had to be banished into the forest, she reflected, it helped to be a witch.

She made her way carefully through the woods, setting her feet on the packed earth of the path and avoiding dry sticks that might snap or puddles that were just miserable to step in. She kept her cloak tight around her, though the burrs and thistles let her pass regardless, possibly knowing what was good for them.

The barrage of ill omens continued as she walked: frost on stones, despite the temperature being well above freezing; the smell of rotten leaves revealed by spring melt that had no business being in the air at harvest time. She took note but mostly listened—not for omens, but for shouting and the clash of steel on steel.

She was almost at the road when she heard voices raised in anger. She froze in place, crouched in the shadow of the thicket.

The wind died down as if the trees were also straining to hear.

“Alright, that’s enough,” called a rough voice, It was one of the locals, from the accent. “Drop your sword, stranger!”

“Come and take it.”

Heather’s breath caught at the magical command woven into the taunt. The stranger’s voice was low and compelling, and even protected by the shadows as she was, she felt the

urge to obey. As the guards on the road charged, she scrambled forward to see the battle for herself.

The cobblestone road that cut through the forest had deep ditches on either side, and she slid down into the hollow of one as the first exchange of blows rang out above her. She raised her head enough to peer out at the melee and found that, not even twenty feet from her, two guards were already laid out and bleeding on the road.

The stranger's back was to her as he parried a wild overhand blow from a third guard. She only had time for the briefest glance—taking in his tall form shrouded by a long, dark cloak, a wide-brimmed travel hat, and a rapier that caught the torchlight with gold and steel—before the fourth guard joined the third, forcing the stranger to fall back as he fought.

His tactic made sense now. If the four guards had taken their time to surround him, he would have been cut down, but taunting them had brought them to him one at a time.

Almost.

The stranger grunted and staggered back as one of the guards scored a blow on his shoulder.

It had almost worked.

It still could. Heather didn't waste time looking for a suitable stone in the mud. She grabbed the onyx from her pocket. Sometimes the simplest form of magic was the best, she thought as she drew back her arm and threw.

The crystal sailed past the stranger and struck a guard on his shoulder—not hard enough to do any damage, certainly, but it distracted him for a crucial moment as he looked around to see who had thrown it.

The stranger seized his chance, his rapier whipping up to disarm the guard before running him through the ribs.

The stranger spun to face the last guard, but his blade caught, just for a moment, in either the ribs or the leather armor of the other as he fell, and it jerked the stranger off-balance.

Before Heather could properly see what was happening, the last guard struck with a yell of desperate triumph. She couldn't see the blow—the stranger's body blocked her view—but from how he jerked at the impact, she knew it had landed.

The stranger abandoned his rapier, still stuck in the fallen guard, and lunged for his final opponent with his empty hands.

There was a low, wet sound like bones breaking, and with a strangled gurgle, the last guard fell.

Heather hesitated, watching the stranger sway on his feet. He was injured. Had he noticed her stone? Should she go to him? Wait for him to make the first move?

With a lurch, he retrieved his sword, jerking it from the fallen guard, and slowly turned to face her, his free hand clutching a wound in his chest. His clothes were expensive and finely tailored, though ruined in the fight. His dark hair was tied back, but a lock had come free in the melee and curled in a loose wave at his temple. He had high cheekbones, and the kind of murderous glare that spoke of wishing there were more enemies to kill.

There was no way he should have been able to see through her shadows, but his burning, golden eyes went straight to hers.

His expression shifted from surprise to sudden desperation.

“Please,” he said.

And collapsed.

Heather clawed her way up onto the wide, torchlit road, trailing shadows behind her. The stones were cold beneath her hands, but she ignored the discomfort. Beyond the circle of torchlight, she heard the fading sound of running feet. There had been a fifth guard, evidently, who had either resisted the stranger's spell or had simply been too far away, and he was running for all he was worth back toward the city gates.

She hurried to the stranger's side, reaching for him to steady him. He had fallen to his hands and knees, though, incredibly, he still clung to his sword.

“We can’t stay here,” she said. “More of them will come back to search for you. Can you walk?” Stars help her if she had to try to carry him through the woods in the dark, she thought.

“Not far.” His low voice sounded strained, and dark blood dripped from between his fingers to the ground. “I only need”—his breath hitched at a sudden pain, but he continued stubbornly—“a moment to recover.”

There was no way his wounds would only require a moment, and the longer they stayed here, the worse it was for both of them. If the guards didn’t catch them in the open, the distant storm would. “Let’s get off the road,” she said. “There’s a thicket a little ways into the woods where you can catch your breath.”

He let out a sharp breath through his teeth and straightened. “Very well.” He managed to sheath his sword on the first try and put his arm around her shoulders as she put hers around his waist.

She steadied him as they rose together, somehow managing to stagger off the road, down into the ditch, and back up the shallow rise into the forest. Her shadows welcomed her, the spell of hiding still strong, kept fresh by the death and bloodshed from the battle. That was just as well. It would have been hard to concentrate on the spell with her arms full of a probably-dying man.

This close, she could smell the blood and sweat on him, though she also thought she caught a whiff of something else—an expensive cologne, perhaps, unless that was the omens speaking. His clothes spoke of wealth, dark silks with gold fastenings on fine wool. He was clearly a rich lord, likely from one of the mountain lands that surrounded the valley, but he wasn’t just a dandy. His skill with a blade was backed up by the firm wall of muscle under her arm.

Well, then. A wealthy warrior with at least some skill in shadow magic, and a nice, fresh hatred for the duke and his men. If she could keep him alive, he might be just what she needed to put things right.

They made it to the thicket, a little hiding place she had found years ago. It was useful for staying out of the way but close to the road, and he wasn't the first victim of the guards that she had hidden there. The thicket was an enormous ring of lilac bushes, flowerless at this time of year, but the tangle of suckers and bunches of leaves made an opaque shield around the hollowed-out center where the ground was a bit higher and dry, thanks to her efforts. It paid to have little places to hide, as any woodland creature would have agreed.

She let her shadows settle over the thicket as she eased the man to rest on the ground. "Lie still," she said, keeping her voice low so it didn't carry. "I'll patch you up. My home isn't too far from here, but you'll need to walk better than that to make it."

"I just need a moment," the man insisted, though his eyes were closed and his breath came in rapid, shallow pants.

"Of course you do."

At least he wasn't coughing up blood or any similar melodrama. Punctured lungs were a nuisance to heal. With practiced speed, Heather unfastened the small pack on her back and unrolled it beside her so she could get her first aid supplies. The first thing she grabbed were the good shears, which she used to cut open his shirt and undershirt so she could see what she was dealing with.

"Well, now," she said conversationally, "that's a bad slash on your shoulder, but your ribs did their job and protected all the important bits. Let me mend it up a bit for you, my lord, and then we'll be on our merry way."

"Don't trouble yourself, my lady," he managed, which she ignored as complete nonsense. Though it was nice to be called "my lady" again. It had been a long time since her own clothes had been as fine as his.

His injuries were serious, but mainly flesh wounds: muscle and tendons and skin and all the little fiddly things between that kept them working. She plucked the appropriate herbs for each injured tissue and rolled them all into a ball of soft clay

from the riverbed. She broke the ball apart into two jagged chunks, breathed on it to activate it, and then began the spell.

A soft, muted glow shone from her hands and the clay as she patiently put the pieces back together. She lined up the herbs inside, tucking them back up against each other one at a time with the precision of an embroidery teacher. She used a needle, too, for the tiny parts that were too small for her fingers to manipulate, and a smooth twig from a willow tree to help her blend the clay pieces back together.

As she worked, an echoing glow bloomed from the man's shoulder and chest as his severed flesh was mended along with the clay ball in her hands.

Effort was what it took, and she bent her will to the spell. It was the kind of work she could lose herself in, painstaking but meditative. Match up the torn herbs to fix the muscles and blood vessels. Smooth over the clay to mend the flesh. When it was as perfect as she could make it, she broke it apart in a new direction and began again, mending and fixing.

She blinked when his hand closed over hers.

She looked up to see that he had sat up, his striking golden eyes searching her gaze, their faces close together as the light from the spell faded.

Absurdly handsome. Ridiculous. Men shouldn't be allowed to be so beautiful, she thought irrationally, taking in his dark brows and thick lashes, his perfect jawline and inviting lips.

Lightning strobed the sky above them, and thunder rolled.

"Thank you for your aid," he said, gently but firmly lowering her hands with their now-useless ball of clay. "I admit it was not quite what I expected, but it is ... appreciated."

"Shadow and light need each other," she told him, tossing aside the used components and wiping her hands on her cloak. "I use both of them when they're needed."

"Indeed. I would prefer not to repay kindness with trouble," he said, examining his torn and stained shirt. "The

guards will be searching for me. I should leave you now.”

She snorted. “I’m no stranger to trouble. Can you even walk?” she asked, stowing away her spell components. “I’m surprised you can sit up.” He must have used magic of his own to help him heal, though she hadn’t noticed any casting. Perhaps a charm he had prepared earlier, which would have been the smart thing to do when anticipating a fight.

With a quiet sigh, he gave up the inspection of his clothes, once more looking at her. “I can walk a ways,” he said in a deliberate cadence, like he was choosing his words with care. He began to say more, but stopped and looked back toward the road with a scowl.

She heard it, too, between the rolls of thunder: the barking of hound dogs.

“I should go,” he said abruptly, and rose.

“Hang on,” Heather said, rising with him and reaching out to hold his arm. “They’re hunting you, but they won’t find you in my glade. I can keep them away.”

He looked at her hand on his arm like it was a strange creature from another realm. “If your glade will hide you from the dogs, then return to it. I’ll be fine, I assure you.”

Damn him, but maybe he would be fine. He stood tall and steady now as if he hadn’t been near-mortally wounded only a moment ago. What other magic did he have?

If anyone was going to wander into her life with the power to help her change it, it was going to be him. She didn’t want to wait for the next chance.

“Do you acknowledge the favor I gave you?” she asked intently, not releasing his arm. “I distracted the guard.”

He didn’t try to pull away. His gaze was wary as he searched her expression again. “Yes, I acknowledge it. What would you have of me? I don’t have any money for you.”

Ass, she thought. “Return the favor by returning with me to a place of safety and hearing my proposal. The duke is no

friend of yours, it seems, nor is he a friend of mine. Perhaps we can help each other.”

Now understanding dawned on his face. His eyes held a hint of amusement. “An interesting idea. May I ask your name, my lady?”

“Heather,” she replied, and because he was so polite, and she did miss being a lady, she also gave her last name. “Heather Thistlecrown. Once a baroness, but no longer, I’m afraid.”

There was a flash of recognition on his face. Perhaps he had heard of the scandal? If he had heard of her, he did not seem to be offended at the idea of her being a witch. Instead, he took her hand from his arm to bow over it. “It is my pleasure, Lady Thistlecrown. I am Revan Thorn, the Marquis of Monvale, entirely at your service.”

She doubted that last bit, but she lifted her cloak in one hand to offer him an elegant curtsy. “Enchanted, Lord Thorn. But the storm is at our heels. We should take this discussion somewhere more civilized.”

“Lead the way.”

Two



Heather led the way back to her cottage, aware of Revan's eyes on her back. The wind had picked back up with a vengeance, but otherwise, the forest was empty of any sign that might have hinted whether her impulsive invitation was a good idea or a terrible one.

She would have to be wary, that was all. She had protections layered into her home but he was clearly a powerful magic user as well, possibly stronger than her. He was also a damned nobleman, and if Heather had learned anything in life it was that noblemen had no concern for others. To them, people were convenient tools to use and to discard. It was no matter, though. She would simply use him for her own ends. Then they could part ways and she would be free of all ties to the nobility forever.

By the time she reached her home, she could hear the rain in the not-so-distant trees. She shook off the shadows that had loyally trailed her and moved through the sudden darkness to her door, where she put her palm to the protection rune, dispelling it. She pushed her door open with a sigh of relief, stepping into the calm herb-scented warmth inside.

She turned to hold the door for her guest only to see that he had paused a few steps from the entrance and was examining her cottage's roofline with interest.

"You can admire the architecture in daylight, come inside," she called over the wind.

“Of course,” he said, all unhurried, like examining old thatch was infinitely more interesting than staying dry. He stepped in as the first raindrops dotted her front step. “Forgive me, I was inspecting your defensive charms,” he said by way of explanation, closing the door against the weather. “I admit I was skeptical about you keeping the dogs away, but I think you’re right. They’re unlikely to be able to find me here.”

“You’ll be safe,” she promised, hiding her annoyance at being doubted. “It’s small, but it’s dry and warm, and well hidden from troublemakers.”

She gestured in welcome at her home, wondering how a fine lord like him would perceive it. Her cottage was one large, round room, with a fireplace in the center inside a raised stone hearth that vented through the roof. The walls were stone and mortar but covered with thick wool tapestries, either gifted to her by people she had helped or woven by her. To one side of the door were shelves and drawers, full of books, reagents, dried herbs, bones, and crystals that were all organized the way she liked them but surely appeared chaotic to her guest.

To the other side of the door was a crafting and cooking area, and beyond the fire was her bed, with heavy curtains to protect it from drafts at night. A small back door led to the storage shed and, beyond, to the covered washhouse, which used a cunning bit of magic combined with plumbing to grant her running water without the need to go outside. Heating the water was another story, but that was what the fire was for, after all.

“It’s a perfectly admirable witch’s hut,” Revan said with a smile. “Kind of the duke to leave you with a suitable home. Does he have a sense of humor?”

“Hardly. He cast me out entirely. But as they say, the enemy of my enemy is my friend. I had common cause against him with the owner of this place, and she let me use it for a time.”

“A lovely cottage,” Revan said, and sounded sincere instead of contemptuous. Perhaps he was trying to charm her. “It is certainly preferable to lying bleeding in a ditch in the

rain. I consider myself quite fortunate to have met you tonight.” He unclasped his traveling cloak, moving with care.

He was probably sore as hell from his injuries. His skin was pale enough to make blood loss a major concern. Heather took his cloak to hang it for him. “Go sit down,” she said, nodding toward the larger of the two mismatched chairs. It was a solid wicker thing with lovely cushions. “You look like you might keel over.”

“I’ll be fine once I have a drink,” he murmured, but he moved to the chair instead of standing around insisting he was tough enough not to.

“I’m afraid I don’t have any wine,” she said, hanging up her own cloak as well. She was suddenly very aware of the fact that she had a man in her cottage. An injured one, perhaps, but someone who was at least an equal to her rather than some mendicant from the city or a farmhand begging for her help.

It was a first, as far as she could recall.

She turned back to him to find him watching her again.

“I’ll make some tea,” she said, seizing the reins of the situation. “I have a bit of brandy left, and a shot of that will warm you right up.”

“Delightful,” he murmured. “I hope you will excuse me for being rather useless at the moment. I find myself a bit spent after all the excitement.”

He didn’t sound like he was about to faint, but some people were like that, strong until they broke. “You just sit down, you got stabbed twice,” she said firmly, moving to stoke the fire and put the kettle on.

He was quiet for a moment, watching her with that unnerving frankness. As if she were the most interesting thing in the world, and so watching her was natural to do.

He broke the silence first. As she fussed with her healing kit, too wound up to sit, he spoke in his mellow baritone.

“Tell me about yourself, Lady Thistlecrown. I would very much like to know more about you.”

The request made her chuckle. “Oh, don’t look so affronted,” she told him when he frowned. “It’s just been a long time since anyone asked to know more about me. I think most people around here would prefer to know less, though most of what they think they know is nonsense.”

“Let me guess,” he said, “you eat babies and blight crops?”

“Yes, exactly.” She put away her healing kit, giving up on the pretense, and pulled up the smaller, sturdy wooden chair so she could sit and face him properly without the fire between them. “Really, there’s not much more to say than what you already know. I was once a baroness in the duke’s favor, but I gave him some news that he didn’t like, and he stripped my title and banished me. I practice magic—dark and light—and I know quite a few charms. And I live here.” She made a little gesture at her home.

Revan’s gaze stayed on her face. “And who taught you magic, I wonder? Or are you self-taught?”

She smiled, leaning back in her chair. “Well, now you’re getting personal, aren’t you? You know, you’re much more mysterious than I am. You appear with no warning, use shadow magic yourself, murder four guards, and now you’re in my home. Perhaps you could tell me a bit more about yourself.”

Revan gave her a crooked smile, apparently amused at the request. “Shall we trade information, then?”

“Oh, I think we must,” she agreed. Stars, but when was the last time she had enjoyed a conversation with a handsome man? “Tell me about yourself, my lord. How far is your home? Are there crops for blighting? Lost children in the forests ripe for eating?” she joked. Though she did wonder idly if he had children. Had he left behind his family to seek violence?

“Not many forests,” he said, still amused. “Or crops or children, for that matter. Plenty of mountains, though. Steep passes. Narrow bridges, treacherous terrain. My people have kept their independence because we have little worth taking, and it would be very difficult for anyone to take it.”

“And they have you to protect them,” she prompted.

“Yes, they do,” he said seriously. “I take my duty to my people to heart.”

“Then why are you here, so far away from them?” she wondered.

Revan smiled at her with a knowing expression. “My turn for a question, I think, my lady. Who taught you magic?”

She’d scarcely taken a breath to answer when the shrill whistle of the tea kettle cut her off.

She rose to take it off the fire, feeling a bit shaken. Was it a portent, or just a coincidence? It was hard to listen to the words of the world, sometimes. And what harm could come of the answer regardless?

“I learned from my mother,” Heather said, pouring two cups of tea. “I’ve surpassed her, as she always intended. I often wish that I could show her what I’ve learned, but she passed away a few years ago.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Revan said quietly. “I’m sure she would have been quite impressed by your abilities.”

“Oh, probably,” she said with a sigh. “She’d be less impressed by my dealings with the duke, though. And that’s rather more to the point of our conversation tonight, isn’t it? My turn for a question. What is your business here? What brings you to town?”

“You’re so mercenary,” he grumped, probably joking. “Demanding answers already.”

“I can’t help but notice that you only complain now that it’s your turn to share information.” She handed him a mug of tea, despite the chiding. “Did you have business with the duke before his guards assaulted you, is what I wondered. If you have unrelated business in town, it’s none of my affair.”

His hands brushed her fingers as he took the mug with care. Even though she’d had an arm around him earlier, this touch felt more intimate. Helping him off the road had been a

necessity, but now the crisis had passed, and the question of what would come next hung in the air.

“To speak of Duke Arnel,” he said, “yes, I did have business with him. I said as much to the guards and they grew hostile, so I rather think he doesn’t wish to see me at all. I’ll find another way into the city and challenge him to a duel, I think.”

Oh, but what a lovely mental image that made in her mind. “I’ve seen you fight, but I’ll warn you all the same. Markus Arnel is a nightmare with a sword.”

Revan smiled faintly. “So am I.”

She didn’t bother repeating her warning. Men like him wouldn’t listen regardless and, besides, he had handled four soldiers with only a few stab wounds to his name. Maybe he could handle a single combatant, no matter how competent that combatant was. “Did you really come all this way to challenge him to a duel?”

“Not initially.” Revan held the cup in both of his hands as if to warm them. “He has an artifact that I’m interested in acquiring, but after the treatment on the road, I rather think a few fresh punctures would suit him.”

“Well, perhaps you can claim the artifact as forfeit when you perforate him,” she said lightly. “He prides himself on his collection of rare and magical items. Art, too. Most of it was stolen.”

“That seems to fit,” Revan said. “The artifact that I’m after was stolen from me a long time ago. I need it now, for reasons of my own.”

“I’ll take your word for it, but I doubt he’ll let any of his treasure go without a fight.”

“Again, a service I’m happy to provide.” There was a darkness behind Revan’s humor that made her wonder how often he had dealt with other nobles in a similar manner. “But you’re the one who lured me to your abode, so let’s flip the question to you, my lady. What’s your business with the duke?”

“Please call me Heather,” she said, dropping her gaze to her tea so she didn’t have to meet his golden one. “If we’re planning a murder, it seems more appropriate—and I’m not a lady anymore.”

“Nonsense, you’re a lady of the woods,” Revan said carelessly. “But fine. Heather, if you prefer. You’re welcome to call me Revan. I don’t stand on ceremony. It’s tedious.”

“Thank you,” she murmured. A marquis that didn’t enjoy pomp and ceremony was a new experience for her. Or perhaps he wasn’t a marquis at all, and was merely lying? Though he was certainly wealthy, and well-trained in battle.

“As for the duke and I,” she continued, trying to gather her scattered thoughts, “I’ll give you the short version. A few years ago, we had an ill-advised relationship. Then he banished me like a petulant child when I told him a few truths that he didn’t want to hear. I could have moved on with my life, honestly, but he also stole something of mine that I want back. I can get into the city unnoticed and even into the castle, but I don’t know where he’s keeping it, and I can’t fight him directly. My talents lie more toward avoiding danger than dealing with it head-on.

“So.” She took a breath and met his gaze again, “I would like to find a way for us to help each other. Perhaps the two of us can succeed against Arnel where neither of us can do it alone.”

“Interesting,” Revan murmured, watching her with a calculating expression. “So, you get us into the palace, I can deal with any violence, we find his secret treasure horde and help ourselves, yes?”

“You’re welcome to abscond with any of his ill-gotten goods that you want,” Heather said. “I don’t want to bring any part of him with me when I leave, though. I merely want to get back what he took from me. Then I’ll be satisfied.”

“And when you’re satisfied?” Revan prompted. “What then?”

“Well, it will depend on how much of a mess we make in the castle,” she said wryly. “If Arnel is alive, I’ll want to leave the country, definitely. I think I might leave regardless, though. The road calls to me, lately.”

“If you tire of the forest, you should come to the mountains,” he said, a hint of a smile on his lips again. “The air there is invigorating.”

“Perhaps I will,” she said as if the idea didn’t already excite her. Perhaps she had been languishing, just a bit, in the woods. She missed stimulating conversation. What would it be like to be a guest of the marquis, at his home? If things went well, maybe she would have the chance to find out.

In the meantime, he was a guest in hers, and that thought made her realize she had forgotten the offer of brandy.

“Forgive me, I’m neglecting my hosting duties,” she said lightly, getting back up. “I promised you something stronger than tea! And you should eat something.”

“I should go and clean myself up first,” he said with the lazy regret of someone who did not want to get out of a comfortable chair. “Do you have a rain barrel outside or shall I use the stream?”

“Oh, no, there’s a washhouse just out the back door there,” she said, pointing. “I am not entirely bereft of luxury. I can heat water for a bath, too, if you want one?”

“Gracious,” he said, setting aside his tea to also rise, “you work quickly. You only just got me inside and now you’d have me disrobe entirely.”

That made her face heat, and she cursed herself for being so easily flustered. “The bath is in the washhouse. Your modesty would be protected, I assure you.”

“Modesty is also tedious.” He flashed her a grin of perfect white teeth. “I am only teasing. I’ll clean up in the basin for now, but I would impose on you for another favor if I could. I lost my pack in the scuffle, and I have no way to clean or mend my shirt. It might be a bit difficult to sneak around with

a nipple peeking out, so could you lend me a needle and thread?"

The heat in Heather's face showed no signs of abating. Now that he stood in good light, she could see the lean musculature of his chest where she had cut through his clothing. "Yes," she managed, looking away. "Leave your shirt with me. I can get the blood out and mend it while you clean up."

"You're an impeccable hostess," he said in honeyed tones.

Looking away from him was hardly any less distracting than staring, because she kept wanting to see his expressive face again. She glanced over and found he was unbuttoning his dress shirt, right there in the middle of the room!

But of course he was—she was being silly. She couldn't afford to hold on to tedious things like manners and propriety when she was plotting theft and probably murder with a mysterious stranger. She deliberately moved toward him instead, to prove she wasn't a blushing idiot. She was practical. Sensible. It was just a shirt.

Revan caught her gaze and held it as he shrugged off his torn clothing. He looked amused, but at least he wasn't shy. Yes, that was best. They were both just being sensible.

"Thank you, Lady Thistlecrown," he murmured, close and intimate as he laid the cloth on her outstretched hands. "I am rather fond of this one." For a moment, he let a finger trail over her palms, as though he were merely touching the clothing. "I am eager to see what your skills can do with it."

She could only stare like an idiot as he bowed, still watching her with a little grin before he turned and vanished into the back washhouse.

Well, then.

She washed the blood and dirt from the clothes in the kitchen sink, her motions vigorous as she wrestled with her thoughts. Yes, he was handsome. But that did not mean she could afford to lose her head! A bit of flirting was fine, as a social nicety, perhaps, but no more until after their quest was

completed. A fine chest and chiseled jaw could be enjoyed as eye candy without sacrificing her focus.

Besides, he was a marquis. That meant he was doubtless an entitled ass, even under all those charms. She would not be swayed by his sexy voice or gorgeous arms, because he was bad news.

She would be sensible. It would be fine.

Relieved to have sorted that out, she hung his clothing by the fire to dry. Once it was dry, she could mend it, sewing in a little charm to repair the fabric entirely so there was not an alarming row of stitches up the breast of the shirt.

The sound of running water in the washhouse basin cut off, and there was a quiet splashing. Revan was doubtless washing his arms. And chest. With lathered-up hands sliding over his skin—

Heather muttered a curse and tried to banish the mental image. She got out her sewing supplies to distract herself and threaded a needle with black thread.

What if she indulged a little, she wondered? Would pursuing Revan really be such a bad idea? Didn't she deserve a little fun?

Torn once again, she held the threaded needle up by the thread, letting the silver needle dangle beneath her hand. It was a simple bit of divination, too simple to be a proper answer to a complicated question, but like drawing a card or examining leaves, sometimes you could find that the world helped you make up your mind with even a little nudge.

She let the needle swing. Circle for yes, pendulum for no. She focused on her question: *Should I climb that man like a tree?*

The needle swung—

—the door to the washhouse opened—

—and she dropped the needle.

Instinctively, she tried to catch it, which was stupid. If a falling knife has no handle, a falling needle is made entirely of

pointy bits. She caught it before it got lost on the ground but managed to jab the cursed thing into the pad of her thumb.

“Bloody hell,” she muttered, stabbing it back into the pincushion with her other hand. “Slippery little thing!” She glanced over at Revan and couldn’t help but stare again at his perfect musculature.

What was strange was that he was giving her the same hungry look—but he was staring at her hand.

“Are you alright?” he asked, not moving from the far side of the room.

“Oh, yes.” She watched him carefully. A few things started to add up in her head. “Just a little accident. It’s only a drop of blood. See?”

His gaze followed her hand, and the little drop of blood that beaded there. With a huff, he looked away, crossing his arms across his chest and staring at the fire, not meeting her gaze. “You should be more careful.”

“A little late for that, isn’t it?” Calmly, she wiped off her hand. “I already invited you in.”

The subtle accusation hung in the air for a moment.

Revan closed his eyes, leaning his shoulder against the door jamb. It seemed to take him a moment to formulate a reply. “You should be safe enough with me,” he said roughly. “I don’t intend you any harm.”

The rain hammered on her roof, and the wind tugged at the shutters as she stared at him. Her home felt very small now, like the two of them filled it so completely that it threatened to overflow. Slowly, she moved toward him.

“You healed yourself in the thicket,” she said, a statement more than an accusation. “But you weren’t using light magic. And you commanded the guards before that. Hard enough that I heard it and came out to see you. A command made from shadows shouldn’t work at all on me, not when I’m on guard. And you saw me. I invited you in. How long would you have stood in the rain if I hadn’t?”

He looked up at her, his golden gaze even more striking so close. “I would have left you in peace and found somewhere else to shelter. Probably,” he added. “You had already captured my interest by then, so perhaps I would have lurked ominously in the shadows.”

A smile tugged at her lips. Even now, his words were clever. “Where are your fangs, Lord Thorn?” she asked boldly.

He gave a little sigh, his crossed arms rising and falling with his chest. “I use a glamour to hide them, if you must know. Shall I drop it?”

A glamour. An illusion. Of course. No one could be this impossibly handsome. Heather frowned, wondering what he really looked like. “Yes, I think you should. I’d rather see what’s in front of me.”

“Well, who wouldn’t?” he said, raising a hand to gesture as if shooing away a fly.

There was a flicker of shadow like a cloud had passed over the sun momentarily—except that they were indoors, and there was only firelight and oil lamps.

His gold eyes didn’t change at all, though she fancied she saw hints of dark circles underneath them now, evidence of exhaustion. His high cheekbones and perfect jawline were unchanged, though a dark stubble shadowed them.

Damn the man, he was even sexier like this.

Something in her expression made him smirk, and a subtle tension left his shoulders.

Deliberately, he grinned at her. An amused, predatory grin.

Yes, those were *definitely* fangs.

She stared at the elongated canines that ended in needle-sharp points. She couldn’t help it. The sight triggered an instinctual response in the dark little part of her brain that remembered what it was like when humans were hunted by beasts in the night, and she froze in the presence of a predator.

His grin faded into a polite smile, one that hid his fangs. “At ease, mortal,” he said airily, “I’ll go find an animal or

wandering guardsman to slake my thirst. I need you to get into the duke's palace, after all.”

His condescension—joking or not—greatly annoyed her, and she clung to that annoyance desperately to ward off her fear. “It might take more than a stab wound to do you in, but I wouldn't go acting like you aren't mortal, too. It's unbecoming.”

“I know. But I can get away with it because I'm so charming.”

“Jackass.”

He chuckled, and this time when his fangs peeked out from behind his lips, they were much less intimidating. “Well, at least you didn't run screaming into the woods. Do I get my shirt back, or do I have to dance for it?”

She turned away from his confident smile and maddeningly bare chest, going back to fuss around with her mending things in the kitchen. “Once it's dry, I'll mend it. If you're cold, then grab a blanket from the back of the chair.”

“Or you could warm me up.” His voice was teasing, and he followed her, leaning his elbows on the far side of the counter from where she worked. It gave her an enviable view of his shoulders. “We're stuck inside in this atrocious weather, perhaps we ought to make the best of it.”

“We can discuss dark magic.” She held his gaze. “Blood magic, perhaps.”

“I'm an avid fan of both of those things. And I'm feeling generous,” he added, standing up straight again. “Go on, ask me what questions your books couldn't satisfy. We'll see if I can satisfy you instead.”

A smile tugged at her lips but she wouldn't let it show. Revan was a conceited jackass, but he was also handsome, amusing, and above all else, interesting. “Alright, then, Lord Thorn. Can you eat and drink normal food? Would brandy even affect you? Because I'm having some. Is garlic poison? Does the sun burn you? And who turned you into a vampire in the first place, or is that considered impolite to ask?”

“My dear lady, I think we’re well past common courtesy, don’t you? To answer simple questions simply, food is delicious, it would take rather a lot of brandy but yes, I could feel it, garlic is also delicious, and the sun burns me painfully and immediately. To the extent that a moment of exposed skin would start smoking. It’s quite dramatic, I assure you. As for becoming a vampire, that’s a far more interesting question to explore. Why don’t you get that brandy and we can discuss it?”

“It’s not done just by biting someone, is it,” she reasoned, fetching down the half-empty bottle of amber liquid. “The world would be full of vampires in a month.”

“Indeed,” he agreed, following her back to the chairs. “And why should prey animals get all the benefits of a powerful enchantment, just for being delicious? That system wouldn’t make any sense at all.”

Now that she knew what he was, he seemed pleased to stay near her, no doubt hoping to provoke more staring. She kept her eyes on their cups instead as she poured them both a shot into the clay mugs. “How does it work, then?” she asked, turning to hand him his.

“Thank you,” he murmured, his fingers brushing hers again as he took the drink.

Neither of them moved to sit down. Instead, they stood by the fire, so close their hands were nearly touching as, outside, the storm raged against the stone walls and thunder rolled above them.

“The truth,” Revan said, “is that no one turned me into a vampire. I did it to myself, deliberately. All vampires are formed that way and, if you’re wise,” he added, his low voice a whisper, “you’ll keep that secret to yourself.”

Three



“**Y**ou did it to yourself?” She studied his face, trying to find the truth of his words in his expression. “Why would you curse yourself?”

“Is it a curse?”

The firelight shone a warm, steady light on his bare chest, casting his muscles into sharp relief. Had his physique always been so beautiful, or had his body been changed by vampirism? People would do wild things to chase beauty. Her gaze was drawn to the thin line on his shoulder where he’d been run through less than an hour ago. It looked like an old, minor wound now, scarred and forgotten. Another gift of his, it seemed.

“You can never see the sun,” she said. “I’d call that a curse, wouldn’t you?”

“I can see daylight, I just can’t be in it! Like so many other dangerous things that are only meant to be observed and not experienced directly. Thunderstorms. Lava. Marriage.”

Marriage? “What else did it cost you, then? Do you need blood to survive?”

He clicked his tongue at her. “Heather. Everyone needs blood to survive.”

She let out a huff. “Is being deliberately obtuse also part of your curse?”

“No, my dear, I’m just a jackass, as you so ably deduced earlier. You’ll have to forgive my jokes. Or don’t! I intend to

keep making them either way.”

An overly familiar jackass, she noted. “I’ll suffer your quips if you answer my questions, how’s that for a deal?”

“Oh, excellent. Making deals in a witch’s forest hut is delightfully folkloric. Very well, don’t murder me with your eyes. The answer to your poorly worded question about blood is ‘no,’ but also ‘yes.’ I need blood to power my magic. I’m sure you’re aware of the power of a well-placed drop? I require something similar to function. Normal food can sustain me if I’m not doing anything interesting, but to use the full range of my abilities, I do need to acquire an external source of power.”

“Acquire a...? You drink blood!”

“Well, I certainly don’t inhale it.” He sipped his brandy-laced tea at her.

“You used quite a bit of power tonight,” she pressed. “So, what does that mean? How soon do you need to drink blood again? And how much of it do you need?”

Revan looked pained, as if she was being incredibly gauche. “I’ve craved it worse than this. Don’t agitate yourself. I can easily wait until tomorrow. As for how much—well, that’s more interesting. It rather depends on the quality, and the manner in which I obtain it.”

Despite the heat of the fire and the warmth of the mug in her hands, Heather felt a cold trickle down her spine at his words. This sounded familiar. Her own dark magic used similar rules about certain reagents. “Let me guess,” she said. “Animal blood is not as good.”

“Mm. Correct.”

“And,” she pressed on, needing to know, “is it better when the blood is given willingly?”

His grin once again revealed gleaming fangs. “Well, you are a quick study, aren’t you?”

“Interesting.” She stepped away, taking her seat again, wanting a moment to process all of this.

This time, he didn't follow her closely. Instead, he took his own seat, lounging in the simple wicker chair like it was an elegant wingback in a library. "It all comes down to the magic that drives it. Think of it more like a permanent enchantment rather than a curse. I've invited the darkness into me, where it can live and feed, and in return, it grants me power."

Heather drank her tea as she listened. He was being very forthcoming about this if it was true. In all of her studies of magic, she had never once heard so much as a rumor that vampires—rare, dangerous, powerful creatures of the night—had become such on purpose. And why tell her now? Perhaps he just wanted to tell someone who would appreciate the knowledge, as he must have once done.

"So could anyone do it?" she asked. "If a mage had enough control over dark magic and knew how, I mean?"

"Again, it's yes and no." He looked pleased with her interest. "The ritual can be performed by anyone of sufficient skill. The trick is learning the ritual. As far as I can tell, the only ones who know it are vampires, and they guard the knowledge very carefully."

"Well, then, how did you learn it?" she asked. Guiltily, she realized that she wanted to learn it, too. Not to become a vampire! Just to know it, to better understand what it entailed.

He sipped his tea at her before he answered. "I asked the vampires. It took me three years to convince them that I was worthy, but eventually, they let me join them."

"There's an organization of them? This is incredible. Everything you tell me brings up ten more questions!"

"The world is a fascinating place," he said, looking smug. "It's natural for young things such as yourself to be full of questions when you learn about it."

Infuriating man! The real problem was that she could not even tell if he was being honest or just feeding her a lot of entertaining nonsense. If what he said was true, there was so much she needed to learn. How did vampires "invite darkness

into themselves?” Who was the select group of them that guarded the knowledge? Why was all of this such a secret?

How could she believe anything he said?

He chuckled. “The look on your face is amazing.”

Heather watched him. His overconfidence. His smug security in the knowledge that he was so much wiser and more powerful than her.

It was an opportunity.

“I wonder,” she said, “what you would trade in this moment for a proper drink, my lord.”

The amusement vanished. He watched her now, his expression guarded. “You’ve given me a drink, my lady.”

She just held his gaze, waiting. Betting that he wanted it enough to break the silence.

Revan carefully set aside his mug on the stained wood of the side table. “Well,” he said, “let’s see. I have nothing on me beyond my clothing and sword, which I don’t believe you crave. I’ve already agreed to your plan to assault the duke. If you want the ritual, understand that I cannot teach it to you without the permission of the council.”

“I don’t need the ritual,” she said, and saw a subtle relaxation in his posture. “What I would like is to be able to trust your word.”

He canted his head to one side. “You want a promise of honesty?”

She spoke the words carefully, weaving the spell as she did. “If I can trust what you say to me for the next fortnight, then you can drink what you need of me right now.”

It was reckless. Dangerous. But he had knowledge that she wanted, and of all the things she had, her blood was surely the only thing that he wanted.

Revan’s gaze was piercing, like he could sense there was some trap in her words but couldn’t see it.

She waited, holding the spell inside herself, ready to release it into him when his guard was down.

He shifted his weight, slowly, leaning toward her.

She made no move to rise. The spell could compel truth from its target, but it needed to be performed from a position of power. He had to give the promise to her, had to cross the distance himself to agree to the bargain. But she set aside her drink and held out her hand, palm up. Offering her wrist.

When he rose, the shadows rose with him. The light in the room dimmed, and the fire shrank to mere embers.

“A bargain in a witch’s hut,” he murmured. “Why not? Very well. I accept.”

Revan knelt at her feet, his motions elegant and graceful. He took her hand in both of his and pressed a kiss to the palm. As his warm lips burned against her skin, he slid a hand up to grip her forearm.

He did not pause to ask if she was sure. She appreciated that.

His hold on her arm was firm as stone, though not painfully tight. Her heart raced as he pressed another kiss to the base of her hand, and another to the pulse point of her wrist.

She had expected pain. She had not expected pleasure.

She gasped as he bit her, nearly losing her hold on the spell as a wonderful heat ran through her. She leaned forward, curling toward him like a lover. Her free hand tangled his hair, but not to pull him away. Instead, she caressed his head, urging him to continue, and let her magic flow with her blood into him.

She felt it take hold, forging a bond between them. A little moan escaped her lips as they parted in a smile of triumph. It was a release, a precious victory, made all the sweeter by the warm, almost erotic pleasure coursing through her. What would his mouth feel like on her neck?

She tried to focus, feeling drunk and euphoric. Damn, but he looked fine as he was, shirtless and kneeling for her. “Do your kisses feel this good without fangs?” she asked, trailing her nails through his hair, down the back of his neck. She should take him to bed and find out.

He shuddered once under her touch and made a low noise in his chest that might have been pleasure.

The kiss slowly broke.

The warmth that had filled her ebbed, the fire in the hearth danced back up into flames. He licked the last drop from her wrist—already healing over, she noted—and pressed a kiss to her palm before releasing her and sitting back on his heels. “Thank you, my lady.”

She grinned at him, leaning forward against the armrest, dizzy and lightheaded. “Well? Was that as good for you as it was for me?”

“Better, I’m sure,” he said. “I’m going to want you again, and I’m already worried about what I’d offer you in exchange for the pleasure.”

He froze, an aghast look coming over his face. Clearly, he had not meant to admit that much. The spell had worked.

She giggled, laying her head on her hands as she watched him.

With growing horror, he stared up at her. “What did you do to me?” he asked, hoarse.

She reached out to stroke his jaw. So beautiful. “We made a bargain, my lord. My blood for your truth. You’ll be compelled to answer all of my questions honestly—and fully. I hope ... it was worth it,” she managed, a great lassitude coming over her.

He answered, but she wasn’t sure what he said.

He caught her as she toppled forward, though, and her last thought before she fainted was that his arms were warm and strong.



Heather woke to birdsong.

It was dark around her, the heavy curtains around her bed drawn closed against daylight. She was not sure what time it was or how long she had slept for, but the storm had passed in the night and now the warblers and chickadees argued with squirrels and crows in the forest outside.

Memories of the night before came back to her as she sat up. She winced a bit at the memory of being so giddy before she lost consciousness, but forgave herself. Blood loss was to blame for that, possibly aided by the effort of the spell.

Anyway, his expression *had* been funny.

“Revan?” She pushed the curtain aside, noting that she was still dressed in her clothes from yesterday. “Are you burnt to a tiny crisp?”

The curtains were all drawn and the shutters were still closed.

“Yes.”

The voice came from a blanket-wrapped, cloaked lump of a marquis curled up in the wicker chair in the darkest corner beside the bed.

“I’ve been utterly incinerated,” Revan continued. “What kind of a witch doesn’t have a cellar? Where do you keep your stolen orphans?”

It was true that her curtains were not heavy enough to keep out all the sun. Her house was meant to be light and airy inside during the daylight hours.

“Take my bed for the day,” she said, stepping aside. “The curtains around it are much thicker. You could have hidden in there with me, you know.”

“Crawl into bed with an unconscious woman? Unchivalrous in the extreme. I’m offended at the very notion.”

The mass of blankets and cloth shifted, rose, and shuffled over to dive through the curtains into the bed. “About time you got up. I thought you were going to sleep until nightfall,” he complained through the bed curtain.

She adjusted the fall of the cloth to make sure no cracks were left to admit any light and moved around the bed to double-check the rest of it. “I can’t imagine what exhausted me,” she said, her tone dry. “But thank you for putting me to bed. I do apologize for falling over on you.”

There was a muffled sound from the bed. “Are you feeling recuperated now?” Revan asked. “You should eat something.”

His grumbling was almost sweet. “I’ll be fine. Yes, I’ll eat. And I’ll make sure nothing bothers you until sunset. Do you need anything?”

“Just let me sleep, woman.”

Heather chuckled and let the tired vampire sleep. They would both need to be at their best if they were going to take on the duke and his men, so she let him rest while she made her preparations.

For the most part, she was able to distract herself from the fact that he was sleeping topless in her bed. There was, after all, quite a bit to do. For one thing, she intended to prepare as many useful charms and protections as she could before they assaulted the palace. For another...

...she knew that she would not be coming back.

It was a bittersweet feeling, but it could not be denied. The signs of it were everywhere: the birds that were leaving her feathers and flowers on the windowsill, the little mound of acorns on the step, the patterns in the tea leaves, and even the leftover storm clouds directed her away. It was time to take her leave of the secluded cottage that had been her home for the last five years. She would not need it anymore. Either she would retrieve what had been stolen and leave, or she would die in the attempt.

She cleaned the place until it was immaculate. She packed up her clothes and the few items she had brought with her,

leaving everything in as good condition as she had found it, if not better. At one point, she took a break from cleaning to mend Revan's clothing, weaving magic with her needle so that the repairs were invisible, mending the fabric as though it had never been cut. A charm to remove blood stains worked just as well. As she admired the fine clothes, her thoughts turned once again to her guest.

What would it be like to be a guest of his instead? To put aside being a forest witch and once again wear the fine silks and lace of a baroness? Perhaps she had been lying to herself this whole time, pretending she didn't miss those touches of luxury and fine things. Or, even more, the touches of fine people.

A little bit of travel might do her a world of good.

She was in a cheery mood as the sun fell below the treeline, though a little jolt of nerves twisted her stomach as Revan stirred in the bed. Before any awkward greetings could be exchanged, she grabbed the last of the scraps from the day and headed outside to dump them in the compost pile at the far side of the garden.

It wasn't that she was nervous, she told herself. She was just giving him a bit of privacy to wake up in. It would hardly be dignified to gawk at someone's bed-tousled hair and bare arms as they stretched themselves awake. Or to surreptitiously try to see if even vampires woke up with morning wood. Evening wood?

She let herself fantasize for a moment about what might happen if she did accept his offer to visit. Would she be given a guest room, or be invited to share his? What would it be like to wake up next to Revan, to experience the domestic intimacy of letting someone else see you drowsy and vulnerable, to linger in body-warmed sheets for stolen embraces before having to face the world again? Would he welcome affection when he woke? What sounds would he make if she trailed her fingers down his fine chest, over his abs, and down between their bodies to stroke his cock awake for a bit of fun?

She was so distracted by her daydreaming that she walked right through a pile of deer droppings on her way back from the garden.

“Ridiculous,” Heather muttered, chiding herself as she scuffed her boots along the grass to clean them. She didn’t need any magic to interpret that sign from the world. Maybe she ought to climb into bed with him, just so she could free her mind of these distracting thoughts.

By the time she had cleaned up and gotten back to her house, however, Revan was up and about. She found him standing by the banked fire, doing up the laces on his shirt. Behind him, the bed was made and its curtains were tied back, as if he had never been in it at all.

“Good morning,” she greeted him ironically. “It’s shaping up to be a lovely evening. Perfect for skulking about in.”

“Just as well that we don’t have to creep about in the rain,” he said. “Thank you for working your magic on my clothing. You did a flawless job.”

The mellow depth of his voice was a pleasant shock, and she realized she’d missed the sound of him speaking during the day. “You’re welcome. Perhaps I’ll take up work as a seamstress now that I’m giving up being a witch of the wood.”

Revan looked around the room, raising a dark eyebrow. “I did notice that you’ve been busy today. Everything’s tidied away. I take it you were serious about the road calling?”

“Oh, yes. Now, do you need to eat before we go? Because I’d like to make use of the last of the light, and I’m ready to be off.”

“I’ve kept you waiting all day—it would be churlish of me to delay us any longer,” Revan said in a tone that was half *pretending to be haughty and superior* and half *I am actually haughty and superior*. If a man could be both full of himself but also self-aware enough to joke about it at the same time, that’s what Revan was. It was a strange blend, and she had never met another nobleman who used it.

They gathered their things, mainly her pack and his sword, and soon stood outside wearing their long travel cloaks. She took the time to put a last enchantment on the cottage before they set off.

“Why bother enchanting it if you’re leaving it?” Revan asked as they followed the path that led toward the city walls.

“I’m not abandoning it,” she said over her shoulder. She knew the forest here, so she led the way. “It wasn’t mine to begin with! All of my family’s lands were seized when I was exiled. The cottage belongs to an old friend of mine. We’ll stop by her house to give it back to her on the way into the city.”

“That’s a fine sentiment, but is it wise to delay with visiting?”

“It is when it’s to repay a debt,” Heather said stoutly. “And I think she can help us sneak past the walls.”

“Ah! Well, then we should definitely stop by your friend’s house,” Revan said. “It’s the polite thing to do.”

They traveled in silence for a time, and Heather listened for signs from the world as she went. The forest was quiet in the deepening dusk as if it was listening and waiting as well. Everything felt up in the air. Her foreseeable future depended on the events that would unfold in the next day or two.

It was rather exciting.

As the last of the sunlight faded under the thick canopy of the trees, Heather paused beneath a tall willow. “I’m going to call the shadows again,” she told Revan. “Otherwise, I’ll be tripping over roots all night.”

“Go right ahead,” he said, once again scrutinizing her as if she were the most interesting person on the planet. “Your command of the shadows is remarkable,” he continued as she summoned the darkness with hair and blood and feathers. “You know, when I first saw you on the road, I thought you were one of us.”

“A member of your secret vampire cadre?” she asked, watching his face. Her vision sharpened as the spell took hold

and she could once again see his handsome features perfectly.

“Yes, exactly. It’s why I asked you for help. I wouldn’t have thought a mere human could have been so useful, but I am, in this instance, delighted to have been proven wrong.” He gave the confession with a little bow, and she wondered if he would have admitted it anyway or if the truth spell had pulled it from him.

“Do you not consider yourself human at all, then?” The path opened out now, getting wider as it grew more traveled near the city, and they were able to walk two abreast. “Aside from the fangs you certainly look human.”

“I consider myself to be more than human,” Revan said easily. “I’ve ascended. I have powers that normal humans only dream about. I’m stronger and faster, and I’ll live at least twice as long. It’s a remarkable transformation! Some of the others are over two hundred years old and still as sharp and hale as they were in their twenties.”

“But are they as humble as you?” she said, teasing.

“Pff, not half so humble. Though they’re charming enough in their own ways.”

She glanced over at him as they walked. The hood of his cloak was thrown back in the mild weather, and his dark hair was tied neatly back behind his neck, letting her see him in profile. “Did your transformation make you more handsome?” she asked, curious.

He grinned, his fangs flashing in the moonlight that filtered through the leaves. “I assure you, my lady, I was always this gorgeous. It’s somewhat of a prerequisite for being admitted to the society.”

Heather scoffed at the idea. “What, only beautiful people can apply?”

“Understand that we need to put up with each other for a long time,” he said, unbothered, not at all defensive. He clearly agreed with the twisted logic. “Why invite anything less than perfection into our group? Everyone is clever, charming, powerful, and possesses a certain allure.” He looked

at her and grinned again. “They’d like you, I bet. They’d find this spell you put on me hilarious.”

This time, his grin had a dark edge to it. The hairs at the back of her neck prickled, and she was suddenly very aware that she was alone in the forest with a predator. “Do you see humor in it,” she asked quietly, “or are you seething beneath that smile?”

“I did a little bit of seething last night,” he admitted. “While you slept. But I’ve made my peace with it for now. I’ve decided to take it as a compliment—and a challenge.”

“A challenge?”

“Yes. I’ll try not to admit all of my most heinous secrets by accommodating your spell as you intended it. I imagine you wanted to know more about my magic, didn’t you? Well, ask about that, and mind your questions don’t get too personal, my dear.” He gave her a wink. “Lest I begin seething once more.”

Damn, she thought. She would have to be careful. But wasn’t that always the way of magic? There was always a balance. You had to give to get. The trick was giving something you didn’t mind losing, and now she found that she would much prefer not to infuriate Revan. Rather the opposite.

“I traded blood for truth to find out more about your kind,” she admitted quietly as they climbed a low hill in the darkness. “Were you telling the truth last night? About a secret group of vampires that, what, take applications to join?”

“We’re more likely to recruit,” he answered without missing a beat. “I was approached by one of them, initially, but the rest I said was true. I spent years proving myself worthy of being elevated.” He considered for a moment, then added, “It’s interesting, I wasn’t lying when I said I had searched for them, but our little agreement pulled that detail out just now. The truth is that I was searching for something. For them, I think, though I didn’t know they existed. Do you understand what I mean? My studying was not aimless, I was seeking what I found. Power, and something more to life than what everyone else got. I was hungry for it, and they gave me what I needed. There. Are you satisfied?”

“With that answer, yes,” she said carefully. It was polite of him to refer to the compulsion to tell the truth as their *agreement* but it was still a spell, and she did not wish to end it yet. There was one more thing that she needed to be sure of. “I found it hard to believe. Revan,” she said, reaching for his arm and pulling him to a stop at the top of the hill. There was a clearing around them, and fireflies sparked and faded above the long grass. In the distance, the trees thinned, and she could see the wall of the city with its torchlit parapet. “I don’t intend to pry into your personal matters, but I need to know something before we go further together.”

“Oh, god, what is it?” he said with a sigh.

Infuriating man. “Can I trust you?”

The plain question evidently surprised him, and he swallowed the first thing he was going to say before he answered. “Mostly?” he hazarded. “Probably? Look”—he pulled his arm away and smoothed down his sleeve—“that is an absurdly broad question. I’m not going to attack you or betray you to the duke, if that’s what you’re asking. I came here for my own reasons and wasn’t looking for you but I am delighted to have found you.” His demeanor shifted from defensive to charming again, and he reached for her hand.

She let him take it and kiss her fingers. “And what should I not trust you to do?” she asked archly.

He gently turned her hand over to kiss her palm.

It sent a shiver up her arm and through her chest, reminding her of the pleasure his bite had given her the night before. “Revan?” she prompted.

His voice was low and melodious as he answered her, drawing her closer into an embrace as if they were about to dance. “Understand, my lady, that my first priority is retrieving what I came for.” His arm slid around her waist, confident and sure that it belonged there. “I will not let anyone stand in my way for long, including you, if you decide to. But I’m confident that we can avoid conflict going forward if everyone is reasonable. And even if it came down to it, my dear, believe that I have no intention of harming you. I would

much prefer to pursue a relationship that was more ... mutually satisfying.”

Heather looked up into his gold eyes, mesmerized, as they began to sway together, her hand in his. Her free hand found his shoulder, their rhythmic movements an echo of memories—dancing in a ballroom. Dancing in the dark. She felt lightheaded and breathless, and this time, she could not blame it on blood loss.

“I would also like that,” she admitted softly. “I find you fascinating, my lord. More than anyone else I’ve ever met. Though I worry about what dark paths you’d lead me down if I followed you to your mountains.”

He made a low sound, almost a growl, and his arm tightened around her possessively. He pulled her close against his chest and lowered his head to breathe his words into her ear. “Trust me, sweet witch. All I want is to take you away with me, to protect you and seduce you. To please you and show you secrets that the darkness still hides, even from you. Release me from your clever little curse, my dear. I won’t hurt you.”

She shuddered, helpless against his charm. His promises of delight and seduction appealed to her just as much as his whispers of new magic to learn, and she finally admitted to herself that she wanted more than a simple life in the forest. Much more.

But hadn’t she heard such promises before? Of adoration, and gifts, and protection?

“If your intentions are as you say”—she pulled back to see his face again—“then you have no need to worry about our pact. Besides,” she added, wanting to ease the sting, “your sweet nothings are even sweeter when I know you mean them.”

Revan raised a hand to her cheek, his fingers brushing back an errant strand of hair as he studied her expression. “You keep your heart as closely guarded as your home. But I can be patient.” He smiled, his voice lowering to a murmur as he leaned closer. “Sooner or later, you’ll invite me inside.”

Four



Heather wasn't sure how she had pulled herself away from the warmth of Revan's embrace, but she must have managed it, because he was once again following her through the dark forest.

She took deep breaths of the cool night air as she walked, trying to clear her head. Revan was bewitching. He was alluring and interesting and, worst of all, totally aware of his appeal. She had come far too close to releasing him from that spell, and for what? Promises of romance? She had heard such promises before, and *forever* had turned all too easily into *never again*.

Heather pushed her desire aside for now, determined to focus on the business of the night. There would be plenty of time to take the measure of the marquis and enjoy his attentions after they had dealt with Duke Arnel.

In order to get to Arnel, they needed to get to Bettany Holloway. Widow Holloway, as she was known in society, was a savvy businesswoman who had stepped up to take over her husband's shipping (and smuggling) business when he had died in a bar fight with an off-duty guard. Heather privately suspected that Bettany had always run the business anyway, but now she did so openly. The Widow Holloway wore her mourning clothes like armor and wielded rumors like knives. Her business pit her naturally against the duke and his tax collectors, but she was too rich and well-connected for Arnel to get rid of her easily.

The important thing was that Bettany, as an owner of caravans and trader of foreign goods, kept a manor house *outside* of the city walls.

Heather led Revan toward it through the woods, eventually coming out of the trees on the edge of a wide, meticulously maintained back garden.

Stone paths curled between copses of manicured shrubs and decorative trees. Beds of flowers, their buds closed against the night, rippled in the breeze that carried the smell of roses and wildflowers. On the far side of the garden was a handsome two-story house, many of its windows still lit up, and from an open window, the sounds of a pianoforte carried across the lawn.

Bettany's manor was always occupied and lively. She had never remarried, nor had she had any children with her late husband, but she didn't want for companionship—she had several equally influential lady friends who lived with her, or who spent nights in her company.

Heather had even been invited to join them, once. It had been flattering, and she often wondered if she should have given it a try ... but Heather was not here to dive into memories or might-have-beens.

“Of all the things I thought you might be leading me to,” Revan said, his voice low in her ear, “this was not one of them.”

She turned her face to find his close to hers. “And what did you expect me to lead you to, my lord?”

“Oh, a sketchy tavern, perhaps. A humble farmstead. Dark alleys or the like, where criminal elements might gather.”

“You'll find more criminals in fine houses than in dark alleys these days,” Heather said. “This is the home of the Widow Holloway, who is by most accounts richer than any of the lesser nobility in the city. I knew her socially as a baroness and always counted her as a friend.” Bettany had even warned her, discreetly and in private, about what sort of man Markus Arnel was beneath his charming exterior. It was a pity that

hearts never listened to reason. “Let’s keep ourselves out of sight,” she continued. “I don’t want to bring her any trouble after she’s helped me.”

The moon lit up the scene like it was midday, to Heather’s enhanced vision. She and Revan stayed by the treeline, keeping the shadows close to conceal them as they made their way around the garden, toward the side entrance that was usually used by servants—or discreet visitors.

“I’ll wait here,” Revan decided. “We’ll keep things nice and simple. You go speak with your friend, and I can keep an eye out for trouble if it arrives.”

It made sense, though she felt a strange reluctance to leave him behind. Splitting up would avoid the problem of him having to be explicitly invited inside, though, and his description might have been spread around already as a wanted man. Best not to have the servants gossip about strangers with swords.

She slipped around to the servants’ entrance and only let the shadows slide away when she was at the door. It would be just like Arnel to have someone spying on Bettany’s comings and goings, and she wasn’t about to make it easy for them to see her. She knocked softly and was glad that she recognized the servant who answered the door.

“Hello, Mister Marlowe,” she greeted the butler. He looked well—the years had added a layer of padding to his midsection, and what hair he still had was streaked with gray.

“Lady Heather,” he said, surprised. “I wouldn’t have expected you at the back door!”

Of course he was offended on her behalf, that she would consider herself to be a servant. She’d been born a lady, and Marlowe was the sort of butler who’d respect that no matter what.

“I’m trying not to attract attention,” she told him. “I need to speak to the lady of the house about an urgent matter.”

“Oh, goodness, and here I am keeping you on the step,” Marlowe fretted. “Come in, my lady, come in.”

She was shown to a private sitting room with windows that overlooked the rear gardens. A middle-aged serving woman brought in tea, though Heather hardly had time to blow on it once before Bettany strode into the room.

“Heather! How the hell are ya?” Bettany crossed the floor to greet her as she rose, and she pulled Heather into a familiar hug that was, as always, just a bit too tight. Bettany had arms as strong as her personality. “I hear you snuck in the back. Are you in trouble or causing it?”

“A bit of both, as always,” Heather said, returning the hug warmly. “Pardon me for interrupting your night, Bettany.”

“It’s no trouble,” Bettany said, waving Heather to a seat as she took her own. “I was still up anyway. It’s not even midnight. Now, what’s going on?”

“Well, first, I want to thank you for letting me use the cottage off the highway. I won’t be needing it anymore, though. “

“You’re leaving town?” Bettany guessed. “Good for you. You can do better than lurking in the woods, curing gout. Are you on your way out of town? Need some money?”

“No! I don’t need money,” Heather said, surprised. She had never asked Bettany for money.

“Damn.” Bettany pulled a flask from an inner pocket of her blazer. She always wore a black jacket over her dresses as a nod to widowhood, though Heather knew that her inner pockets held a flask and a dagger instead of a kerchief and perfume. “Well, you need something, or you wouldn’t have shown up here in the middle of the night. Please tell me it’s not related to whoever murdered ten guards on the highway last night?”

“It was four guards!” Heather protested.

Bettany sighed and took a pull from her flask. “Why couldn’t it have been money?” she said with a sigh.

“I didn’t kill them,” Heather said quickly. “It’s tangentially related. But the man who did is after the duke, and I’ve

decided our interests align. I need your help to get us into the castle.”

This news did not seem to please Bettany either. She slouched sideways in her chair, looking suddenly very tired. “Heather,” she began, “we’ve been friends for a long time. And we’ve always been honest with each other, which I appreciate. So, would you just listen when I say to let it go? Markus was a shit to you, but it’s not worth destroying your own life just to get even. You’ve already wasted years lurking in the woods. Just go! Leave town and start over. You could do such great things,” she said, gesturing with her flask as if to a field of opportunities laid out before her.

“I appreciate the sentiment,” Heather began.

“But you know best. Right, right.” Bettany sat up, giving herself a shake. “Alright, let’s game this out. I sneak you and a murderer into the castle and—what’s your plan? You kill Markus and ride off into the sunset?”

“I don’t *want* to see Markus Arnel at all.” Heather picked her teacup back up to warm her hands on the fine porcelain. “I want to steal back an amulet that he stole from me. My mother gave it to me, and it’s a powerful magical item in its own right. I can’t just leave it with him. The stranger is also intent on getting back a stolen artifact—you know how Markus collects them. He doesn’t even use them, he just displays them like hunting trophies.”

“So, you’re going to burgle him and leave?” Bettany sounded skeptical. “And if he catches you or interferes?”

“The stranger will fight him,” Heather said. “Markus’s goons already tried to kill him, so I can’t blame him for wanting the chance to return the favor.”

“Why do you need my help to sneak in there, though?” Bettany asked. “You can go where you like. You always have.”

“Well....” Heather cleared her throat. “The thing is, the stranger has some rather unique restrictions. Like not being

able to be out in sunlight. And he has to be invited into the castle by someone who has the right to be there.”

“Seriously?” Bettany asked, her tone flat. “You’re telling me he’s a vampire?”

“He’s a powerful shadow mage, certainly.”

“One who drinks blood, presumably? No, don’t answer that, I don’t want to know.” Bettany gave her flask a considering look but closed it and tucked it away again instead of drinking. “I’ve got a loyal maid who works in the castle laundry. You remember the old laundry station down on Fisherman’s Way? Alright, make it there tonight and hide out tomorrow until dark. I can have her smuggle you two in, and invite your friend inside at the door. She does the washing in the day and brings the clean linens back in the evening, so that’ll work for his *restriction*. But I’d like a favor from you in return.”

“Of course,” Heather agreed. “You only have to name it.”

Bettany rose from her chair and crossed to Heather’s, taking Heather’s hands in her own. “Promise that however this turns out, you’ll let go of your grudge against Markus and get out of town. Go start a new life somewhere. You’re wasting the time given to you, and I hate to see it.”

Relief filled Heather. That was an easy promise to make. “I will, Bettany. I’m leaving after this. I might travel with the stranger for a while, but—”

She paused, aware of a distant shouting.

Bettany released her hands to cross to the door, jostling the coffee table as she passed it.

Heather’s teacup fell off the edge and shattered on the floor.

Bettany ignored the cup, jerking open the door in time to see a breathless maid arrive at a run.

“My lady! The duke himself is here, with a dozen soldiers! He said he’s here to arrest the witch of the forest,” the maid said in a rush.

Heather didn't look up. She was staring at the shards of the teacup.

They had fallen in the shape of a skull.

“Well, I'll come down and tell him to shove off because there's no witches here,” Bettany said firmly. “Go tell him I'm coming, girl, and then get out of sight. Marlowe will know what to do.”

Heather looked up to meet Bettany's gaze. “I should go.”

“No shit,” Bettany muttered. “You've got raven feathers handy for that spell of yours?”

“Yes.” Heather stepped around the omen on the floor to give Bettany a quick hug. “I don't know how he knew I was here, but I'll get away. Be careful, he's dangerous.”

“That's what I keep telling you,” Bettany said gruffly, giving Heather a rib-crushing squeeze. “Send me a letter when you're settled far away. I'll come visit one day. Be safe, get gone.”

She released Heather and was out the door, striding down the hall without a backward glance.

Heather didn't linger in the room. She pulled a feather from her pocket and cast the spell again, summoning the shadows to cloak her. Then she blew out all of the candles and hurried to the large windows that overlooked the gardens.

From the darkened room, she could see into the torchlit yard. There was no sign of Arnel's men in the yard, yet. Apparently they hadn't dared a full invasion of the grounds. She had a few minutes, at least.

She opened the window fully and slipped out, glad that she was on the ground floor. There was only a six-foot drop to the lawn below, and plenty of bushes and trees to hide her as she landed. She straightened and listened, but no cry of alarm went up. No one had seen her escape. Now she just had to find—

“Heather,” Revan whispered from behind her.

Her heart leaped into her throat as she barely managed to hold in a cry of surprise. “Revan!” She kept her voice low,

turning to find him beside her. She reached for his hand as he reached for hers, and the shadows cloaked them both. “You startled me. We have to get out of here.”

“What’s going on?” he asked, pulling her protectively close.

“Bettany can sneak us into the castle, but now Arnel is here with his men! I don’t know how he found out I was here, but he’s looking for me.”

Instead of looking concerned, Revan merely smiled. “Well, that makes things easy. We can find a way to separate him from his guards and just kill him.”

The image of the death omen came back to her. “Revan! No, not here. It’s too dangerous. He’s on his guard—he might know you’re here, too!”

“Perhaps,” Revan said. “But this is an opportunity. I’ll just go see—”

She caught his jacket urgently. “No. I cannot bring trouble to Bettany. Not after she’s helped me so many times. Even if you kill Arnel, people will know he was killed in her home. I can’t drag her into this.”

He scowled, evidently not happy about being told no, but he didn’t protest further. “If you insist. I won’t stain your reputation as a good witch. But I hope we don’t regret it later. Stay in the shadows, and stay close to me.”

Relieved, she clasped his hand tightly and followed as he led her through the darkness of the garden and into the safety of the forest.

Five



They arrived at the old laundry yard without attracting any more unwanted attention. Heather and Revan kept the shadows around them with their magic, sharing their protections, and stayed in the forest for as long as they could before breaking out of cover into the quiet streets.

The city was broken into two main groups: the rich nobles, who lived inside the walls, and everyone else, who lived outside the walls. The latter group included people like the farmers, the herders, the merchants, the innkeepers, the lower class of servants, and the tradespeople—like the launderers.

The old laundry yard was owned by the Holloway family, and Heather was familiar with it. At this late hour, well past midnight but not yet close to dawn, there was no one moving in the yard by the river, where the men and women worked in the day to clean the clothes of their wealthy employers. There were a few sheds and buildings about, including a large carhouse, meant to let people load and unload wagons in a sheltered place. The top floor of the carhouse was mainly storage rooms and seldom used.

Seldom used by the launderers, at least.

There were many reasons for people to need a place to lay low, and Bettany had always been keen to accommodate most of them. Heather led Revan into the carhouse and up the rickety stairs to the back room at the end of the walkway. She'd made use of it once or twice before, for reasons of her own, and was relieved to see that it was still set up as she had last seen it years ago—a small, windowless room with sparse

furnishings and a simple bed. There were shelves around the bare walls and an old, once-expensive carpet on the floor, and a door on the far side that led to a tiny but functional washroom.

“We can hide here for the day,” she said, moving to light a candle in a wall sconce. Her matches were in a hard-to-reach part of her pack, so she used a little whisper of magic to summon a flame to her fingertip and lit it with that.

Revan followed her in, surveying the room with a speculative look as he closed the door behind him. “What a strange room to find in a laundry facility,” he said dryly, turning to inspect the door.

It had a sturdy bolt on it, which he slid to the locked position.

“Bettany uses this room for all sorts of things,” Heather said, easing her pack to the ground. She let her shadow spell end, feeling safe in the hideout. “Carts full of laundry are a handy way to move people around unseen. We’re not the first she’s helped this way. Aren’t you going to end your spell?”

Revan still held his shadow around both of them, making the candle dance and dim when he moved.

“I feel safer with it active,” he said. He moved about the room as he spoke, inspecting everything. “The duke knew you were at your friend’s house, didn’t he? It’s possible to use magic to track people, but I suspect that my concealment spell will be strong enough to stop the magic from finding us here.”

Heather gave that some thought as she removed her cloak and hung it on an empty wall hook. It was true that her mother had been able to find people with magic, though she had died before showing Heather how to do that. Perhaps Revan knew how, but it didn’t explain how Arnel was managing it. “Arnel doesn’t know any spells, though. Do you think he’s working with someone else to find us?”

“He clearly works with many people,” Revan said. “Or he could be using one of his stolen artifacts to do the magic for

him. Who knows? But it's best to be safe, I think, and to stay hidden for now."

"Will you be able to hold the spell while you sleep?" she asked. "Or should we sleep in shifts?"

"I can pin it to this room, actually," Revan said smugly. "No need to pay attention to the spell to keep it active. I can set it up and forget it. It will keep the shadows around us until we leave, and I'll dispel it then."

"That sounds useful," she said, her interest piqued. He really did know much more about shadow magic than she did. "Can you show me how it's done?"

"Yes, but not tonight," he said casually. "I'm going to set up our concealment while you freshen up. Once you're done in that absurdly small washroom, I'm going to get properly clean. I've been traipsing through the woods far too much lately, I need to feel civilized again."

Heather left him to his shadow magic and headed to the small bathroom. It was larger than a closet, though not by much. There was plumbing, though, so she wasn't going to complain.

As she cleaned herself up, her thoughts were fixed on the bedroom beyond the door. The bedroom with its singular bed. After their interlude in the forest, Heather was already sure that there was no way she and Revan were going to get through the night without ending up in that bed together, despite her earlier resolution to wait until after they had dealt with Arnel.

Maybe it would be better to give in to temptation, she thought. At least then they'd both have a clear head for their mission, and they'd be able to better focus on the task at hand.

Besides, if she was going to be his guest, she really ought to know what she was getting into. It was only sensible.

Her mind made up, she left her hair loose to tumble in copper waves about her shoulders and went back into the bedroom in only her thin cotton shift with the laces undone.

The atmosphere of the room had changed. It was veiled in shadow now, and she could feel it like a blanket around her mind, muting the outer world. The dim light of the single candle had been joined with several more, of varying heights and sizes. Evidently Revan had found a few more in the drawers or shelves, as he had his back to her and was lighting a votive from a half-used taper candle in a brass holder.

The light gave his pale skin an unearthly glow as he turned to her and smiled. He had discarded his jacket and his shirt was unbuttoned, left hanging carelessly open. The white fabric framed his muscular chest like an art piece, but his eyes were what captivated Heather the most. Gold, and intense, and focused entirely on her.

“My lady,” he greeted her, moving closer.

Did she imagine it? The faint emphasis on the *my*?

“Lord Thorn.” The formality was out of place but felt like a joke they shared. She offered her hand.

He took it and pressed a kiss to her fingers, just as he had when he’d been on his knees, about to drink from her wrist.

It sent a shiver up her spine.

He must have felt it, and a hint of his fangs showed in his smile as he straightened. He did not release her hand. “Surely,” he murmured, “you have never looked as radiant to anyone as you do to me right now.”

Heat bloomed in her cheeks. “How can you say such a thing when you’re under my spell?”

“Because I am firm in my conviction that it is true.” He raised her hand to kiss her palm, his other arm sliding around her waist.

She made no move to resist him as he pulled her close. His chest was firm beneath the thin cotton, and she rather felt that she deserved to be seduced tonight. “And what about you?” she challenged him quietly as he trailed slow kisses to her wrist. “Are you using magic on me?”

He chuckled, and the flash of his canines so close to her skin sent a thrill through her.

“I don’t need magic for this.” He released her hand, and she held on to his shoulders.

“And what is *this*, then?”

“Heather,” he murmured, gently chiding. His hands rested at the small of her back like they belonged there. “You’ve impressed me in every way. Your beauty, your power, your keen mind ... even your connections. But we’re safe for now. Relax. Let me take care of you tonight.”

Oh, but she wanted to. “It’s hard to let my guard down,” she admitted. “Be honest with me, Revan. What do you want from me?”

He raised a hand to gently stroke her cheek as he looked down at her. “Pretty little witch. I want to take you away to the mountains with me. Let me convince you that it’s a good idea.”

He couldn’t lie, she knew. So what harm in letting him try?

“Very well,” she said, letting out a sigh as she slid her arms around his neck. “Convince me.”

Revan made a low sound of approval and pulled her close. He threaded his fingers into her hair to pull it away from her neck and lowered his mouth to the sensitive skin there.

Heather gasped at the pleasure, and for a moment, she thought he must have bitten her again, but as his lips moved along her skin, she realized that he was kissing her, sucking on her pulse point with his teeth barely grazing her skin.

She slid his open shirt back off of his shoulders. His skin was deliciously warm under her hands. She explored his musculature as he kissed down her throat to the top of her shift.

With an unspoken agreement, they pulled apart, enough for his shirt to fall to the floor as she reached for his belt buckle. He pulled up her shift as she unfastened his pants, and she had to release him to raise her arms so he could take it off.

She expected him to admire her, perhaps, or to get out of his clothes quickly. Instead, he scooped her up effortlessly in a bridal carry.

“Oh!” She clung to him, surprised. His arms were wonderfully strong beneath her, and he held her as though she were a precious treasure.

“You are a rare creature,” he said softly. “I have lived for so long alone, but no one has captured my attention like you have. A man fortunate enough to have you ought to spend his life trying to please you and keep you.”

The shadows rippled around them as he carried her to the bed. His bare skin was warm against her thighs and her back, and she wanted to feel more of him.

He followed her down into the bed, his mouth hot and demanding on hers.

She kissed him back, a muffled moan escaping her. She parted her lips and yielded as he deepened the kiss, finally giving in to the maddening desire she had been fighting. She ran her hands over his broad shoulders, feeling the faint ridge of his newest scar where she had healed him the night before.

When the kiss broke, he trailed more kisses down her neck to her throat. His hand explored her shape, sliding up her side, over her ribs, and cupping her breast.

“Revan,” she murmured. It was an admission of pleasure and a soft plea for more. Her head fell back as he sucked at her neck. How long had it been since a man had touched her with skill and adoration?

“Beautiful witch.” He shifted lower, ducking his head to kiss her breasts between his sweet nothings. “You’re a vision. Perfection.”

He took her nipple into his mouth, tonguing and sucking it. The pleasure was electric, and she moaned, caressing his hair, urging him to continue. “Your kisses do feel just as good without fangs,” she teased as he pressed a kiss between her breasts.

He made a low sound of desire. “Heather,” he said, his voice low and intense. He looked up at her with his golden eyes, and she could not have looked away if she tried. “I want you again. What must I trade you this time?”

“Right now, there’s only one thing I want from you, Marquis. Drive me mindless with pleasure, so that I forget my own name.”

“You’ll only need mine,” he promised with a grin, already moving lower again. He trailed kisses down her stomach as he shifted above her to lie between her legs. Despite his purposeful actions, he seemed to be in no hurry, instead savoring her. He lifted her thighs, holding them parted as he sucked on her inner thigh.

The man was maddening. “Revan,” she said, her tone plaintive. She tangled her fingers in his hair, urging him to put his mouth where it belonged.

He made a low, pleased sound as he yielded to the pressure of her hands, and finally, finally ran his tongue up the center of her aching sex.

Heather cried out. Her hands tightened in his hair as he squeezed her thighs, eagerly eating her out. His tongue was hot and wet against her clit, circling and stroking.

Then he slid a hand higher and, without removing his clever tongue from her most sensitive skin, he slid two fingers into her.

“Oh! Yes,” Heather said with a gasp. Her eyes closed as intense waves of pleasure washed over her. She spread her thighs, rocking up against his hand, wanting more. “Don’t stop!”

Revan moaned against her and redoubled his efforts, obviously excited by her reactions.

She loved how responsive he was, how focused on her pleasure and her body. She knew that she wouldn’t last much longer, but she didn’t want the bliss to end. She wanted more.

“Revan.” She released his hair to slide her fingers to her clit. “Keep fucking me with your hand, and bite me as I

come?”

Revan muttered what must have been an oath or a prayer in a language she didn't speak. He eagerly turned his face back to her inner thigh, though, kissing and sucking on the flushed skin as he stroked her. His thumb brushed against her fingers where she touched herself, and she shuddered. He curled his fingers upwards as they slid effortlessly into her wet sex, applying just a bit more pressure, and suddenly she was falling apart, the wave of pleasure cresting within her—

And then he bit her thigh.

There was a high wail that Heather dimly recognized as her own voice, crying out as she came harder than she ever had before. Heat and pleasure filled her, obliterating all coherent thought as wave after wave of erotic energy washed through her body. She was lost in it, willingly and completely.

Slowly, inevitably, the pleasure ebbed. She lay panting, her throat dry, her eyes closed. She felt a beautiful lassitude like she was drunk and half asleep. Her body was heavy, and the bed was so comfortable. She might have drifted into sleep, but Revan was pressing soft, adoring kisses to her thigh, her hip, her stomach.

“Heather,” he murmured.

His voice was so beautiful. She smiled, her eyes still closed. “That was wonderful,” she managed.

He chuckled, a soft, melodious sound. As he moved up, still between her legs, she realized that he must have kicked off his pants at some point, because there was nothing between them as his hot erection slid against her over-sensitive, come-slicked sex.

She yielded, languid and blissful, letting him sheath his cock inside her. She loved how he groaned in pleasure, how he moved above her, pinning her unresisting body beneath him as he thrust wildly.

Suddenly wanting nothing more than to see his expression, she opened her eyes with a great effort.

His golden gaze was fixed on her with a hungry look that even her blood had not sated. His face was flushed, his hair was wild, and as their eyes met, she saw a flash of a vulnerable, needy expression.

Then his lips were on hers in a brief, hot kiss that broke with an oath as he came. His thrusts grew harder and erratic, and a moan of pleasure escaped him as he shuddered, spending himself inside her.

“Gods.” Revan held himself still, catching his breath for a moment before easing himself down to lie beside her. “You’re perfect.”

“Sweet-talker,” she murmured, letting her heavy eyelids fall closed again. She would just rest them for a while. Just for a moment.

Revan pulled her close to cradle her against his chest. “Thank you, beautiful witch.”

“Thank you, handsome vampire,” she replied, pressing a soft kiss to his chest. She was getting cold as the sweat dried on her bare skin, but he was wonderfully warm, and she curled closer to him.

“Heather?” Revan’s voice was oddly hesitant. Usually, he spoke like he was entirely confident, but now he seemed unsure. “You must be exhausted. I shouldn’t pester you.”

“What do you want now?”

“So many things,” he said, but quietly, as if to himself. Then he continued in an intimate tone that sent a little thrill through her sleepy mind. “I find myself unexpectedly smitten with you, my dear. And I want you to trust me. Beyond trusting words that can be twisted. I swear that I would never want to harm you, or even displease you. I’ll answer all your questions about magic as truthfully as I am able. But I want the chance to earn your trust properly. Release me from your spell, witch. You don’t need blood magic to compel me.”

His words were so sweet in her ear—and they must be true because he was still under her spell. She could feel the link

through the blood he'd taken, thrumming now even stronger than before.

"I've been promised the world before," she said, wanting to please him but afraid to let go of her control over him.

"Under magical oath?" he asked, his tone gently teasing. "Do you ensorcell all of your men this way?"

She laughed softly, recognizing the truth of it. "No. No, that was different."

"Please, my lady?" He kissed her on the cheek. "Let me earn your trust."

She was so tired, He was so wonderful. A powerful vampire and deadly swordsman pleading so sweetly was intoxicating.

Heather kissed him back, releasing him from the truth spell.

"Thank you," he whispered, and kissed her again.

She fell into a deep sleep before their lips had parted.

Six



Heather woke in darkness to the sound of distant voices. She was tucked under the covers, and Revan was warm against her back, his breathing slow and even.

Revan's shadow enchantment was still active, making the room darker than it ought to have been. Revan must have hung their heavy travel cloaks over the small window, because they were acting as thick curtains, blocking the sunlight. Only the faint glow at the edge of the dark fabric told her it was likely daytime, though she couldn't tell how long she had slept.

In the carhouse below, men and women called to each other. Ropes creaked and horses neighed as carts were loaded and unloaded. For a moment, she lay in bed without moving, letting the memories of their tryst trickle back to her groggy mind. She smiled, picturing his glorious physique. His skilled tongue was another pleasant memory, as were his deft fingers, and the honeyed tone of his voice as he told her he was smitten....

Release me from your spell, witch.

A spike of panic brought her abruptly, completely awake.

She had removed the truth spell!

And for what? A simple roll in the bed? She silently cursed herself for a fool, but she knew the truth was worse: she hadn't released it because she was addled from sex, she had released him because she'd desperately wanted the rest of what he said to be true.

Yet another powerful man had manipulated her to get what he wanted.

She was twice a fool.

The warmth of his body in the bed beside her was suddenly stifling. She slid out of bed, ignoring his half-asleep mumble of protest, and headed to the small washroom to clean up.

When the sun finally went down an hour later, Heather was immaculate. Cleaned, dressed, and she'd even eaten some of the food she had packed before leaving her cottage. As she waited for Revan to wake up, she was determined that there would be no sweet talk of trysts and promises of pleasant futures. Tonight was about getting back what Arnel had stolen from her. She would be focused. Disciplined.

Those thoughts vanished as Revan got up to stretch, letting the blankets fall away from his bare body.

“Good evening,” he said with a smile, unashamed of his nudity, or how his cock was still hard from whatever dreams a vampire had before waking. “Pardon me for sleeping in. I never was a morning person, and now I’m not an afternoon person either.”

Heather stared because fair was fair. He had enjoyed a fine view of her, after all. He had strong, muscular legs, though there were faint lines of scars on one thigh, as though a beast had raked him with a claw.

“We should get ready to leave at a moment’s notice,” Heather said. “Bettany knew you were a vampire, so she wouldn’t have told her maid to bother us before dark, but I don’t know when she’ll knock. If we’re to sneak in with the laundry, it would be best not to delay it and arouse suspicion.”

“Very sensible,” he agreed, absently combing his fingers through his thick, dark hair. “I’ll make myself presentable, then. If you’ll excuse me.”

To his credit, he was quick enough in the washroom. When he came back into the shadowed bedroom, he was once more the picture of an immaculate foreign nobleman, and she

couldn't decide which way she preferred him—naked and disheveled or poised and polished. He looked absurdly attractive either way.

“Now is when it gets dangerous,” Heather warned him. “We are going to have to drop the shadow spell on the way, and just hope no one is actively searching for us. It would look ridiculous for a cart full of clothes to be trailing extra darkness along beneath it.”

As she spoke, she freed their cloaks from the window frame and shook them out. She offered him his before donning her own.

He took it with a murmur of thanks. “It will put your friend in danger if we do, won't it? If Arnel senses us here, or on the wagon?”

“We'll drop the spell at the last second,” Heather decided. “She can say she knew nothing about us, and that we snuck into the laundry on our own. She's lied her way out of worse jams, and if we're dead, then Arnel will have no reason to bother her anyway.”

They extinguished the candles and made sure that the room was just as they had found it. Not wanting to lurk in the hallway waiting, Heather took out her jade charm and let it sway on a string, watching it carefully. When the pendant shifted from rhythmic swaying to tight, erratic circles, she knew a friend was approaching.

“Let's go,” she said, pocketing the stone before cracking open the door to peer down the hall.

A young woman was making her way silently down the hall toward their door. She was dressed in common clothes and had an intelligent look to her that reminded Heather of Bettany.

“Miss Heather?” the girl whispered, hesitating in the hall as the shadow spell made the candlelight flicker.

“We're here.” Heather stepped out of the warded room, and Revan followed.

“Lady Holloway told me you and your friend needed a way into the castle,” the girl said. “I don’t want to know more than that, so come along silently and I’ll do my best not to get us all killed.”

“Your understanding of the situation is admirable, young lady.” Revan brushed past Heather, moving to take the startled girl’s hand in greeting. “I hope you’re being generously compensated?” he asked, bowing over her hand to brush a kiss to her fingers before he looked up and held her gaze.

Heather knew the impact of those golden eyes at close range. She watched the girl flush and wondered if she herself had looked half so flustered when she first saw Revan.

“I— Ah, that is, yes, my lord.” The girl withdrew her hand and bobbed a half curtsy as if by instinct in the presence of a noble. “My lady is paying me, and I know the risks. Now come along, both of you. We should go.”

The cart they were to be smuggled in was a sturdy thing, built to be pulled by a horse, with the back covered by a tarp to keep the mud off of the bags of clothes. The washhouse was just outside the fortified walls, which Heather knew was unusual. Once, the castle laundry had been taken care of in the castle itself, but the feud between Arnel and Bettany Holloway had had many ripple effects on the commoners, including nonsense like her employees not being allowed to do their work where it was convenient. It was fitting, Heather thought, that his spiteful, petty banishment of laundry services was now a security risk that she could exploit. He never liked to admit that he was wrong.

The ride to the castle was claustrophobic. She and Revan were each hidden in a big canvas sack used to transport laundry. Bettany’s maid gave them the unhelpful advice to “look lumpy, and don’t make noise!” Revan was in the corner of the cart behind the driver, and Heather leaned against him, trying not to think about the smell of starch or how stuffy it was inside the sack.

There was nothing heroic or romantic about the ride over. It was uncomfortable and embarrassing, and each time the cart

stopped, it was terrifying. Heather could hear every word spoken by the guards, and even though the questions were routine, her heart raced with fear. Revan was tense beside her, and she could just imagine the guards finding them, and Revan drawing his sword and getting into a bloody melee in the road —

And then the cart was moving again, off the cobbles and onto wood planks, by the sound of it. Heather guessed that it was the passage through the side gate, where servants accessed the courtyard. She was tensed and ready for disaster until the cart finally stopped, and Bettany's maid spoke.

“There's nobody about,” she murmured. “Best be off before someone comes to help empty the cart.”

Heather started to free herself from the canvas, but Revan was faster. Somehow, he was already out of his own concealing laundry bag and helped her rise from hers.

“Thank you for the ride,” Revan said quietly, bowing once more to the maid before he vaulted down from the cart. He turned to offer a hand to Heather, which she gratefully took.

Her own hands were trembling from nerves as the adrenaline slowly ebbed from her system. She managed to climb down without stumbling and turned to smile for the girl. She realized that she didn't even know her name, but perhaps the girl preferred it that way.

“Thank you,” Heather said. “May your own plans be just as successful.”

The girl nodded and hopped down herself, pausing only to loop the horse's reins around a hitching post before she vanished through a door into the castle.

Heather looked around, getting her bearings. They were in a short tunnel through the fortification wall that the servants used rather than going through the main gate with common concerns like laundry or food. There was an open portcullis behind them where the cart had entered and a closed one ahead that barred their way to the central courtyard.

Fortunately, several passages led to this tunnel, and Heather knew them all.

She held Revan's hand in both of hers as she took a second to breathe and calm down.

"An invigorating ride," Revan commented, his teeth flashing in the torchlight. "Pity I can't travel by laundry cart more often! It was exciting."

"Ridiculous man." She smiled, though, feeling better for some reason. "You seem like you're in a fine mood. Don't you have to be invited in?"

"Being smuggled in counts as an invitation," Revan said, giving her his arm as if they were taking a leisurely stroll.

Once he got her moving away from the cart, Heather steered him along the wall. "There's a kitchen door up ahead, on the left." It was rarely used at night and ought to be locked. Hopefully, no one had fixed the loose tumblers. "You can cast your spell again, now that we're away from the cart."

"Oh, I don't know," Revan said, keeping his voice low so it didn't carry in the still night air. "Maybe it's more sporting if he knows we're coming."

"Don't get cocky," she warned. "I told you he's dangerous already. If he's been dabbling in magic, too, then that's even worse. Let's not make his night any easier, shall we?"

"I shall be guided by you, then," Revan said, summoning the shadows to conceal them with merely a gesture.

His magic was fascinating. While she had to offer a drop of blood for such a spell, he could merely wave it into being. She had no time to wonder about the exact mechanisms of it, though. There would be time to speak of magic later if all went well, but right now, she had a lock to pick.

From a pocket in her skirt, she produced a short metal rod with a hook and a wave-shaped wire.

"Delightful," Revan murmured as she put tension on the lock and inserted the wave tool.

"Shh," she chided him.

There was no finesse required with this old door. She rattled the wave tool over the tumblers, back and forth, and in a matter of seconds, she'd turned the latch.

"They should bar it," Revan said critically, holding the door open for her as she entered.

"There are ways around bars, too," she said wryly. "But they do make more noise."

No kitchen was ever deserted in a castle, but at this hour, the duke and his entourage had already been served and had retired to enjoy drinks in a parlor somewhere while the servants ate. Heather and Revan slipped unnoticed through the quiet kitchen, taking the servants' stairs up to the higher floors of the castle.

Their luck could not hold forever, though. As they climbed the narrow wood steps, a door opened on the landing above them, and a young man in servant livery stepped through.

He froze when he saw them.

Heather recognized him in a flash. "Young Thomas. How's your father's gout?"

"What?" Thomas said, his voice strangled as he stared.

"I said how's your father?" Heather asked again. "He hasn't been into the sherry, has he? It will make his feet worse, and I told him so."

"No, Mistress Thistlecrown," Thomas said quickly as if the instinctive need to appease the forest witch overrode his surprise at seeing her here. "He hasn't touched the stuff since he spoke to you. I'm not sure what you told him, but it worked."

"I told him that if he didn't take care of his hands and feet, I'd take them away," she said dryly. "It got his attention. Now, Thomas, I have two jobs for you."

"Er?" Thomas said, his eyes flicking from her to Revan.

"First, thank your mother for the pie," Heather continued blithely. "It was very kind of her, she didn't need to go to the trouble. Second, is the duke in his chambers?"

“Uh....” Thomas hesitated, wide-eyed.

“I’m in a bit of a hurry, dearie,” Heather said. “Yes or no?”

“No, Mistress,” he said quickly. “I just gave him his port in the observatory. He’s alone. Are you—?”

“I just need to speak with him, dearie.” Heather smiled. “Run along now, and best not to mention that you saw us.”

Again Thomas hesitated, and this time, she felt Revan tense behind her. But the young man had more sense than his father because he nodded slowly.

“I’ll tell my mum that you liked the pie,” Thomas said, “and I won’t say a word to anyone else. Good luck, Mistress Thistlecrown. Er. With your visit.”

“You’re a good boy, Thomas,” she said, remembering how he used to visit her on behalf of his father. “You should speak to Widow Holloway’s maid in the laundry. I bet you’d get along.”

“Lily?” Thomas smiled for the first time. “Really?”

“Let’s get a move on,” Revan growled behind her.

Thomas stepped smartly back, making room.

They continued up the stairs, still trailing a darkness around them that seemed to swallow the light. Thomas’s rapid footfalls faded away down the stairs behind them.

“Do you really need to indulge in matchmaking in the hallway?” Revan asked.

“He was friendly and didn’t give us away,” Heather said without missing a beat. “People like it when you take an interest in them. They remember.”

“Do you plan on taking an interest in everyone at my castle, too?” Revan sounded exasperated.

“We have to get there first,” she said, avoiding the question for now. She still wasn’t sure what role she would play in his domain, or if she’d stay for long.

“Sounds like a *yes*,” Revan said. “Witches are all meddlers.”

“And what are all vampires?” she challenged, turning to meet his gaze.

“Ambitious,” he said with a grin, his sour mood vanishing in an instant. “And selfish. Hence my desire for your company.”

Heather rolled her eyes at the flattery but let it lie, saving her breath for climbing to the next floor on the steep stairs.

The top of the staircase had no door to it and was instead open to the hall of the servants’ quarters. It was quiet and empty, since the usual occupants were down in the kitchen eating, and Heather and Revan hurried down the hall. Once again, she was glad for the concealing shadows as they muffled the sound of footsteps on worn pine boards. The luxury of hallway carpeting was not for domestic servants, and their shoes would have echoed loudly without the magic to help them.

“I assume you know the way to the observatory?” Revan whispered, close beside her.

“It’s built on the roof,” she said. “It was a separate addition by his father. The late duke loved to study the sciences and was fascinated by astronomy. I don’t know why Arnel is up there.”

“It’s probably a trap if he knows there’s trouble coming for him,” Revan warned. “Be careful.”

Heather almost laughed at the idea. Nothing about breaking into the fortified castle ruled by her ex-lover, with a vampire, to steal a magic item, was *careful*. “I’ll try. Alright, this door should lead to the rooftop.”

Revan motioned for her to wait and moved up to press his ear to the heavy wood door. A cool draft blew in from under the door as Heather waited, holding her breath to let him listen.

“I hear a patrol,” he whispered. “At least two guards.”

“We’ll try to avoid them,” Heather said. “Let me silence the door.”

A dab of grease and a whispered charm convinced the hinges to be silent. They were old, heavy brass things that would have groaned otherwise. Revan listened again at the door, and when he nodded, they silently opened it and slipped out onto the stone roof.

The wind was much stronger atop the castle. The distant bobbing torchlight of the guard’s patrol was just disappearing around the corner of the observatory, which took up most of the middle of the castle’s main rooftop. Instead of four sides, the observatory had eight, with sturdy stone walls that supported thick wood beams. Between the beams were huge sheets of glass, with a center portal that could be opened to allow a large brass telescope to look through, or be closed against the weather.

Heather had spent many a pleasant night stargazing in this same observatory, years ago, with Arnel as company. She wondered if Arnel knew that she was coming, and whether he had picked the observatory to wait for her in on purpose.

The door to the observatory was closed, with a simple iron latch to keep it shut tight against the elements. Heather reached for the door, but Revan caught her hand.

“Allow me. If he was searching for you, he might not have anticipated my arrival.” Revan pushed back his heavy cloak and checked that his sword was clear, then opened the door.

Heather took a breath and followed him in.

Seven



The observatory was unlit, but the shadow magic clearly showed Heather what darkness would otherwise conceal.

The place looked dusty and unused, the large room empty of the instruments and furniture that once filled it. All that was left was a few empty shelves by the walls, a dirty table littered with wine bottles and broken glasses, and beside the table a single, wooden chair, from which Arnel was rising.

It had been five years since she had seen him, but he looked to have aged fifteen. He was dressed in his fine clothes, but the tailored jacket was buttoned too tight around his once-trim waist. He held a wineglass in one hand, and he drained it before setting it down on the table beside him. His other hand held a glass sphere that she had never seen before.

He was also wearing her mother's amulet.

"I should have guessed that you'd both arrive at the same time," Arnel said, his voice still deep and commanding as it ever had been. "Lock the door, Heather. We wouldn't want the guards walking in on our stargazing, now, would we?"

"You've been drinking." Heather did turn and lock the door, though, because she did not want the guards to run in and get themselves killed for no reason. "You look terrible, and so does the observatory. Where's your father's telescope?"

"I sold it," he replied. "For this." He raised the glass sphere in his hands. "It's called a skystone. You'll be able to see the moon's surface much more clearly with this than with a telescope. Observe. *Moonstone*."

He said the last word to the glass sphere itself, and the surface changed, glowing with a soft white light. Not a perfect white, though. There were darker patches on it. Familiar ones.

“It shows the surface of the moon itself,” Arnel said. “Clever, isn’t it? Hello, my dear. Won’t you introduce me to your friend?”

Heather huffed out an irritated breath. “This is the Marquis of Monvale, Revan Thorn. He and I are both here to reclaim things you’ve stolen, Arnel. If you return them to us, we’ll leave you in peace.”

“Oh, I doubt that very much. That’s close enough, Lord Thorn,” Arnel said sharply as Revan stepped up beside her. “I have my own defenses. I advise you not to test me.”

“Then hand over the lady’s amulet,” Revan said. “I have no wish to linger for conversation. It reeks of cheap wine and misery here. Your father would be ashamed to see it.”

“Yes, you knew him, didn’t you?” Arnel ignored the insults. His smile was one of gleeful anticipation, of someone who held a winning hand at the card table.

Heather didn’t trust it. “We’re not here to talk, Markus.”

“But you’ll listen,” Arnel said, his gaze fixed on Revan. “Did he tell you that he had been here before? That he had lost something precious? Because you did, didn’t you, Lord Thorn? It was stolen—and not by me.”

“Well, this is tedious,” Revan said, drawing his sword. “Oh, well, we tried talking. I think that—”

“*Sunstone*,” Arnel snapped, and the world went white.

Heather flinched from the blinding light that suddenly filled the room.

Beside her, Revan screamed, a horrible, animalistic sound of raw pain. She heard his sword clatter to the floor and opened her watering eyes to see that Revan had wrapped himself in his cloak, huddled in a ball on the floor.

“Revan!” Heather tore off her own cloak to throw over him. “Markus, stop this!”

“What, so he can kill me?” Arnel asked incredulously. “Don’t be ridiculous, Heather. You’re supposed to be clever.” He crossed over to her, bending to collect Revan’s sword from the ground. “I don’t know what lies he told you to get you on his side, but hear me out. You won’t be so eager to protect him when you know the truth.”

Heather planted herself between the two men, shielding Revan from Arnel. The duke now stood with a sword in one hand and a blinding globe of daylight in the other, smirking as Revan panted like a cornered animal beneath the thick cloaks. The smell of burned hair and burned flesh wafted up from his cowering form, and Heather’s heart froze, terrified of how much damage had already been done.

The protective shadows had been shredded apart by the magical daylight, and all she could do was use her own shadow to hide him. She had to neutralize the skystone. Fortunately, Arnel didn’t seem to want to kill her. Yet. “Tell me the truth, then, Your Grace,” she said, playing for time. “I’ll listen.”

Arnel stared at her, now, a hungry look in his eyes. “You should thank me, you know.”

“That’s a bit rich,” she snapped. “I should thank you for banishing me?”

“What? No.” He shook his head, making a visible effort to gather his thoughts. Heather wondered again how much he had had to drink. “You’re here for the amulet, yes? Your mother gave it to you. Do you know where she got it, though?”

“She never said,” Heather admitted. “But you stole it from me!”

“And your mother stole it from Lord Thorn!” Arnel searched her expression, clearly wanting to see outrage there, wanting her to side with him. “Don’t you see? He’s come back for the amulet! If I didn’t have it, he would have hunted you down, and you’d be dead right now. That’s why you should thank me.”

“You never stole it to protect me,” she shot back. “You banished me, Markus. That’s the opposite of protecting someone you care about.”

“You banished yourself,” he scoffed.

“You—” Heather began, but her incredulous reply was cut off as the duke kept talking.

“I said that if you wouldn’t share my bed, you couldn’t share my city, either,” Arnel said. “It was you who decided that it meant you were banished.”

“You told me I had until sundown to get beyond the walls!”

“Or to get in my bed where you belonged,” he agreed. “And now you’re back. Stay with me, Heather. I’ll give you back your amulet. You can have back everything you want. I’ve missed you so much.” He took half a step as if he were going to reach for her, but his hands were full of weapons, and he couldn’t even try to pull her into his arms. “We had a good run, didn’t we? I’ll forgive the things you said in anger, and we can start fresh. Like the old days.”

Incredible. She had broken into his castle to rob and possibly murder him, and here he was, proposing a reunion. “I will admit that there are many things I miss about our days together.”

“You liked fine things.” Arnel looked hungry again. “Jewels. Perfumes. Dresses.”

“I do miss those.” Heather linked her hands behind her back where he couldn’t see and tried to get a grasp of the shadows there. They slipped through her fingers, insubstantial in the damn sunlight.

“I can give them back to you,” Arnel said. “I’ve always had the power to make you happy again, Heather. You just need to come back.”

“I’ve missed our conversations,” she said, letting her voice grow softer. “About politics and magic. I’ve missed good company. More than anything else, though ... I miss how I used to feel.”

“How did you used to feel?” He was close enough that she could smell the wine on his breath.

“Like I could trust your word.”

Arnel smiled. “That’s easy, then! You can trust my word. You always could. I didn’t lie to you, unlike this one.” He gestured with the sword at Revan, who had not moved from the cocoon of dark cloaks. “He was just using you to get to me. He probably would have killed us both and run off laughing with the amulet, alone.”

“Perhaps so.” She glanced down toward Revan. “Is it true, Lord Thorn,” she said, raising her voice, “that you came to this country seeking the same amulet that I wanted returned?”

Revan let out a pained sound, and when he spoke, his voice was hoarse. “Yes. Your mother stole it decades ago, but I lost track of it. Then I heard that it was seen on the duke. I needed it back, so I came to get it. I would have bartered for it, too, if the guards hadn’t attacked me!”

“He probably wants it to track his enemies,” Arnel said, his tone triumphant once more. “The amulet allows you to know where people are. I’ve become skilled with magic items, Heather. That ought to impress you! It’s how I kept track of where you were. And where he was, after he killed my guards. He’s a murderer and a liar.”

“I know what he is,” Heather said. “And what you are.” Heat rose in Heather’s cheeks. Revan had deceived her, but it was more than mere anger that upset her. She was also furious that Arnel was there to see it and to laugh at her for being a fool yet again. “Why didn’t you tell me?” she demanded of the vampire.

“Pride,” Revan answered, defeated. “Idiot pride. At first, I did not want to risk angering you, and then I thought I could conceal the truth. It was a senseless test of wits to keep it from you. I’m sorry, Heather. You deserved better.”

“She deserves me,” Arnel said, raising the sword. “Any last words, villain?”

“Kill him while he’s distracted with killing me, my lady,” Revan called, harsh and mocking. “You deserve better than either of us.”

“Enough! I will handle him,” Heather declared. She gave Arnel a stubborn look and made no move to let him pass. “I see clearly what happened now, and how this can all be fixed. I’ll take care of it.”

She could see the desperate desire in his gaze, how he wanted it to be true.

“Is this a trick?” he whispered, the point of his sword wavering in the air. “A dark spell?”

“Shadow magic is impossible in the light of the sun,” she said. “Stand back, Markus, and watch closely. Hold the skystone high, and I’ll pull off the cloaks. We’ll let the sunlight do its work.”

There was a fleeting look of suspicion and cunning in his eyes, but he was too sure of himself to doubt her for long. He stepped back, well out of arm’s reach. “Go on then! End him.”

Heather turned her back to him and crouched by Revan, reaching for the edge of the cloaks. “It’s time for you to see that you can trust me, too,” she said.

But she was not speaking to Arnel.

Shadow magic was not going to work in this light, but Heather was not a vampire, nor was she only a shadow mage. She could also wield light magic. The light could heal, but it could also blind. And the room was full of it.

With a word of power and an enormous mental effort, she cut the light, bending it, forcing it where she willed. As she tore off the cloaks, the room was plunged into absolute darkness, except for a narrow, blinding beam that shot from the skystone directly into Arnel’s face.

The duke screamed, dropping the glass sphere. It shattered on the ground as he clutched his sun-blinded eyes. The sound cut off abruptly into a wet, strangled gurgle, and in the fresh darkness, Heather could barely see the movement as Arnel

collapsed to the floor, thrashing in panic, with a darker shadow above him.

There was nothing elegant or clean about Revan as he tore out the duke's throat with his fangs. The man's thrashing got weaker as Revan easily pinned him down, the light extinguished, the sword unused. Arnel let out a last, wet gurgle as he stilled.

Heather stepped closer and raised a hand. A little ball of moonlight appeared above her fingers, illuminating the scene before her.

Revan had been badly burned, but his skin was healing as she watched, and his hair was growing back. The blood that coated his chin looked black in the moonlight, and he sat back in a crouch over the fresh corpse, catching his breath.

She waited in silence until he looked up and met her eyes.

His golden gaze had never looked so feral.

Revan gave her the unapologetic grin of a man who'd been caught in a crime but wasn't sorry. "Well. Now you've truly seen me at my worst." He wiped his sleeve across his face, leaving a smear of blood on his cheek. "If you wish to take your amulet and leave, Lady Thistlecrown, I won't stop you."

Heather let the little moon hover in the air and moved closer, kneeling so Arnel was between them. "Won't you? You came all this way for it and now you're going to let me leave with it? Tell me what's really going on, Revan. The truth, this time."

Revan dropped his gaze with a sigh, looking down at the gleam of silver from Arnel's chest. "I may as well."

He reached down—the dark, burned skin on his hands was visibly healing already—and he unlatched the chain from around Arnel's neck. "Years ago, I found this amulet in the ruins of a mage's tower. It has several magical properties, but the most interesting, in my opinion, is that it can help one find a person. The nearest friend. Or enemy! Or a specific person. For years, it served me well, and then I lost it to a red-headed witch. She passed it on to you, evidently, and then Arnel took

it and wore it in public. I've had people looking for it—jewelers and fences—and one of them spotted it on the duke's neck and sent word to me. So here I am.”

“You said that you needed one of his magical items,” Heather recalled.

“I've wanted to retrieve it since I lost it, but yes. There's a centennial masquerade coming up. I'm sure you can see how an amulet like this would be useful at a party where everyone's identity is a secret?”

“You need it for a party?” she asked, incredulous.

“It sounds unimportant when you phrase it that way, but yes. I do. I did. To be honest, my perspective has been rather changed these last few days. My foolish pride has nearly gotten me killed twice since I arrived, and I won't press my luck a third time. I yield the claim. If you want the artifact, you can have it.”

He offered her the amulet, not meeting her eyes.

Heather reached out and took his chin, turning his face to hers. A look of surprise flashed in his golden eyes as she leaned in and kissed him hard. It was a gesture of claiming rather than romance, and she did not mind at all that she could taste the blood of her enemy on his lips.

“Heather,” he murmured as the kiss broke.

“Let's get out of here,” she said. “You promised me a luxurious stay in your castle, Lord Thorn. I intend to collect.”

“Of course,” he said, smiling. “I'll be sure to always keep my word to you, my lady.”

They rose together, and this time, Revan stepped over the body on the floor to pull Heather into a tight embrace. “I will admit that you had me a bit worried for a moment,” he murmured in her ear.

“Was I so convincing?” She buried her face against his neck, the relief only now hitting her. “I was so afraid. Are you alright?”

“I’ll be fine in a few minutes.” He stroked her hair, his strength a comfort as she clung to him. “While blood given willingly is sweet, there’s great power in lifeblood that’s stolen. I’ll heal from the burns thanks to him. You were magnificent, my dear. That’s twice you’ve saved me when I sought violence.”

“I wouldn’t have dared to confront him if it weren’t for you,” she said. “You shook me out of my rut, and now I want my life back. Not my old life here with him, but one where I can live for myself. I finally feel like I can leave and move on.”

“I’m thrilled for you, my lady, and so pleased to be of service,” Revan said lightly. “Do you think, during your stay, that I could borrow this amulet once or twice? For vampire reasons?”

She had to laugh. “Yes, you can borrow it for your masquerade, so long as you promise to show me how to use it as well!”

He raised his hands to loop the chain around her neck. “I’ll tell you everything,” he promised. “Thank you, Lady Thistlecrown.”

She kissed him, and a warm breeze stirred her hair. It carried the smell of spring, of new beginnings, and of hope after a long winter. She smiled as the kiss broke, recognizing the good omen for what it was. “Let’s be off, then, Lord Thorn. A new adventure awaits.”

A Note From Kendra

I hope, Dear Reader, that you have enjoyed this introduction to Heather Thistlecrown and Revan Thorn.

Their next adventure takes them into the windswept mountains of Monvale to meet mysterious vampires at a masquerade ball. While everyone will be intrigued by the beautiful witch on Revan's arm, some will be more welcoming than others...

Reader, you are cordially invited to subscribe to my newsletter at <https://kendracorbeau.substack.com/> if you wish to stay in the loop about future releases.

As always, leaving a review is the highest compliment you can pay to an author whose work you've enjoyed.

Thank you for reading,

Kendra

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