

TALIA VANCE

GOLD



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ONE

Ireland is magic. There's no other way to describe it. The air is alive, so cold it cuts right through skin and bone, even though it's supposed to be summer. Ever-present clouds move across the sky, dampening the ground with fat drops of rain that make everything glisten. The earth smells of loose dirt and something richer. The elements converge and meld, coming together so fiercely that even a human must feel their power.

I am drunk with it.

I ride in the back of a black BMW driven by a tall guy with ginger mutton-chops and a tight blue suit. Apparently the full facial sideburn is making a comeback here. His name is Mikel, which rhymes with pickle, but he had to tell me three times before I got it right, so I'm just going with Mick. He doesn't smile, but he keeps glancing at me in the rearview mirror. His eyes are rimmed with a sadness that makes him seem older than his eighteen years.

"Did Joe tell you why I'm here?" I ask.

Mick shakes his head. "Not my business."

"Don't you want to know what I'm running from?"

"Nope."

When Joe left me at LAX yesterday and told me his friend would be there when I landed in Dublin, I assumed that Mick already knew what he was getting into. That he understood the danger.

"Well, you should. You might change your mind about helping me."

"Doubt it." Mick concentrates on the narrow road in front of him.

The houses get farther apart as we drive. Sheep graze in pastures so green they make my eyes hurt. I blink back a tear. I refuse to let myself cry.

It wasn't my fault.

I take a deep breath and concentrate on pulling myself together. "Where are we going?" I ask, trying again to engage Mick. Trying to distract myself.

A hint of a smile teases at the corners of his eyes. "A place I think you'll like."

"Thank you, Mr. Vague."

"Lorcan Hall on the Dingle Peninsula."

The unfamiliar names mean nothing to me, but at least we have an actual destination. It's not enough to ground me, but it's something. I lean back against the seat and suck in another taste of the wild air. I need to tell him what's coming. "The Sons are looking for me."

He doesn't take his eyes off the road. "Figured as much."

"You get what that means, right? They want me dead. And I won't go down without a fight."

He sighs. "You never have."

What's that supposed to mean? He sounds so certain. "I'm sorry, have we met?"

"Yes." He must catch my look of confusion in the mirror because he adds, "Perhaps not yet."

"What do you mean, not yet? Either we've met or we haven't." And I'm pretty sure I would remember meeting a red-headed Elvis Costello with mutton chops.

"We have a mutual friend."

"Joe. I know. That's not the same as actually meeting. Did Joe tell you about what happened?"

"I wasn't thinking of Joe. I meant Lord Lorcan."

"Not ringing a bell." I don't know a Lord anything. I mean, Blake can be holier than thou at times, but he's only a demigod.

"You probably know him as Montgomery."

The cold air fills me until I'm nearly numb. I haven't heard his name in weeks. Austin Montgomery. A murderer. A god. The air in the car swirls around me before it occurs to me to summon it. I fight against the urge to blow out the windows, struggle to keep my power under control. It's what got me into this mess in the first place. Besides, Austin is safely locked up in the underworld.

I start counting in exponents of seven until the wind settles around me. I don't speak until I'm certain I can say his name without losing it. "Austin

Montgomery is not my friend.”

Mick lifts his chin stiffly. “Sorry to hear that.”

I wonder if this means he won’t help me. “You can just drop me off at the next town.”

“Can’t.”

Crap. I don’t even know this guy. Maybe this was a set-up to begin with; Blake was furious when he sent me off with Joe.

“Okay, let me out here then.” I look out the window. There’s nothing but fields and sheep and rain.

“Easy, bandia.”

It’s what Blake said to me the first time he saw me. The tears are back all at once, streaming down my cheeks in long lines, little waterfalls of saline that I can’t stop.

Mick doesn’t say anything more. He keeps his eyes firmly on the road. I don’t have much choice but to trust him. I’m halfway around the world with no friends and a bunch of demigods out to kill me.

I don’t know how long I cry, but it’s a good half hour later before Mick tries to talk to me again. “I don’t know what happened with you and ... ” He pauses, biting back Austin’s name. “It doesn’t matter. I am sworn to protect all that is his.”

My anger is back tenfold. My body burns with fire, but it’s a welcome relief from the hurt that squeezes my heart. “I am not his,” I say. “Not even close. Austin killed my horse. He nearly drowned my best friend. He made me kill my boyfriend. I sent him back to the underworld where he belongs.”

Mick covers his mouth with his hand. “Oh my.”

“Are you laughing?” Blue flames start to spark on my fingertips, my power there before I can stop it, ready to strike. I take a deep breath and concentrate on another element: Water. Ice.

Better. I can control this. I have to.

Mick shakes his head, but he keeps his hand firmly over his mouth.

“It’s not funny.”

Mick removes his hand and looks as stoic as ever. “The path to your destiny never is.” Then he does laugh. “I think I’m going to like you.”

That makes one of us.

TWO

“We’re almost there,” Mick says from up front.

I open my eyes, trying to focus. I glance at my watch. Nearly four hours have passed since we left the airport in Dublin. The rain stopped somewhere along the way and the sun peeks out from behind fluffy white clouds, making everything even brighter.

We drive through a little town that looks like something straight out of a theme park, with cobblestone streets and rows of old buildings in bright colors. The pub on the corner has a suit of armor standing guard at the front door. Tiny little iced cakes dot the window of a bakery across the street. As we turn up a hill, I get a perfect view of the harbor, filled with fishing boats and a few pretty schooners.

“Cath is beautiful, isn’t she?”

“Cath?”

“The town. The prettiest stop on the Dingle Peninsula. But then I’m biased.”

“It is pretty.”

“Wait until you see Lorcan Hall.”

“Is it here?”

“About ten kilometers north. The ancestral home of the Montgomerys.”

“So we’re going to his house.” As much as I don’t like this idea, I have to admit it’s the last place the Sons will look for me. Joe is kind of brilliant.

“It’s more of an estate. But you needn’t worry—a Montgomery hasn’t set foot on the property for at least a thousand years.” As he drives, Mick gives me a history of the estate and the improvements that have been made over the last few centuries. I’m sure it’s not uncommon for people to know the history of the property they manage, but he talks as though he personally oversaw the work.

And then it occurs to me—he has. Joe isn't the only giolla around. While Joe has always served the Sons of Killian, it makes sense that the gods would enlist giolla to help them, too.

“You're like Joe?”

“Not at all. I'm far more outgoing.”

I'm not letting him evade the question. “You're a giolla?”

Mick sits up straighter, the top of his head brushing the ceiling of the car. “In the service of Arawn.”

Arawn ... Austin's true name, the name that serves him as the god of the underworld. Before he showed up in my hometown, he'd been banished for a thousand years, confined to the underworld for taking a mortal life. After only three years of being able to once again traverse the gateway between his realm and ours, he was banished a second time. By me.

Not that I feel bad about it. The underworld can have him.

“How long have you been in his service?” I finally ask.

“A long while.”

The road narrows as it winds higher, twisting and turning through a forest of trees until I can't see the town or the ocean anymore. “Can you remember the last time Austin came here?” The giolla are keepers of the history they live, so Mick should know this.

“Aye. The lord graced us in the year of our gods 1009. The house never got a wink.” Mick's eyes crinkle in the corners, and I wonder how he manages to keep from getting crow's feet given the centuries he's been alive.

“What was he like then?” I can't imagine Austin as some kind of medieval lord.

“Fancied himself quite a lad.”

“Figures.”

Mick nods his head like he's made a decision. “I give him a new name and persona every sixty years or so, even though he never comes back to claim it.”

“Did you know he was back? In California?” It's kind of sad that Mick has been maintaining Austin's life on earth for all these years for nothing.

Mick doesn't answer. He straightens a little more, though there's barely room in the car for him to do so. “Are you truly a bandia then?” he asks, changing the subject. “Is that what's stirred the Sons?”

The Sons of Killian have hunted my ancestors for centuries. The same way they hunt me now. “Who else knows?” I demand. “About the bandia?”

“Even the most stalwart of the people here know our town’s history. The bandia are part of that.” Mick smiles. “Best you don’t go throwing your power around where anyone can see.”

Maybe Joe did fill him in on why I’m running. “So you’re saying my one-woman magic show is out?”

“Perhaps not. I imagine most folks would pay a small fortune to see it.”

Just when I think I’m going to be carsick from all the turns, he pulls the car off the road, stopping in front of a huge pair of iron gates. Each gate has a giant metal sun at its center and is flanked by a high stone wall that goes on as far as the eye can see, on either side. Mick hits a button on the rearview mirror and the gates open with a creak. He picks up his phone and says something in a thick brogue that I can’t understand at all.

After a mile or so, we crest the top of a hill. The ocean is visible again, stretching out beyond a flat expanse of land that ends in a steep drop to the thrashing waves. The house sits on the bluff. Grass and stone pathways dot the land around it, ending at a low stone wall that follows the edge of the cliff. The jagged hillside matches the fierceness of the white caps and rocks below.

The house itself is more of a castle than a home, a giant stone building with two immense wings that fold behind it, walling in a courtyard on three sides. Matching round turrets flank the corners, like something out of a fairy tale. To the right is a large barn, encased in matching stone. A man lunges a shiny bay horse in an adjacent field. It’s a home fit for a king.

For a god.

“You like it?” Mick stops the car so I can take it all in.

My chest expands as I breathe in the salty air. “It might be the most beautiful place I’ve ever seen.”

“I know exactly what you mean.” He eases the car down the hill, gliding to a stop at the front of the house.

Eight people are lined up along the stone drive. They look perfectly starched in their black uniforms, but on closer inspection they all seem to fidget, shifting in their places as they try to get a glimpse past the dark tint of the car windows.

Mick gets out of the car and walks around to open the rear door. The eyes of the assembled staff settle on me as I step out, in my slept-in jeans and sweatshirt. I push a strand of brown hair behind my ear in a useless attempt to tame it.

Mick goes down the line, introducing me to each person in turn. I follow, bowing my head and extending my hand. I try to commit their names to memory, but by the time we get to the frizzy-haired, freckled woman on the end, a cook named Rhiannon, their names are swirling around my head in a jumble.

Rhiannon takes my hand. I'm about to let go, but she tightens her fingers, trapping me in a painful squeeze. She stares at the silver charm bracelet around my wrist, taking in the small horse and horseshoe charms before settling on the silver wolfsbane blossom dangling from the chain.

Her eyes go wide, and she drops my hand just as suddenly as she trapped it. She backs up a step. "I'll not work in the house with her."

Mick puts a hand on Rhiannon's shoulder. "She is a guest, and you will treat her as one."

"I don't serve witches."

The word stings.

So much for running. I can't escape what I am. The eyes of the assemblage are all on me now, still curious, but wary too.

The stable manager, a short, rough-looking man who I think is named Malcolm, laughs. "Can't you see she's American?" This draws a laugh from the other four men in line.

"Enough." Mick's voice is barely above a whisper, but everyone stops laughing immediately, recognizing it for the command it is. Even Rhiannon looks chastened, her eyes focused firmly on the ground in front of her. Do they know what Mick is? Or is he using compulsion?

A light rain breaks free from the clouds, but no one moves. Mick takes my hand in his and I let him, grateful for the acceptance.

"Brianna is a guest of his lordship. If you cannot respect her, leave now."

I don't want to be Austin's guest, even if he's trapped safely in the underworld. I don't want to be Austin's anything. I pull my hand away from Mick.

Rhiannon glances up from the ground, her eyes narrowing on the pendant hanging at my throat, a silver circle the size of a quarter with a wolfsbane

blossom etched on it. “Accept my resignation then.” She reaches for the arm of the girl next to her. “And Shannon’s. No daughter of mine will work here.”

The rain comes harder now, but everyone stands in place. I shiver as the water soaks into my hair, turning the straightened locks into wild curls. There will be no taming it here.

Shannon doesn’t move. She makes eye contact with me from beneath her blond bangs. Her lips curve in a shy smile. She wants to stay, but her mother is right—she should run far away from this house while she can. I am exactly what her mother says.

A witch. A Seventh Daughter of Danu, who can control the elements and leave destruction in her wake. A danger to them all.

Just ask Blake.

Rhiannon crosses herself as she drags her daughter toward the road. She stops and points a long, crooked finger at my chest. “She will bring a plague on this house.”

The chill that fills me now has nothing to do with the rain. It’s bone deep. Austin used to call me Juliet to his Romeo, but it was Blake and I who were doomed from the start. Rhiannon’s words echo in my head, and all I can think is that Shakespeare only had it partially right.

I am a plague on both their houses.

THREE

Sleep is sporadic. I can't close my eyes without seeing the fury in Blake's eyes when he sent me away. I thought he could forgive me for what I did to him on the beach. I killed him, but I found a way to bring him back. Maybe we could've trusted each other after that, but his family was a whole other story.

What did he expect me to do? Just let them keep hurting me? A bandia can fight back. But I wouldn't hurt innocent people. How could he think that I could?

I'm left alone in a giant house that's basically a castle, with a staff that's afraid to look at me after Rhiannon's outburst. I spend most of my time in the huge room that Mick designated as mine. The bed is so high, it has its own stairs. The floors match the stone walls, making the room seem more cold than cozy, an elaborate cave softened by feather comforters and pillows. I pass a good seventy-two hours fueled by nineteenth-century science texts from the library and lots of room service.

At first, I jump at every sound, as if the Sons are right around the corner, waiting to catch me off guard. It's not like my fragile truce with the Sons was going to last forever, but I expected it to last more than a few short months. I don't even know if anyone was hurt in that fire. Or if Blake means to kill me too.

By the third day, I'm more restless than wary, and I set out to explore. I stick to the halls, taking in the paintings and furniture which make the house feel more like a museum than a home. Even with all the elaborate furnishings, there's an emptiness here, one so vast that even the thickest tapestry can't wall out the drafts and echoes. It's a house without a family. Without a soul.

It's not until I get outside and make my way to the barn that the cold chill that's settled around me since I fled Rancho Domingo starts to dissipate. The

familiar smells of oats and leather chase away the darkness. Malcolm, the stable manager, nods at me as I walk down the barn aisle. He looks even rougher in the half-light of the sun peeking through the clouds, his face pockmarked and scarred.

I stop at every stall, taking a minute to introduce myself to each horse. A thick bay flicks his ears at the sound of my voice and walks over to lift his nose over his stall door. I stroke his cheek.

“I see you’ve met Tally.” Malcolm steps beside me. “Don’t let him fool you. He’s all charm on the ground, but he’s a handful under tack. A tiger in a horse’s body.”

“I know the type.”

“You ride, then?” For someone who looks like a back-alley thug, the man’s voice is light and friendly.

“I had a horse back home.” I smile and hold out my hand.

Malcolm takes it without hesitation. He was the one who stood up for me when Rhiannon called me a witch. I don’t know whether he doubted her or was just trying to score points with Mick, but I like him either way.

“Can I ride?” I feel almost shy, asking.

“Aye, the horses will be glad for the company. But not Tally; start with Molly. She knows her way around the property and she won’t give you any trouble.”

Molly turns out to be a thick black mare with three white socks and a small star in the middle of her forehead. I groom her myself, but Malcolm insists on saddling her. He gives me a leg up and then points me in the direction of a path that disappears over a hill.

I ease Molly into a trot and then a canter. On a long stretch, I let her have her head and gallop. Everything goes by in a blur of green and gray, and my mind goes blank as it registers only the beat of Molly’s hooves on the soft earth and the cold wind on my face.

By the time I bring her back down to a walk, I can no longer see the house or barn behind me. A small trail branches off to the right of the main path, narrowing toward the ocean. I taste the salt on my lips, and I’m seized with longing to be closer.

I turn Molly the opposite way. I can’t afford to indulge my instincts. Not anymore.

I find a trail that disappears into rows of neatly planted trees before twisting up a steep hillside. I ride up, looking back every now and then to admire the view of the estate below.

A small clearing sits at the top of the hill. The remnants of two stone walls meet at a right angle in the middle of the field. The strange ruin is six feet at its highest point, three feet at its lowest. The longer wall stretches for about fifteen feet before turning the corner and going five feet farther. The stones are odd shapes, but they fit together like a jigsaw puzzle, forming neat rows.

I set Molly loose on a patch of fresh grass and approach the crumbled structure on foot.

The gray sky turns darker. Wisps of white mist crawl along the ground, breaking off in opposite directions where they meet the base of the wall. The stacked stones sealed with mud remind me of the wall I saw in the field with Danu ... in the vision I had when I tried a love spell with my friends at home. Only this wall is smaller and in disrepair.

The wind is cold, cutting through my light sweater. As I step closer to the ruin, I feel dizzy. I place my hand against the wall to regain my balance. The smooth stone is marred by deep lines cut into it, carved into primitive shapes. The first shape is a circle with lines pointing out, like a child's drawing of the sun. Next to it is a crude lightning bolt. The last shape is more detailed—the silhouette of a horse, its mane and tail flowing behind it as it runs.

I know that horse.

I finger the little horse charm hanging from my bracelet. I lift my wrist, holding the charm next to the stone carving, marveling at the similarities. The charm brushes the stone, and there's a flash of bright silver light before everything disappears.

Everything.

I'm surrounded by fog, so thick I can't make out anything but the cloud of choked air around me. The ground beneath my feet gives way to air, as if I'm floating. I close my eyes to try to orient myself, but that only makes me dizzier.

When I blink my eyes open, I'm back at the ruin, the solid ground under my feet. I catch my breath. Okay—I'm right here. Only everything looks different. The south wall is taller, reaching over my head nearly twelve feet or so. The mist

and gray sky are gone and bright sunshine lights the little clearing, which is filled with spring flowers. Molly is nowhere in sight.

A girl laughs in the distance. When I turn to look, there's nothing, just the wind whistling through the trees, which are thinner and sparser than I remember.

I hear the laughter again. Now I see the girl. She's about my age, maybe a little younger, with dark hair that flows to the middle of her back. Her dress is long, made of thick brown wool that brushes the ground. It's belted at the waist with a long strip of matching fabric. Her neck is adorned with a thick silver chain, accented by three distinct charms I recognize well: a horse, a horseshoe, and an odd-shaped flower.

I glance at my bracelet. The charms are identical, except for scratches and tarnish from years of wear.

"Gwyn," a boy with a thick Irish accent calls from behind her. "Come back." He doesn't speak in English, not exactly, but I understand him perfectly.

The girl's name is Gwyn? Danu had a daughter named Gwyn. Supposedly my charms belonged to her. Is this Danu's daughter? My ancestor?

The girl laughs again and runs toward the ruin. Toward me. She stops and turns toward the boy's voice before she sees me. "Come on, Aaron. The grass looks soft enough to lie on."

That gets the boy's attention. He peeks around the trunk of a tree, a mop of brown hair covering his eyes. "Is that so?"

A squeak catches in my throat. The boy's hair is long, brushing his collarbone, but it still falls across his forehead in a familiar, unruly way. His smile is crooked, the little imperfection that made Austin's otherworldly beauty feel almost human.

Impossible.

Gwyn laughs again and runs toward the field of grass and flowers.

The boy starts to run after her, but stops when he sees me. Gwyn is already across the field, darting into the trees, but he doesn't follow. He takes a tentative step in my direction.

I lean back against the wall, reaching for fire, wind, any weapon. For the first time in weeks, the elements are not there in an instant. There's nothing but cold fear.

“Austin?” My voice shakes. It can’t be him. She called him Aaron, not Austin. Austin is banished to the underworld. He can’t hurt me anymore.

“Would that I were.” His eyes rake down my legs. “Do I know you?”

I’m wearing jeans, but suddenly feel like I need more clothing. “It’s me. Brianna?”

He cocks his head to the side. “Are you not from around here then?”

“Of course not.” The sunlight does little to warm the air. I shiver.

He steps closer. “Are you an angel?”

A laugh escapes before I can stop it. Does he really not know me? “Hardly.”

Gwyn calls from across the meadow. “Aaron!”

“Aaron?” I take in his clothes. The belted wool shirt that hangs almost to his knees, the coarse leggings that look almost like tights. He’s dressed like one of Robin Hood’s merry men.

He bows slightly. “Lord Lorcan.”

If that girl really is Danu’s daughter, then is this boy Austin before he was banished? One of the personas created by Mick as the current Lord Lorcan?

He doesn’t look away from me. “And you are?”

“I think I’m from the future.”

“My future?”

“Don’t you know?” This is where Austin should make one of his cracks about how we will end badly.

He smiles, the familiar crooked one. “Your ambition is admirable, but I’m not exactly on the market.”

He thinks I’m hitting on him? Please. “Get over yourself.”

“Pardon?” There’s an air of innocence to him that’s unexpected. It’s hard to imagine this boy as the boy who put my friend’s life in danger and tricked me into killing Blake. But I know it’s him. It has to be.

Gwyn comes out of the trees. She moves across the meadow, dragging her skirts behind her. Austin’s eyes flit toward her.

The dizziness I felt earlier is back tenfold. I double over with nausea, falling into the wet grass. When I open my eyes, the sky is gray again. My clothes cling to me, soaked through from the ground. My teeth chatter as I push myself to my feet.

Molly grazes in the patch of grass where I left her. The wall is smaller, six feet at its highest point.

What did I just see? It was Austin, I'm sure of it. He was here with Danu's daughter.

I make my way across the little field. "You okay, girl?"

Molly continues chewing, unfazed. So it's just me then.

I swing into the saddle and glance back at the ruin, half-expecting to see a ghost, but there's nothing.

I've traveled to places I couldn't understand before. I've met Danu and even Killian in visions. But this felt different somehow. I wasn't trying to hold back my power or attempting to cast a magic spell. And Gwyn and Austin didn't seem to know who I was. They weren't part of my present.

I'm pretty sure I intruded into their past.

FOUR

I should leave this place. The last thing I need is the ghost of Austin Montgomery's past haunting me from across the centuries. It's bad enough that the ghost of Blake Williams' present keeps invading my dreams.

I could go back home to California and fight the Sons. It's not like I'm afraid. I'm not alone, either. There's another bandia—Sherri Milliken is out there somewhere. God knows she's up for a fight. But I've never wanted a war with the Sons. I never wanted any of this. I just want a normal life. A normal boyfriend, one who trusts me. Is that too much to ask?

Apparently it is, if Blake is any indication.

I didn't want to go to his little sister's fifteenth birthday party, but Blake was so adamant. I get that he wanted me to be part of his whole life, not just some girl he kept hidden away, and I wanted that too. Still, it was one thing to want it, and another thing to try to make conversation with the backs of his parents' shoulders. I'd only met Mallory once, and I was pretty sure she hated me as much as the rest of the family. It had only been three months since the Sons initiated me into their Circle, and I was ready to fold. Yet Blake kept insisting we go all in.

It wasn't just Blake's family, either. The Sons had only allowed me into their ranks because they thought I could lead them to Sherri; they thought I was under Blake's thumb. And maybe on some level, I was. I thought I loved him, anyway. I thought he loved me.

I'd only been at the party for a few minutes. Blake hadn't even seen me yet. He was talking to a group of breeders, next to a built-in barbecue made of stacked stone that matched the exterior of his parents' McMansion. Without the

soul bond that we once shared, I could no longer feel his emotions, so it was impossible to tell if his dimpled smile was real or a mask.

Sierra Woodbridge, the self-proclaimed leader of the Brianna Paxton Not-a-Fan Club, flipped her cherry-striped hair away from her face and curled her lip as I walked toward her and her boyfriend, Jonah Timken. I would've kept my distance, but they were blocking the narrow path that cut across the yard. Jonah tightened his arm around Sierra's waist, pulling her closer. She melted into him, completely oblivious to the fact that the squeeze was not a sign of affection.

Jonah succeeded in distracting Sierra while his gaze followed the line of my floral skirt to where it draped along the curve of my hip. He winked at me, over Sierra's shoulder.

Gross.

"Keep walking, witch," Sierra said. "No one wants you here."

The comments used to be murmurs, malicious whispers I wasn't meant to actually hear, but in the weeks leading up to Mallory's party, the breeders had become more confrontational. Still, I tried to ignore her. Sierra and I would never be friends, even if we weren't on different sides of the war on magic. It was better to keep walking.

"That's right," Sierra said. "Run to your boyfriend. He's the only reason you're still alive. Might as well enjoy it while you can."

Jonah's grin got bigger.

My fingers tingled with a fiery itch—desperate to unleash a torrent of flame, to wipe that smile off of Jonah's face. To wipe Jonah off the face of the planet. I should've been used to these flashes of power, given the months of hanging out with my mortal enemy, but they seemed to grow stronger with each passing day, impulses that were becoming harder to control. I ducked behind a large palm tree and started counting.

6. 36. 216. 1296. Better. By the time I got to the seventh exponent of six, I was sure the itch was snuffed out.

I should've known better.

Mick walks into the kitchen, where I'm fumbling with a complicated piece of machinery that's supposed to be a coffeemaker. If a degree in mechanical

engineering is a prerequisite to making a cup of coffee, it's no wonder everyone here drinks tea.

Mick wears a dark gray suit today, with pinstripes and pants that taper in at the ankle. He looks like a nineteenth-century hipster. All that's missing are a pair of nerdy glasses. "You settling in?" he asks. At least he doesn't comment on the pajama pants, oversized sweater, and three pairs of knee socks that I'm trying to pass off as an outfit.

"Define settling in." Holing up in a castle on the far coast of Ireland would've sounded like a dream vacation a week ago. Now it just feels lonely. And cold.

Mick takes the coffee grounds from me and presses them into a small metal cup. "I've been wondering if Joe was wise to send you here."

"Why?" As far as I can tell, no one knows where I am. I checked in with my parents online, but even they knew better than to ask where I went.

Mick adds more grounds to the cup and slides it into the contraption, in no hurry to answer my question. He places a small glass underneath the spout before he presses a button and looks up. "You saw how Rhiannon reacted when you arrived. The people here know well enough the destruction that a single bandia can bring. They're at least as much of a danger to you as the Sons are."

"You mean the locals? But they're humans."

"You shouldn't underestimate them. Humans were re-sponsible for defeating the gods the first time."

"But I'm on their side."

Mick arches a brow. "Are you sure you're a bandia?"

"I wish I wasn't."

Mick focuses on the dark liquid as it finishes pouring into the little cup, but he has a curious look in his eyes. "You are an enigma."

"An enigma?"

"An enigma inside a mystery, wrapped in magic that you're afraid to use."

"I'm not afraid to use it." That's the problem. I can't seem to stop myself.

Mick hands me the tiny cup of black sludge. "It's probably best if you don't go into town. There will be rumors. We can't stop them, but there's no need to fuel them either."

"So I'm trapped here? Like some girl in an ivory tower?"

"It's just a suggestion."

“Of course it is.” I add two cubes of sugar to the tiny cup of coffee. It won’t be enough to mask the bitter taste, but Mick doesn’t keep vanilla syrup on hand, and the odds of my getting some steamed milk are less than zero. “Can I take the car?”

“I think there might be a bit of the bandia in you after all. I suppose you won’t listen when I say you should stay in one place for a while.”

I can’t stay cooped up here forever. I stride toward the door, but stop halfway. “Who was Aaron?”

“Ah.” Mick leans against the stone countertop.

“He was Austin, wasn’t he?”

“The last incarnation of Lord Lorcan, before the thousand years he was locked away in the underworld.”

How did I manage to see Austin from over a thousand years ago? And why?

All I know is that I shouldn’t be here. “If you won’t give me the keys, will you at least take me into town?”

“It’s not a good idea,” Mick says.

“I won’t stay here.”

He almost smiles. “I didn’t say I wouldn’t take you.”

FIVE

The town is even more magical up close. It looks the same as I imagine it did centuries ago, with stone streets and stone buildings and wood facades painted in bright colors. We stop at the bakery with the little cakes, and I eat three of them while Mick sips a cup of raspberry tea.

No one pays any attention to us. “I don’t know what you were worried about,” I say as I bite into yet another little cake. It’s sweet without being sugary.

“No sense taking risks if you don’t have to.”

“The Sons don’t know where I am, do they?”

Mick shakes his head. “I told you, the Sons aren’t your only concern. The Milesians are every bit as dangerous.”

“The Milesians? But the Sons are the Milesians.” The Sons were the descendants of the warriors who’d been tasked with ridding Ireland of the last vestiges of magic.

“*Were* the Milesians. After Killian bonded with Danu, he became something more. More than a human—a demigod, like Danu herself. Cursed with the dark powers of a god, he and his descendants became the very thing the Milesians sought to destroy.”

“I get that, but Killian went on killing demigods,” I say. Killian’s new, godly power made him very successful; he eradicated all the remaining demigod lines except for Danu’s. Ironically, while the bandia descended from Danu believed that Killian had killed Danu, and therefore swore eternal vengeance on the Sons, I knew the truth: *Austin* was the one who’d killed Danu, to spark a war between the bandia and Killian’s heirs. Austin wanted the bandia on his side, fighting against those who’d conquered the gods of Ireland. If the bandia defeated the Sons, according to Austin’s logic, the gods could one day return to earth.

Mick stirs a cube of sugar into his tea. “Killian wasn’t the only warrior. The Milesians—the merely human Milesians—still exist, Brianna. As I said, they are at least as dangerous as the Sons.”

“Does anyone actually like the bandia?”

“I like you fine.”

Shannon walks into the little bakery. She sees me and smiles warmly before coming up to our little table. “How are you?” She strings the words together so fast they sound like one word.

“Good.” It’s hard not to smile back.

Shannon’s hair is plaited in a long braid that falls between her shoulder blades, but her bangs nearly cover her eyes. “I wanted to apologize for my mum. She’s not as off her nut as she sounded. She’s only marginally insane.”

“It’s fine,” I say. *Your mom was exactly right about me.*

“I work at the dress shop around the corner now. We have some beautiful party dresses. You should come.”

“Thanks, but I don’t think I’ll be going to any parties while I’m here.” I don’t think I’ll be going to any parties for a while. Not when the last one ended up in a blaze of blue fire.

“You should come anyway.” Her smile is so genuine that I’m tempted to take her up on it.

Mick waits until Shannon leaves before he tries to talk me out of it. “She’s harmless, but her mother is a different story.”

“I like her.”

“You need to lay low.”

“I’m not going to spend the rest of my life under house arrest. It’s not like I can’t defend myself.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

“Oh.” I stare down at the tray of tea cakes, my appetite gone. Is that why Mick doesn’t want me around the villagers without a babysitter? Does he think I’ll lose control of my power?

I’d really thought I had my power under control. There was no question that it seemed to come at me quicker, stronger, the more I was around the Sons, but I was always able to keep it to a low simmer. Maybe if Mallory hadn’t chosen that

exact moment, when fire still lingered at the edge of my self-control, to confront me at her party, I could've stopped it.

Blake's little sister marched up to me as I stood behind the palm tree, counting. Her arms were crossed tight across her chest, wrinkling the smooth lines of her designer dress. "I don't want you here," she said. Mallory had the same silver-blond hair as Blake, but that was where the similarities ended. Blake's easy confidence and friendly smile drew people in. Mallory was pretty, but her features were sharp, her body stiff. Untouchable.

She probably thought her statement was some shocking revelation. I almost wanted to laugh, but since she was only fifteen, I tried to appease her instead. "I think Blake wants us to get to know each other."

"Why? I know everything I need to know about you. You're a witch."

I took a breath, checking to be sure the fire inside me wasn't going to fight me for control. I was pretty sure that taking down the birthday girl in a ball of flame was a party faux pas. "And you feel the need to tell me this because ... ?"

"I know what you are. Everyone knows. You might be able to lead my brother around by his dick, but you're nothing to me. Less than nothing."

Her words shouldn't have hurt—they weren't anything worse than what I'd heard a hundred times from Sierra or Portia or any of the breeders. But I couldn't help the bitter laugh that escaped my lips. Everyone thought Blake was with me for the sex. The truth was, we hadn't been alone together since we'd broken the bond. The one time we were, Blake wouldn't let it get that far. He denied it, but we both knew the truth: he was afraid that we'd bind our souls again.

I couldn't expect her to understand Blake and me. Not when I didn't understand it myself.

"There's no such thing as 'less than nothing,'" I said, trying to ignore my blood's rising temperature and focus on something more rational. "Under the theory of infinite smallness, things can always be halved, shaved into smaller and smaller parts."

Mallory blinked. "Whatever. Why don't you go find my brother so you can screw him and leave?"

I glanced toward the barbecue. Portia Bruton stood next to Blake, her eyes flitting from her sandals to Blake's charming smile. He looked relaxed, almost

happy. More comfortable with the daughter of the Sons' leader than he could ever be with me.

I used to know exactly what Blake was feeling. Hell, I felt every emotion he did, when we were bonded. But that was before. All I had at Mallory's party was my own loneliness as I navigated a house full of people who'd prefer me dead; my own jealousy, as I noticed how genuine Blake's smile appeared as he talked to Portia.

Mallory followed my gaze and let out an unkind laugh. "Maybe my brother's finally coming to his senses."

I didn't need this brat rubbing it in. "You better hope not." I turned to face her, letting the fire come. I raised my hand so she could see the blue flames arc between my fingers. "Right now, he's the only thing keeping you alive."

She backed up a step, eyes wide. "Witch."

For the first time since I'd gotten to the party, I felt em-powered. Strong. Mallory might be a descendant of Killian, but only the Sons—the seventh-generation Sons—manifested Killian's demigod power. She was just a breeder.

Human.

I moved my hand to the right, letting the fire fly from my fingers. The blue flame sailed past Mallory, but she screamed anyway. The fireball hit the center of the large swimming pool with a blue flash that fizzled and vanished almost as soon as it sparked. The loss of the fire made me instantly cold.

A group of breeders standing by the pool looked around with mild panic, trying to find the source of the blue flash. I stepped out from behind the palm tree and smiled.

Let them look.

Let them see that their months of persecution had not rendered me weak. It only made me stronger. They shouldn't hurl stones as if I were a defenseless girl.

I shivered, but not from the cold. Was I seriously considering hurting these people? What was I becoming?

I hadn't been lying to Rush when I'd told him I was no threat to his people. I'd been lying to myself.

Blake saw me now. His blond hair glowed against the setting sun, shading his face in darkness.

I reached for his emotions, finding, of course, only my own anger and frustration and fear. Blake's body language gave away nothing. Ever the poker player, he kept his expression a mask of polite interest. If I was closer, I might have seen the vein along the line of his neck stand out, the one tell he couldn't master.

It was only a matter of seconds before Rush and Jonah appeared in their demigod forms. I knew they wouldn't let my display of power go unchallenged.

Everything happened so quickly after that.

A flash of blue light flew over the people gathered outside and exploded in flame on the roof of Blake's house. People screamed and ran as another explosion rocked the west side of the home. Blue fire was everywhere.

I couldn't feel it.

I couldn't stop it, either.

SIX

When Mick and I get back to Lorcan Hall, I'm still restless. I pull on a jacket and walk out a back door of the house, toward the edge of the bluff. The waves below crash and churn against the rocks, sending sprays of water straight up. It's nothing like the rhythmic sounds of the waves rolling in to the beach in California. There's no order to the swirls of riptides, to the waves colliding and attacking before being swallowed by another rush of water from behind.

Water stirs inside me, there before I even call it, a power as strong as the ocean. As wild. I conjure a wall of water and push it over the bluff with as much force as I can summon. It rushes out across the rocks before collapsing and merging with the sea.

This small display of power does nothing to curb the ache in my chest. I want to be closer, somehow. Part of the sea. I walk along the bluff until I find a worn switchback trail that leads down to a rocky beach. I pick my way down the trail slowly. By the time I get to the bottom, the sun has dipped behind dark clouds, making the early afternoon look more like night. The days last forever here, the sun clinging to the earth until nearly midnight as if to make up for the constant cloud cover.

Something calls to me, singing to my blood. It's a pounding in my chest, a drumbeat that pushes me forward. The water looks even wilder from down here on the shore; waves crash against tall rocks that soar above me. The wind carries the sea in its grasp, creating its own icy current that pelts my cheeks. This beach has no sand, just rocks of all shapes and sizes arranged haphazardly. A small passageway veers between two boulders, large enough for a person to pass through.

I make my way across the rocks, slipping through the boulders to another, smaller beach. The air swirls in circles, trapped against the bluff and boulders, creating a natural wind tunnel. It should be freezing, but steam is billowing from a crack in the rock wall that rises up at least a hundred feet from where I stand. There's a glint of gold behind the cloud of steam, and I move toward it instinctively.

Wind, water, fire, and earth converge at once—all my powers harnessed into one chaotic surge. It's overwhelming and incredible. I lift my hands up to the sky, wanting to take it all in, alive with the elements pulsing through my veins, pulsing through this place.

The power that fills me is stronger than any I've felt before, yet I feel peaceful, calm. This wildness is who I am. I let fire, wind, and water out to the ocean in one burst as the ground shakes beneath my feet. A flash of blue lights up the darkening sky, creating lightning-like arcs that flare out in several directions at once before my power settles back inside me.

The wall beside me rumbles and shakes.

I freeze.

I reach for the earth, finding it quiet and undisturbed beneath my feet. I can't feel the wall as it shakes.

No.

It can't be happening again.

I instinctively move away from the wall. The rumbling continues. Not in the wall but *behind* it. The sound gets louder. Something is coming.

I take a few more steps backward, not taking my eyes off the shaking cliff. A rock falls to the ground a few feet away from me. I run to the shelter of the two boulders. The opening in the wall groans and shakes, widening with a loud crack that sends another shower of rocks to the ground.

A dark shape sails through, landing with a hard thud on the ground, barely missing the boulder that I'm crouching behind.

The wall cracks and groans again before sealing itself tight with a final shudder.

I stare at the dark figure on the ground, waiting for it to rise up and attack. It doesn't move. I take a tentative step forward. A shirtless guy lies on his stomach, still and unmoving. A body?

I kneel down and place my hand on his neck. There's a pulse. I pull on his arm, rolling him on to his back.

Austin's lips curl up into a familiar, crooked smile.

He's draped in ancient plaid, a thick piece of fabric around his waist, but he's not glowing gold like he normally does when in his true form. His jeweled broadsword is nowhere to be seen. He's filthy, still covered in clumps of rock and debris from the cliff wall. Yet the dirt can't mask the sculpted lines of his face and the perfect proportions of his body. He is a god, after all.

I drop his arm, letting him fall back against the rocky ground.

"That hurts." He blinks, propping himself up on an elbow. "That shouldn't hurt."

"And you shouldn't be here," I say. *Should. Not.* I banished him to the underworld for a thousand years. By my count, he still has over nine-hundred ninety-nine years to go.

Austin groans and closes his eyes. Beneath the smudges on his face, his skin looks sallow and pale. Sweat beads along his brow. I touch my palm to his forehead. He's burning up.

The ocean fills me, cooling my hand before I can think to call it. It's becoming so instinctual—the elements come to me almost unconsciously now. Like I'm part of them. Except when they take on a life of their own.

Austin opens his eyes. "And Juliet is the sun."

I jerk my hand away from his forehead. "You need some new lines."

He rubs his temples. "Best I can do with this vise on my skull. Does pain always feel so bad?"

"It's called pain for a reason."

Austin lifts his head, his crooked smile in place despite the obvious effort it takes him. "Says the girl with a death wish."

"Are you threatening me?" He doesn't look like he's in any condition to threaten anyone.

"Course not. I would never threaten you," he grunts as he pushes himself up into a sitting position.

"Oh, that's right, you prefer to threaten the people I love."

"For your own good."

“I’m the only one who gets to decide what’s good for me.” I take a step forward, flames simmering under my skin. “You shouldn’t be here.”

He watches the blue flames arc between my fingers. “Right. I’ve made quite a mess of things, haven’t I?”

“How did you get here?” The spell I used to trap him in the underworld had worked. I know it. “You shouldn’t be able to cross over.”

“Perhaps fate has other plans for me.”

A ball of flame appears in my hand. “A fireball to the head?”

He laughs and then stops himself, rubbing his forehead. “I hope not.”

The sky darkens as more clouds roll in. Everything is wrong. I’m half a world away from my parents, my friends, Blake. For what? To postpone a war that will come for me anyway? To spend my last days alone, or worse, in the company of the very god who made me kill Blake?

The fire burns hot, my blood searing my skin from the inside. Austin watches the flames dance in my hand, and I swear there’s something that looks a lot like fear in his eyes. Good. He should be afraid of me. But since when is Austin afraid of anything? He may be weak, but he’s immortal.

“Go on,” he says. “It’s about time you acted like a bandia.”

No. I am not a killer. I may have killed Blake, but only because I tried to save him. And I brought him back, too. That has to count for something.

I turn and throw the fireball as hard as I can at the water. It sails for fifty feet before it hits a wave with a bright blue blast and dies out.

Austin sighs and falls back against the rocks. “Perhaps there’s hope for us yet.”

I reach for the wind, gathering it with such strength that I have to wrap my arms around the boulder to keep from getting swept up in the strong gust, and send it flying at Austin. He soars into the air, his back slamming against the wall of rock behind him. I keep the wind on him, pinning him there, five feet above the ground.

I have to shout to be heard. “There is no us. There will never be any us. And if you come anywhere near me or anyone I care about, I will find a way to kill you.”

I stop the wind as quickly as I called it, and Austin drops like a stone, landing hard on his side.

“There’s my girl,” he says as he rolls to his back and closes his eyes.

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