



The Impaled Bride (Vampire Bride 3)

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Description: My name is Erzsébet, Countess Dolingen of Gratz, and I am a vampire.

I am also Vlad Dracula's one true love.

For centuries, we shared a love that consumed us whole. But betrayal can turn the greatest of passions bitter in the hearts of lovers. In anger, he impaled me on an iron stake and left me to suffer in a mausoleum hidden from the world.

Now, my mind wanders through the centuries, recalling the triumphs and defeats of my long life as the wife of Vlad the Impaler that eventually resulted in my captivity.

But what he doesn't know is that I am not yet defeated...

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Chapter 1

I can hear her scampering about like a rat as her delicate fingers scrabble at the stone walls of the sepulcher. Her piteous cries and wails are a discordant melody that I find both amusing and infuriating. This is her nightly ritual ever since she was imprisoned here.

“Enough!” I shout at her.

This only elicits more pathetic sobbing.

From where I lay upon my stone platform, I only catch glimpses of her as she scuttles about in the dim light cast by the oil lamps hanging on the walls. I wrap my fingers around the iron rod piercing my body. Vlad plunged the wretched stake through the roof of the mausoleum pinning me to the bier so I cannot escape him. I attempt to pull myself upward so I can crane my neck to gaze upon my husband’s latest vampire Bride. But, alas, I am too weak for such a feat. My hand slackens around the stake and slumps against the underside of my breast, close to where I am impaled. The silver coating sizzles against my flesh, sapping my strength, and keeping me trapped in this cursed place hidden by the darkest magicks. If I could, I would press the silver against my heart and end my suffering, but my beloved was wise enough to cast a spell upon me to hinder any attempt.

He is so very clever in his torment.

Scuttling up the stairs to the iron door, she attempts to break the lock while calling out for help. The words she speaks in German are muddled by a voice hoarse from

screaming. When she fails, she bangs her small fists against the unyielding door until she grows discouraged. Afterward, she dashes about the small room, fingers gliding over the stones as she seeks an escape from this terrible place. I lash out and catch the edge of her gown. She shrieks and scrambles up the wall to hide in the corner like an insect.

Tilting my head back, I can see her staring down at me.

“What is your name?” I ask in German.

With eyes green as jade, she stares at me in horror. Tangles of her golden tresses fall over her shoulders. The gossamer gown adorning her delicate frame is tattered about the edges from her constant tantrums. Her pale hands and feet cling to the stone wall, jewels glittering on the gold bangles and rings she wears. I recognize a few of the finer pieces. They once belonged to me. My husband is generous with his new Brides.

“Whatever did you do to anger him?”

I cannot help but add a taunting lilt to my voice. She is delectable with her petite frame and angelic face. Exactly the sort of young woman my dear husband loves to corrupt.

“I did nothing!” she spits out.

“That is a possibility.”

“He is a devil!”

“That he is,” I agree.

“You are a devil, too! Cursed! How can you be alive when impaled with a stake?”

“Oh, my darling little one, you are as cursed as I. And if I should be a devil, so are you. Look at you! Hanging there on the wall like a spider!”

She screams at me, long teeth revealed.

My laughter mocks her. “Little one, I have faced much fiercer enemies than you. Our shared husband for example.”

“I am not his wife! Never!” Huddling in the corner, she weeps. “He lied to me! He promised me a life of wealth and comfort!”

“Of course he lied. All men do, you simpleton.”

I tire of craning my neck to gaze at her and return to staring at the ceiling of the mausoleum. The spots of rust where the iron pole pierces the stone roof are gradually spreading into a dark mosaic. Sometimes, in my delirium, I see the stains transform into images of friends and family. Even now I can almost see the strong nose of my vampire brother, Ignatius, taking shape in one dark splotch.

The iron door creaks open.

Immediately, I tense. My sharp teeth descend as my veins scream for blood. I am weakened from not feeding for so long. If a hapless traveler has wandered into my prison, I will have just enough power to compel him to bare his throat to me.

The Bride drops from her perch and sprints toward the doorway.

I growl with frustration. If she robs me of my meal, I will find a way to tear off her head and reclaim the blood that is rightfully mine.

Instead of the sounds of feeding, I hear her scream in terror and her footfalls as she flees back to her corner. The scrape of a heavy iron coffin being dragged down the stone steps into the sepulcher follows in her wake. The door clangs shut with a thunderous clang. I close my eyes comprehending what shall transpire next. I have witnessed this foul practice more times than I care to recall. And worse yet, was once the victim of it long ago.

The miserable little vampire Bride is more spirited in the face of her doom than I expected. The noise of her scrabbling about the ceiling to escape her fate compels me to open my eyes and observe what shall come next.

A great shadow fills the small stone room. It is as though a great dragon with leathery wings has swooped inside to pluck her from the wall like an eagle catching its prey. Her screams echo about me as she's swallowed by the dark power that consumes all light and renders me blind.

I hear her cry out one last time before the heavy bang of the coffin lid being dropped into place muffles her screams. The clank of a padlock being shut is followed by the scrape of the turn of a key. A heavy stone is drawn from the wall and the coffin is slid into the opening. The little Brides cries finally diminish when the stone is returned.

I am intimately acquainted with each sound. I shiver with the memory of my own entombment.

The darkness recedes in a great wave revealing the tall imposing form of my husband. His keen green eyes regard me from beneath the brim of the top hat. The swoop of his long nose, the high pitch of his cheekbones, the full sensuous lips beneath his mustache, and long thick auburn hair resting heavily on his broad shoulders belong more to the prince he was once than the count he now claims to be. Dressed as a modern gentleman in a waistcoat, long trousers, heavy overcoat and top hat his bearing is still that of a warrior. My husband may clothe himself as a mortal

man, but his bearing will always be that of Prince Vlad of Wallachia.

“Erzsébet, my beloved wife,” he says.

The deep resonance of his voice thrums through me, causing my body to crave his touch. Even my blood-starved heart thumps faster in my chest. I despise that even now I yearn for him, but I will never allow him to know that truth. I will not tolerate my desire being wielded as a weapon against me.

“Cursed beast,” I reply. “What other torments do you plan for me? Shall I endure another of your pathetic wives bleating like a lamb disturbing my reverie?”

“Did she not amuse you?” he asks, flashing a smile that reveals his very sharp teeth.

“No more than the last.”

It hurts to speak, but I attempt to hide my pain. I despise showing any weakness before him.

Stepping toward the bier, his eyes rest on the ugly wound beneath my breasts. My fine red and gold dress, my favorite long ago, is torn and frayed where I am impaled. Does it distress him in the least to see what he has done to me? He sets a gloved hand on the stake, the on

e only he can remove, and stares down at me. I have no sense of time in this terrible existence, but I do know it has been a very long time since he last stood at my side to converse with me.

“I have missed you,” he says.

He is in one of his moods and I will suffer.

Not with pain.

No, with something much worse.

His love.

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“I did not miss you.”

The bitter chuckle that flows from the lips I once kissed with unbridled passion chills me. “All attempts to find another Bride such as you fail.” His voice is sorrowful, yet I know he will not release me.

From his pocket, he withdraws one of the bracelets that had adorned the limb of the Bride he just entombed. In silence, he wraps it around my wrist and gently hooks the clasp. How like him to make sure his treasures are not locked away with his prisoner. With a scowl, I pull my hand away from him. I wish to turn his saccharine emotions into anger that will fuel my own and untether me from this great longing to comfort him.

“I am unique to this world. It is your curse to have lost my love,” I declare. “Certainly, Vlad, you did not believe such an unworldly child could be like me. Are you that daft?”

Leaning over me, he stares into my eyes. His gaze is searching, haunted, and desperate. “No, I created her as an amusement, but soon tired of her. My affections for all others are fleeting when compared to you.”

“I spent far too many years at your side,” I retort. “Far too many.”

“You wish me to be angry,” he says, smirking.

“You are cruel when angry. Why should I desire your anger?”

“So that you can hate me instead of love me.”

I snarl at him, perturbed at how well he can still read my inner thoughts. He brushes my cheek with his knuckles. I snap my teeth at him in return. With a laugh, his hand strays to my black hair, gently coiling a strand about his little finger. This loving gesture is cruel salt on my tattered heart. I wish to not remember the many times in the past that I garnered comfort from his affections. I refuse to relent now.

My eyes flick to the wall where several of his past wives are entombed. I pity them, yet also envy them. After the years have rendered them nothing more than skin over bones, their minds will enter the world of dreams where they will wander until they are finally pulled from their tombs and killed by Vlad or vampire hunters.

“Why did you create this one, Vlad? She was a bit of a simpleton.”

“I was angry,” he answers simply. “Because of another.”

“Ah! Her!”

I foretold the English Bride would destroy all the intricate plans he created. I observed in her lovely aquamarine eyes my own strength and cleverness. She might have been my equal, if not for one simple truth. She does not love him as I do.

“Yes, her,” he says with distaste.

“What did Lady-”

“Do not speak her name!” Snarling, he steps away. “I gave her all she desired and more. But in the end, she revealed that she was weak and unworthy of my attention.”

“You killed her.”

Eyes downcast, he does not answer.

“Or did she kill herself?”

He growls, his fangs threatening behind his lips.

“How blessed she is to find death as her reward. If only I could be bestowed such a blessing.”

“I did not love her as I do you. She was not deserving of your exquisite torture.”

His words are cruel because he is angry.

Angry at her?

Or angry at me?

Perhaps both.

“Your love was always the most exquisite of tortures,” I say.

A smile seeps onto his full lips and I immediately regret my words.

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I do not wish to give him succor.

With a dismissive gesture, he says, “She no longer matters. Her name is stricken from my lips. I loathe that I once thought she could be your equal. I was foolish.”

It is rare for him to admit his shortcomings. This can only mean that he did believe her to be my peer until she proved otherwise. She wounded his pride and my vengeful heart sings with pleasure. How many Brides will he create in an effort to replicate our passion only to be disenchanted in due time and dispose of them? Perhaps this is his punishment for all that he has done to me.

“You’ve always been a fool, dearest husband. She would have never loved you for you gave her every reason to hate you. Did I not warn you of that truth after you first brought her to me?”

Vlad returns to my side to bend over and gaze at my face. I am too weak to do more than attempt to slash his face with my long nails. He catches my wrist and presses his lips to my knuckles. “Why must you inflict this pain upon me, Erzsébet?”

As always, his touch stirs in me the great passion we once shared. That I should love him so utterly with all my heart, yet hate him with as much ferocity is the factual torment of my captivity. I yearn to hold him to my breast and calm the storm of his passions. Instead, I use the last of my strength to pull my hand away.

“Seek my forgiveness now when I am so utterly lost without you. Tell me you love me, swear your obedience, bow to my authority, and promise to stay at my side. Do all this and I will free you, Erzsébet.”

I despise the tears that flood my eyes. The temptation is great. To be free of this prison, find passion in his arms, taste fresh blood on his lips, and stand in the fragile illumination of the moon would be bliss. But I know all that would be an illusion that would soon fade. I could never be happy bowing like a slave to his demands.

“Erzsébet,” he whispers, lowering his lips to my brow. “Say the words. Say them quick while I am weak in the power of your beauty.”

“No,” I answer, my voice hard. “For you are dracul – the devil – and there can be no peace between us.”

The sharp intake of his breath is like a dagger being drawn from its sheath. “How did our love come to this?” His voice is a growl in my ear and the deadly points of his sharp fingernails press against my throat.

I am not certain of the answer, so I remain quiet.

“Erzsébet, Erzsébet, Erzsébet,” he whispers against my skin. “Tell me what I desire and I shall rectify the past. Do not torment me by denying me.”

Perhaps it is my weakened state or my hunger that renders me sympathetic to his maudlin words. They speak to my own desperate loneliness, yet, I cannot acquiesce.

At last, I say, “Choices were made that cannot be undone.”

His kiss is fevered against my lips. I yearn to thread my fingers into the coils of his auburn hair and hold him close, but instead, I curl them into fists at my sides. I refuse to respond to his tempting seduction though I long to surrender to his ardent ministrations.

How can I forgive him for all that he has taken from me?

How can I forgive him for Ágota?

Vlad's lips turn to ice and his body to vapor when he realizes he is beaten by my stubborn heart. The black cloud of his power recedes through the doorway and the iron door clangs shut.

I lay alone once again in my sepulcher.

With a sob of despair, I tremble with pain as the iron stake presses into my ribs. I wish not to cry, but the tears flow freely.

How did my life cumulate in such pain?

It began with such joy...

Chapter 2

In the aftermath of Vlad's visit, I clench my hands and weep. I am so utterly alone. I cannot even hear the cries of the entombed Bride. We are both trapped in our hells, but at least she's free of Vlad.

His words haunt me.

How did our love come to this?

It is tempting to lay all that has transpired at his feet, yet I acknowledge my complicity in the creation of the complex lies, betrayals, and conspiracies which eventually collapsed and buried us both. We loved each other with such ferocity; I would never have imagined the future before us.

It is in these darkest moments I yearn for him most. The touch of his hands o

n my skin, his ardent kisses covering my mouth, his body pressing against mine...

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How cruel of my own mind to besiege me with memories of our love. It renders this prison even more unbearable for it stirs a tiny flame of hope that Vlad will release me from my tomb without attempting to subjugate my will. I struggle to banish those thoughts from my mind. There is no value in ruminating on my present situation and hoping for a better future. It only increases my suffering.

Only in my past can I find some measure of escape in this terrible existence. Some memories are precious and I cling to them until they dissipate. But others are sheer torment, and oftentimes, those are the ones that relentlessly pursue me through my waking hours. Yet, even this task is difficult. I search for memories where he does not fill my mind's eye with his cunning smile and smoldering gaze.

Vlad haunts nearly every aspect of my past.

The only exception is my childhood with Ágota and the span of my mortal life.

Ágota...

I seize upon my recollections of my sister, unfurling them like beloved tapestries. I plunge backward in time, following each intricate stitch in the fabric of my life until I settle upon one lovely memory.

The day Ágota told me about my father.

I do not recall the year of my birth, let alone the month or day. Too many centuries have passed for me to concern myself with such trivial mortal dealings, yet I remember very well the details of that day when I was four and she was thirteen.

It was morning and I toddled along behind her, clutching my basket filled with a variety of plants and berries. We were collecting ingredients in the forest for either dinner or one of our mother's concoctions. We wore simple homemade white blouses tucked into embroidered skirts. I was wearing new shoes made of the softest leather which my mother had purchased from the village shoemaker. As I walked, I stared at them with great pride.

Even young, I was vain.

I recall Ágota strolling in front of me, swinging her basket, and the sound of the forest floor crunching under her bare feet. She refused to wear her shoes, so the pair was tucked into the bottom of her basket. As always, her long dark hair was unruly and her blouse hung over the waist of her skirt, the hem fluttering in the fresh breeze.

Ah, such a sweet memory!

I can see it vividly in my mind. I close my eyes, willing myself to submerge fully into the past. I yearn to exist solely in my recollection of that day. I ruminate on the sensation of the sun on my skin, the heaviness of the basket in my small hand, and the smell of the forest after a light rain. Gradually, the pain of the stake through my body fades as the memory takes hold and sweeps me back through the centuries to a point in time too dear to ever forget.

I open my eyes to peer up at my sister.

"Agy, tell me a story," I ask.

My voice is small and musical. I clamber over tree roots as I follow her. She is a gifted storyteller and loves to recount details with great flair and verbosity. The stories are rife with court intrigue and speak of a land far from our small cottage in the Black Forest. I love her stories. Besides, my feet hurt in my new shoes. A small

break from our task among the tall trees would be rather nice.

Twirling about, my sister says, “I should tell you about when you were born.”

I seat myself upon a gnarled root and set my basket at my side. I pluck a wild berry from the basket and crush it between my teeth. The juice is sweet and tangy, so I reach for another.

“Mama says I was born when she was sad and I made her happy again.”

“That is very, very true!” Ágota tosses her basket on the ground in front of me. A few truffles fall out and roll on the ground. She does not seem to notice. “Mama was heartbroken and full of deepest despair.”

“Why?” I eat another berry.

“Well, it is a very long story. Very dramatic. And tragic. Very tragic.”

I nod solemnly, understanding. Most of Ágota’s stories are tragic.

“Viorica,” she starts.

“Mama,” I correct her.

“For the story, I shall call her by her name,” Ágota says. “It is much more melodramatic that way.”

Frowning, I nod. That my mother should have two names, ‘Mama’ and ‘Viorica,’ is quite confusing to my young mind. Yet, I feel the power in the name my sister says with both delight and solemnity.

“It all begins long—well, actually about eight years ago—when a voivode, a prince in Moldavia, sought out our mother when he heard rumors there was a witch who lived at the edge of a nearby pond.”

“We live near a pond now,” I say.

“Yes, but it was a different, much more mysterious pond. Ghosts used to dance in the mist that floated across the darkest water,” Ágota replies. “Sometimes, I would join them, my toes skimming across the surface as light as a water bug.”

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I am suspicious of her boast but hold my tongue. I have seen my mother floating like a feather upon the wind, so perhaps Ágota can as well.

“Was the prince handsome?” I ask.

“Oh, no! Drago? was dreadful. He had a thick mustache and very black hair. His face was like this,” Ágota scrunches up her face, lowering her eyebrows into a straight line “and he always talked like he was shouting. But when he saw our mother, he loved her.”

“She is very beautiful,” I say, my tiny fingers drawing a nut from the depths of the basket. I crack it open against the tree trunk.

“Drago? loved her. He gave her a fancy house next to the river. There were even servants! Mama wore the finest dresses and her hair was piled on top of her head. Every day we ate the best food! It was all very nice. But when Drago? visited, it was very grand. I even had to dress up and wear my hair up! Even though I thought Drago? was very loud, I liked him. He made Mama laugh and gave her many presents. Sometimes,” she says leaning toward me with a wink, “he brought me presents, too. Like this!”

I admire the simple gold bracelet around her wrist and this pleases her.

“Mama had lots of pretty jewelry, but she had to leave it all behind when we had to run away in the middle of the night!”

Ágota smiles with satisfaction as I gasp.

“When Drago? died in battle, his son came to find Mama and me. To kill us!”

My eyes widen with horror.

With a shrug of one shoulder she says, “Of course, he failed because we are still alive.”

“Where was I?”

“In Mama’s belly. That was why his son and his men came to our house. If you were a boy, then you could cause problems.”

“How?”

In the memory, I cannot grasp what she means, but my adult mind fully understands. If I had been a boy, I would have been a threat. A potential usurper to Drago?’ throne.

Ágota shrugs. “That’s what Mama said when she grabbed me and flew away. They chased us! Even fired arrows at us! But they could not touch us because we were up so high in the sky!”

My mouth forms an “O,” and I wish to see Mama fly that high again. She only flies around when the moon is dark and no one can see. And never higher than the treetops.

“Soon, she had to land, because her powers were waning. For days we were alone. One day, we encountered a caravan. Mama paid them with the jewelry she was wearing for one of the wagons, but she let me keep my bracelet. She had me hide it under my sleeve and never reveal it. We rode with them for a long time. Through the Carpathian Mountains and into the world beyond! Mama would tell fortunes and sometimes make potions to pay our way. I know she was sad, but I liked playing with

the other children living in the caravan. And her tummy got bigger and bigger because of you. But none of the men cared. They would knock on our wagon door in the middle of the night and she would send them away. But sometimes they gave us food and other gifts.”

“Because Mama was so beautiful,” I say.

Ágota laughs and threads long strands of grass between her toes. “Oh, yes. But then one night we had to run away again. One of the men got mad at her because she did not want his kisses. She grabbed me and we flew away again. This time we did not find a caravan. We were alone. When I was scared, Mama called wolves to walk with us through their territory. At night they would protect us and keep us warm. Ravens would bring us food. Deer would guide us to water.”

“I like ravens,” I say, smiling.

“Probably because they took such good care of us. And then, one night, Mama could not walk anymore because you wanted to be born. So we made a fire and we waited. You were born during the New Moon when the night is dark and full of stars. Our mother was very weak afterward, and it was I who named you. As I cradled you in my arms close to our campfire, I peered into your golden eyes and saw your name written in their depths. Mama, weakened by your birth, was pleased with my very first portent, and your name was set in the stars.” Ágota leans toward me, grinning. “And that is when I knew I was a witch, too.”

“Am I a witch?” I dig around in the basket, looking for more to eat.

“We do not know yet. We have to wait and see. You might be. If not, I will take care of you.” Ágota hands me a pear from her basket.

Pears are my favorite.

I take it, staring at her curiously. I cannot imagine where she found it. I bite into it and my mouth is filled with sweet fruit. As I eat, Ágota makes a little girl out of twigs. She gives her hair made of grass and a dress made of leaves. I giggle as Ágota brings her to life, making her twirl about on the forest floor. The little twig girl dances around until a strong wind comes and she scatters into pieces.

Disappointed, I start to cry.

Ágota attempts to soothe me, but I am saddened by the demise of the little twig girl.

“Make another, Agy,” I sob.

“I do not have enough magic to make another,” she says. “In a little bit the magic will return to my hands and I will make you a new one.”

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It is then my mother appears. The basket on her hip is filled with wildflowers. Like Ágota, her black hair is long and unfettered. As she walks toward us, her embroidered skirt ripples on the wind. Gazing at her, I know that no other woman is as beautiful as my mother. Green-eyes flecked with gold regard me from beneath long, dark lashes.

I rub my nose and stifle

my tears. I do not want to upset her.

“Erjy, why do you cry?” she asks.

“The little twig girl died,” I say, sniffing.

“I made a poppet,” Ágota explains. “And the wind carried it away.”

Our mother tilts her head and nods solemnly. “I see.”

“The wind is cruel. It killed her,” I complain bitterly.

I am upset at the injustice of the little twig girl being taken away.

“The wind is merely doing what the wind does.” Mama points to the leaves skittering across the ground.

I do not grasp what she’s trying to say and continue to cry.

Setting the basket down on the ground before me, my mother flexes her fingers. I

immediately lift my eyes to watch, understanding that she's about to do something wondrous. With a smile on her lips, she starts to twist and turn her hands, her fingers forming intricate designs. The flowers within the basket shiver beneath her hands. As I watch with delight, the flowers rise slowly into the air, their petals forming skirts and long trousers, their stems and leaves twisting into green-limbed people. Laughing, my mother raises her arms, and the flower people spiral into the air, dancing on the wind. They spin higher and higher into a colorful arc.

“Oh, Mama! They are beautiful!” I clap with joy.

My mother grabs Ágota and my hands to draw us into a merry dance.

When my feet leave the forest floor, I am dancing among the flower people in the wind and with my mother and elder sister.

It is glorious...

The iron door to the mausoleum crashes open. The pain from the iron stake returns with brutal intensity, shattering my concentration and returning me to this atrocious reality. I grip the stake with both hands and scream not only with the agony caused by my wound but the loss of the vision.

“Do not say I do not care for you!” Vlad roars.

He is already in the midst of an argument with me.

I gape at him in surprise.

Is this the same night? Or another?

I cannot tell.

But that he has returned so soon is a sign of his misery.

“Leave me to my agony!” I screech at him. “Do not torture me with your declarations of love while I lay here your prisoner!”

With the flick of his hand, a torch awakens, revealing his tall form. Again, he wears a dark overcoat, but the top hat is gone. His thick auburn hair rests against his wide shoulders in long coils. Dangling from his hand is a terrified man with white hair and sideburns. Choking in the fierce grip, the elderly gentleman—for that is what his clothes reveal him to be—flounders as he attempts to free himself.

“You are here of your own hand! You made me do this to you!” Vlad heaves his prisoner onto the end of my bier. The fear flowing off the man like warm smoke is intoxicating.

I am famished. My teeth tear into my bottom lip as I stare at the veins in his neck straining beneath his skin as he struggles for breath. Vlad releases the man and he clings to the platform, gasping for air.

Ignoring him, Vlad prowls about the small room like a great wolf. “Admit it, Erzsébet! Admit this is of your doing and I will take mercy on you.”

“Never!”

In German the old man cries out, “Where is my daughter? Where did you take her?”

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Vlad does not answer.

The mortal man appears to gradually become aware of me. It is my legs upon which he lays, yet his gaze remains riveted to the furiously pacing vampire. Only when Vlad steps close to the head of the bier to glower at me does the man become aware of the iron stake piercing my body. He recoils in shock.

“You drove me to this!” Vlad grips the iron rod and leans over me. “Why will you not confess your sin and beg for my forgiveness!”

I snap my teeth at him.

“I love you, Erzsébet! I love you so fiercely it is as if hell itself was consuming me!”

“Hell will consume you for what you did!”

The old man attempts to dart toward the door, but Vlad vanishes from my side to reappear before him. He backhands the man, knocking him across the room and into my arms. I do not hesitate. I drive my long teeth into the man’s throat and feed.

The taste of hot blood overwhelms all my senses. The rapture of feeding on a living, breathing man is transcendent. Nothing compares to the pleasure I feel when I drink the blood of the living. It swirls through my veins to restore my life and power.

I am renewed.

Born once again.

When the man's heart fades, I drop him to the floor. I am sated and my body flushes with pleasure. I lick the blood from my lips while resting my hands against the curve of my cheeks. They are rounded and soft again. My beauty is fully restored. Should I be free of this place and among mortals, I would appear as a living, breathing woman full of life.

Vlad drags the body to a corner and drops it with disdain. "He was a liar and a cheat. Presented his daughter as a princess and himself as a man of means. All he wanted was to marry her off and empty the coffers of her new husband."

I ignore his muttering. I am in agony after feeding so well. My body attempts to heal the wound beneath my ribs, but the silver-coated stake resists. The pain compels me to writhe. I grip the stake, seeking relief, but find none. My body refuses to acknowledge the stake driven through me and attempts to heal my flesh only to have it ripped apart once more. I do not care about Vlad's domestic problems. I desire for him to leave me to my memories. How like him to destroy my blissful reminiscing.

"Do you not see, Erzsébet?"

Vlad stares down at the dead man who inquired where his daughter was just scant minutes ago. Ironically, his body now leans against her tomb.

"See that you have destroyed yet another woman and her family?"

In an instant he is stooping over me, green eyes glimmering with coal fires. "Do you not see how much I love you? I could have killed him and been done with him back at the castle. But no, you haunt my every thought, so I brought him to you. I cannot bear for your beauty to fade."

"Yet you can bear to witness me suffering. How loving you are, dearest husband."

He slams his fist against the bier. The stone cracks, but does not crumble. “I love you to my detriment!”

“Kill me and be done with it,” I retort. “Release me from this hell.”

“Beg for my forgiveness and it will be yours!”

“Never!”

He smothers my lips with kisses. I bite at his thick lips, but he ignores the wounds I inflict on him. Blood streams from our mouths, and for one voluptuous moment, I respond to his kiss. His tongue in my mouth reminds me of the soft flesh of a pear. I remember Ágota and what he did to her.

I savagely bite down.

Recoiling from me, he wipes away the blood with the back of his hand while chuckling bitterly. “You will return to me, Erzsébet. One night, you will say the words and I will release you.”

“Never.”

“You once kneeled before me and you will again.”

“Only to give you pleasure. Never in subjugation.”

I only bowed to one man when I was young and nearly died for my naiveté.

Vlad snatches the torch from the wall and throws it on the body in the corner. He knows I despise the smell of burning flesh after all I endured when mortal.

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“You will kneel,” Vlad vows, his gaze holding mine.

And then he is gone.

As the acrid reek of the fire fills the small chamber, I shudder with despair. Vlad is cruel and he has inflicted upon me the cruelest of all memories.

The night my mother burned.

Chapter 3

As I lay here assaulted by the repugnant scent of burning flesh, I am tormented by recollections of my mother’s final day on this earth. How such a lovely day could end so terribly still haunts me. I was only eight years of age when my life was shattered and I was robbed of the mother I adored.

I press my hand over my nose, attempting to stave off t

he reek of burning flesh. I wish to remember my mother’s beauty and love, not her terrible demise. Though I have lost names, faces, and important moments to history, my mother stands out vibrantly in the grey mists of time.

In my mind, she is an otherworldly beauty set against the drabness of a peasant life. I remember her black hair that glimmered with shades of blue and purple, her unusual blue eyes that were ringed with green and gold, and her pale skin that flushed bright pink when she laughed or cried. Though I witnessed her fantastical magic every day, I enjoyed the more mundane moments in our life together. When she tended to our

home, I was always in her wake. She performed everyday tasks with the same flair she brought to her spells. I suspect she infused magic into all she did.

My mother was beautiful, but not perfect. Like me, her hands appeared too large for her body. When she cast her magic, the intricate designs she created with her long slender fingers were grotesquely beautiful, though the magic that flowed from them was breathtaking. Those same hands wiped away my tears, held me close, and tickled me relentlessly.

I loved her hands.

Perhaps that is why one memory of intense clarity is her knuckles, reddened from washing, as she mended my dress on the last day of her life.

Strange how the smallest details remain after all this time.

I long to feel her hand hold mine, hear her voice whispering my name, and see the beauty of her magic once more.

But she was taken from me.

The pain rippling through my body as I lay here in this mausoleum does not measure against the agony I experienced so long ago. That Vlad should thrust upon me such a hideous memory is not a surprise. He wishes to punish me and has found an exquisite way in which to do so.

Weeping, I cover my face with hands which resemble hers.

Even though I know that in the end there will be despair, I want to relive those precious moments that are lost. My mind untethers from my brutalized body and drifts backward in time. I seek refuge once more in my memories...

My mother looks up from her task and smiles. “See, Erjy. Her skirt will be mended in time to dance with the fair folk in the forest tonight.”

I giggle as I watch my mother’s slender fingers creating the tiniest of stitches to fix the tear in the hem of the doll’s skirt. She’s mending the dress of my favorite poppet. It is a cloth doll that Ágota made out of bits of scrap material. She has long strips of black fabric for hair, embroidered golden eyes to match mine, and a blue dress that my mother sewed for her.

My doll sits patiently, her small cloth hands folded on her lap. I tug on her hair and the doll swivels her head to gaze at me.

“Will you dance with the fair folk?” I ask.

The poppet covers her mouth, miming that she is giggling.

My mother laughs with delight, continuing her sewing.

“Does she really dance with the fair folk?”

“Sometimes. When I send her out to see what they are plotting.”

I frown at the thought. “Do they plot against you?”

“Oh, no. I give them trinkets, sweets, and liquor to keep them out of our garden and home. But sometimes they cause mischief among our neighbors and that is not such a good thing. We do not want to be blamed for the misdeeds of others.”

The people in the small town nearby know my mother is a witch. They come to her at night to seek advice or have her cast a spell. The men sometimes come to try to kiss her, but she sends them away with a twirl of her fingers. The priest despises her, but

his fiery sermons against her fall on deaf ears. People in town know if they come to my mother with a sick child, she will always help them.

“They will not blame you, Mama. They love you.”

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“Until they become too afraid of me. Remember what I told you.”

“Always be good to others.”

“And?”

“Be kind to the fair folk.”

My mother smiles at me, her eyes filled with delight. “And?”

“Keep my true name a secret from everyone,” I say solemnly.

My mother nods. “You may tell people your Hungarian name, but never your true name. Not even Agy.”

“Because it can be used against me,” I whisper. The thought frightens me.

“Yes, my love. That is correct.”

My mother finally whispered my true name in my ear when I reached the age of six. She told me in the dead of night when the moon was absent from the sky and Ágota was snoring in her bed. My Romanian name, the one she whispered into my being when she was carrying me in her belly, is never to be revealed. Death cannot find me and other practitioners of magic cannot spell against me if they do not know my true name.

“Does Agy have a true name?”

She scowls. “No. Her father was foolish and named her openly when I was carrying her. It was too late then. Stupid Hungarian.”

Ágota and I do not have the same father. Ágota’s lives far away from the Black Forest and mine is dead. I also understand that Ágota is half Hungarian, while I am fully Romanian. Yet, even deeper in our blood, we are descended from witches that fled a world hidden in the shadows of the human one. Sadly, I have yet to exhibit any of the abilities of my lineage.

My mother concentrates on her work, her dark eyebrows lowered over her eyes. Sometimes I wonder why my mother does not use magic to enrich herself, but I never ask. The question feels wrong somehow, tainted by my own selfishness. Our life is happy and comfortable, yet I long to live like my mother and Ágota once did when my father was alive. What would it be like to live in a grand house with servants? To wear fancy dresses with my hair piled on my head? To wear gold bracelets and jewels?

I shift on the stool I am seated upon, my feet brushing over the hard earthen floor. My mother raised our cottage out of the ground with her magic. The walls are a framework of twisting roots plastered with clay, and the roof is covered in thick grass and wildflowers. The simple table and stools where my mother and I are seated were gifts from a man thankful for the potions that saved his wife’s life. My mother’s bed is hand-carved from tree trunks and covered in the softest silks, which were given to her by a fey admirer. Ágota and I sleep in the loft on mattresses filled with downy feathers under soft, thick blankets. I am not certain where all the tiny luxuries we enjoy came from, but I know most were given to my mother out of thankfulness. Yet, I cannot help but wonder why she does not elevate herself in status.

“Erjy, please go fetch your sister. I need the water for our stew and she’s been far too long,” my mother says.

Reluctantly, I slide off my stool. I want to stay inside with my mother and watch her work, but I do not dare disobey her. I pull open the door and step outside into the bright sunshine. I blink against the glare and tip my chin to observe the clouds gliding high over the forest to cluster around the mountaintops. The clearing is ringed with towering pine trees and the crisp breeze gliding through the branches is laced with their fragrance. The birds sing in the branches of the oak tree that looms over our home while the insects hum in the flowers growing on the roof.

With a little skip, I seek out my sister in the garden behind our small cottage. Ágota is not by the well at the rear of our garden. Instead, she is leaning against the trunk of the oak tree with the neighbor's daughter enclosed in her arms.

I regard their amorous kissing with annoyance, then say in the very loud, shrill voice only a younger sister can wield with great effect, "Agy! Mama wants the water for the stew! Stop kissing Enede!"

With great annoyance, Ágota releases the blushing blonde girl. "I shall bring the water shortly."

"Mama wants it now! For our stew! So we can eat!"

"Go away. We wish to say our farewells," Ágota hisses at me.

"You wish to kiss her more," I retort.

"Bah!" She waves her hand at me, the golden bracelet on her wrist glinting in the sunlight.

Enede giggles, her pretty blue eyes shyly downcast.

This isn't the first time I have caught Ágota kissing one of the German girls from the

village. My sister isn't beautiful like my mother. At seventeen, she is tall, slender, and rakish in her gait and manner. The disheveled appearance of her clothing only seems to add to her allure. Her dark hair is cropped close to her shoulders and always messy, giving her the appearance of having just awakened. Her hooded hazel eyes and wild smile make her appear a bit crazed and dangerous. Our mother often warns her about flirting with the girls from the village, but I suspect no power on earth can stop Ágota once she has set her mind to something.

"Now, Agy!" I stomp my small foot at her.

Jerking a basket from Enede's hands, she thrusts it toward me. "A gift from Enede's family. Give it to mama."

I take the heavy burden but refuse to move. "Get the water for mama or else I will tell her what you were doing."

"I will hex you," Ágota grumbles, waving her hands at me. "Make you grow a tail so I can grab it and swing you about."

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“No, you will not. Mama will never allow it.”

“We shall see,” Ágota says, smirking.

“I better return home,” Enede says reluctantly, eyeing the position of the sun. “My father expects me.”

“I should walk you home to make certain you are safe,” Ágota replies, and they give each other secretive smiles.

I may be a little girl, but I am not naive. Enede’s family lives close enough that we can see the smoke from her family’s hearth rising above the trees. This is yet another ploy by my beloved sister to steal kisses.

“Mama wants the water, Agy. Now.”

Ágota growls in her throat and I swear that Enede stares at her with even more adoration.

“Fine! I am getting the water!” Ágota kisses Enede’s cheek before stomping toward the well.

With a very red face, Enede darts away, her long blonde plaits bouncing against her back.

Satisfied, I twirl about and return to my mother’s side. I am pleased to see that she’

s finished her task. My doll twirls about to show off her mended skirt before dashing off.

“Agy is bringing the water. Enede brought this.” I set the basket on the table.

My mother flips back the covering to reveal a stack of unleavened bread and a slab of venison wrapped in a cloth. “Oh, how kind of her father. It seems his leg is feeling better if he is hunting again.”

“Well, you gave him a potion,” I remind her.

“Yes, but it was only honey water. He merely twisted his knee. It just needed time to heal, but he insisted on a potion.” My mother shrugs a shoulder. “If he believed it worked, that is good enough.”

The door bangs open. Ágota trudges in carrying the heavy bucket filled with water. “Can I give Erjy a tail?”

My mother raises her head, observes my sister for a moment, then bursts into laughter. “Did she interrupt your romancing?”

“You knew! You sent her out on purpose!” Ágota looks quite miffed. She staggers over to the hearth, water dangerously close to sloshing over the rim.

“How many times must I tell you to be careful, Ágota. The young women of this town will marry men and have their babies. Your future lies elsewhere.” My mother attempts to smooth Ágota’s wild hair, but my sister dodges her and sets the bucket down.

“What if I do not want to be elsewhere?” Ágota sticks out her chin defiantly, her hazel eyes aflame.

Our mother sighs, shaking her head. “Agy, you know that we can never stay in one place for more than a few years. It is too dangerous.”

“Maybe we should not have let the villagers know we are witches,” Ágota mutters.

My mother sighs. “Agy, you know that it is our nature to serve others with our magic.”

“To our detriment!”

“Can you hide who you are?” my mother asks, her gaze troubled.

Ágota fidgets, her fingers flexing at her side. “Maybe I want to remain here. Maybe I enjoy it enough not to move away. Maybe when you decide to move on I will stay here.”

My mother flicks her hand and the water from the bucket arcs into the pot over the fire. “Will you?”

Pressing her lips into a thin line, Ágota does not answer.

I am troubled by the thought of being separated from my sister.

“Will Agy get married, too, if she stays here?”

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“No!” Ágota exclaims in horror. “Men are disgusting!”

“Agy will not marry if she does not choose to,” my mother answers, ignoring her older daughter’s outburst.

“I will never marry. Never! No one can make me!” Ágota sets her chin in defiance.

My mother pinches her cheek affectionately. “No one will, Agy. Now help me chop up the vegetables for the stew.”

“Will I marry?” I ask, curious.

I had not thought of the possibility before. My life with my mother and sister feels so perfect, I cannot imagine another.

“Yes, you will,” my mother replies.

I sense that she is troubled and stare at her fearfully.

Seeing my expression, my mother kneels before me, a smile gracing her red lips. Taking my hand, she turns it palm upward. Her long finger tracing over the lines, she says, “You will marry once for love and once for power. And you will love with all your heart two people.”

“Two great loves?” Ágota peers over my mother’s shoulder at my hand.

“Is that good, Mama?”

My mother folds my fingers over my palm. “Yes. To love is good. But remember, even love does not protect you from heartbreak. Guard your heart, Erjy. Love only those worthy of you.”

Staring at her own palm, Ágota says, “What of me?”

“How do you think I know you will never marry?” My mother pats Ágota’s cheek before striding to the basket of vegetables gathered from the garden.

My sister thrusts her palm at my face. I never noticed before, but there is a lattice of lines crisscrossing in all directions. “What do you think it means, Erjy?”

“You will kiss many, many girls,” I decide after a moment of contemplation.

Ágota grins. “Good.”

I lean against the table and watch my mother slice the venison into chunks while Ágota furiously chops the vegetables into pieces. The poppets that Ágota has made for me help tidy, sweeping away the refuse and disposing of it. The smoke rising from the fire forms a snake that slithers along the ceiling before vanishing into a regular plume as it escapes through the flue.

The conversation turns to the coming new moon and the possible spells they should create together. Every new moon my sister and mother set new spells deep into the ground beneath our feet. Though I am unable to assist them, I am allowed to watch from within a protection circle. I am always mesmerized by how the intricate golden designs float in the air before settling into the dirt, glowing brightly until they vanish at the end of the casting.

“We need to refresh all the wards,” my mother says. “It is time. They are beginning to fade and we cannot move on until summer.”

“Must we leave?” I ask sadly.

We have lived in the Black Forest in Germany for many years, moving from time to time to a different village. My mother will make another cottage that looks much like this one, but I like our home.

“I thought perhaps we should travel higher into the mountains,” my mother answers. “It will be beautiful up there.”

Ágota makes a disgusted face. “We are always moving.”

“We have been here two years,” my mother reminds her.

“The villagers will miss us,” I decide.

A few times people from other villages where we lived for a time find my mother. They seek her out, desperate for her help. Some journey great lengths to find her. Every time this occurs, we leave the area.

“Oh! I forgot! There is an alp tormenting several women in the village,” Ágota says. “Enede says her mother is having awful dreams.”

“Why do you believe it is an alp? Could it not be regular nightmares?” My mother starts to drop the meat into the boiling water.

“They complain of something heavy upon their chest. It is only a matter of time before they suspect it is supernatural.”

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“I shall have to prepare a vanquishing spell.” My mother adds the vegetables and wipes her brow with the back of her hand.

I ask the question burdening me since her earlier comment. “Did someone find us?”

My mother’s eyes dart toward me. “Why would you ask?”

“Because you are speaking about moving.”

Ágota notices my mother’s subdued expression and arches her eyebrows. “Mama, have we been found?”

Hesitating, she cleans her hands on her apron before walking to the center of the room. Stretching out her fingers, she calls for the intricate pattern of the protection ward. It glows beneath our feet, delicate swirls alive with power. The design is a vibrant glorious gold, except for one section near the door. It glows an ominous red.

“What does that mean?” Ágota asks worriedly.

I’d never seen the protection ward alter in color.

“It means danger is nearby. Something powerful. Maybe it is the alp,” my mother answers. “We shall deal with it, renew the wards, and—”

The knock on the door startles us all. The chimes that ring a warning when any mortal approaches are silent. The light streaming through our one tiny window is dim in the fading day.

“Is it him?” Ágota whispers.

My mother stares at her with wide frightened eyes. “I do not know. I sense nothing.”

“Neither do I,” Ágota answers. “But if it is him—”

“Do what we discussed. Do not falter, Agy. I trust you to take care of your sister if it is him.”

“Who?” I ask.

When they do not answer, fear blooms in my chest. What dark secret are they keeping from me? Why is my mother so afraid when she is so powerful?

My mother calmly removes her apron with trembling fingers and sets i

t aside. She gestures to the loft. “I love you, my darlings. Never forget that. Now go!”

Without another word, Ágota sweeps me up in her arms and carries me to the ladder that leads to the loft. I scramble upward as she floats past me. I crawl to my bed beneath the low ceiling while Ágota takes her position in front of me. Her long, skinny fingers flex as she raises them toward the door, ready to assist my mother.

The ward fades into the earth as my mother tucks her hair back from her face and squares her shoulders.

The knock comes again. More urgently this time.

My mother hoists open the door and seals her doom.

Chapter 4

I am weak.

So very weak.

My body struggles to heal what it cannot. The blood I drank is dwindling in its power while the man I stole it from smolders in the corner of the mausoleum. The cruel irony is that feeding may quench my unbearable hunger, but the aftermath is sheer torture. My spine is severed and the bones attempt to mend around the stake only to be broken again.

Yet, I am glad for the pain. It releases me from the terrible memory of my mother's demise.

I do not understand why my thoughts have turned to the morbid aspects of my past. My mind has always wandered whenever I go mad with pain and hunger, but my memories have never been this vivid, nor have they flowed in sequential order. Is this Vlad's doing? A new way to torment me in hopes of breaking my spirit so I will relent to his will?

Smoke, thick and cloying with the scent of burning flesh, pulls me back to the night I do not wish to remember. This is the one memory I wish to forget, but it clings to me like the web of a spider trapping me in its power.

I dig my fingers into the bier, striving to fight against the sensation of being sucked down into the mire of my memories. Tears flood my eyes as I strain to retain my hold on this wretched reality, but darkness fills my mind and I fall into an abyss.

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And then I am a child again, cowering in my bed, peeking over the edge of the covers into the room below. Ágota crouches beneath the low roof, fingers flexing at her side, swirls of her magic illuminating the air.

The door to our cottage creaks open.

In the fading light of the day, it appears a bit of the forest has broken off and waddled to the cottage. A child-size man stands on the threshold. His bushy beard and clothing are covered in thick green moss and his skin is the color of the forest floor.

My mother's shoulders relax at the sight of one of the moss people that inhabit the forest that surrounds our home. Bowing her head, she says, "Greetings, sir."

"Greetings and a warning, fair Viorica," he says politely. "Der Leibhaftige has been seen on the path approaching the village."

My sister swears in German under her breath. When she directs her gaze toward me, I observe the fear dwelling in her eyes. Her hazel eyes have turned a vibrant green, a sure sign she is about to unleash her magic.

"The devil?" I whisper in Romanian.

Ágota nods. "Do as I say. Do not disobey me. Mama and I have planned for this."

"But the devil?" I gasp. "Why?"

"He wants Mama," Ágota answers, "and now he has found her."

Below us, the moss man and my mother speak rapidly in German.

“The wards on the road are weakened. Earlier today two women from the village, bewitched by the alp, dug up many of the charms you buried.”

“Why was I not told?” my mother demands. “We agreed—”

“An alp saw me and I had to fight the demon all day. I only escaped when it scampered to the side of Der Leibhaftige when he appeared. I rushed here as fast as I could. There are a few charms still on the road. He will have to break through them, but it will not take him long.”

“Then there is not much time,” my mother says, her voice trembling.

The moss man bows his head. “We will do as we promised.”

He departs with those words.

My mother shuts the door, her long hand splayed against the aged wood. Lifting her blue eyes, she stares at us with tears in her eyes. “Agy, promise me you will do what we planned. Do not falter in your task.”

“We should run now!” Ágota replies. “All of us!”

“There’s no time. He will follow and catch us. I must do as I planned so that we can all escape together.”

I am drowned in the fears of little Erjy. My adult mind, trapped within the confines of my younger one, struggles to scream out that she will fail, but I cannot change what has already happened.

“Mama, please. Let us run now!” Ágota never sheds tears, yet she is weeping.

“Then he will not have just one prize, but two. And I do not ever want to know what he will do to Erjy. We do as we planned.”

Ágota wipes at her face with the bottom of her dress, spreading dust across her cheeks. “Mama, please, I am afraid.”

Our mother pulls herself up on the ladder to peer into the loft. It is dark and cool in the small space. With gentle fingers, she cleans off Ágota’s cheeks and kisses her on the forehead. A swirl of golden magic glows on Ágota’s skin before fading.

“Ágota, I trust and believe in you. Promise me you will do as we planned and do not falter.”

“I promise. Witches oath.” Ágota lifts her chin, blinking away tears.

My mother smiles. “Thank you.”

I crawl forward and my mother kisses me. Her lips are warm against my skin. I raise my hand to my brow, wondering if magic lingers there, too.

“Erjy, a very cruel and evil man is coming. He wishes for me to serve him, but I will not. I have laid a trap for him, but it will hold him only for a short time. You must obey Ágota. Everything she says you must do.”

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“I do not want him to hurt you,” I sob.

“I will do my best to stop him from hurting any of us, but you must be brave and obedient.”

I nod, tears dripping from my chin.

Reaching out, our mother presses her palms to our cheeks. “My beautiful girls, I love you.”

The knock on the door breaks our tender moment.

Inhaling sharply, our mother whispers, “He is here. I will deal with him. You stay here.”

She steps down off the ladder, snaps her fingers, and the wood shatters into kindling. Another wave of her hand and the pieces scamper into the hearth. Raising her head, she gazes at us, eyes glimmering with tears and then whispers under her breath. A wall forms over the opening to the loft, enclosing us in utter darkness and shielding us from view.

“Agy,” I whimper.

“Shh,” she answers.

A moment later, a wisp of light forms in the air, revealing Ágota bent over a small tin cup filled with water. It is always kept on a shelf over her bed. I assumed it was for

when she grew thirsty during the night, but now I see I was wrong. Reflected in the water is not her face, but our mother standing near the door to our cottage. I crawl forward to stare at the image as it becomes clearer.

Smoothing back her hair, our mother hesitates as an even more demanding rap on the door reverberates through the cottage. I can feel the force of the knock vibrating through the walls and into my bones. My mother stretches out her fingers, crosses her middle and index fingers swiftly and the elaborate spell under her feet glows briefly. I gasp, for all of it is bright red. The magic recedes into the earth.

Satisfied, our mother opens the door.

I had heard stories of a goat-legged, horned man from the villagers. I am disappointed that the devil looks nothing like they described. Tall, fair-haired, blue-eyed, and very fair-skinned, the man on my mother's doorstep looks more like a prince from the fanciful stories old women like to tell small children. I have never seen a man dressed so finely. Clad in black and crimson, his doublet is embroidered and his cloak edged with dark fur. The chaperon on his head is artfully arranged on his golden curls with the end dangling jauntily over one shoulder. His smile is radiant and it is difficult to believe he is the devil. Yet, behind him, crawling on all fours, is a hideous creature with a smashed face, gray skin, and long black claws. It perches behind the man and glowers at my mother while drool falls from a mouth filled with sharp yellow teeth.

“The alp,” Ágota whispers.

“Viorica, at last,” the devil says.

His voice is faint for I am hearing it through the walls.

“I denied you before and I do again,” my mother says sternly.

With a charming chuckle, the devil says, “But you must change your mind. I have come all this way and not without some difficulty. I never expected you to flee to Germany.”

“Which is why I came here.”

“You weakened yourself being so far from your own land in the futile hope to escape me and yet, here I am.”

“The alp found me, I see.”

“Plucked your image from the dreams of the village women,” the devil answers, smirking.

“Clever.”

The devil gazes past our mother into our home. The ripples in the water caused by Ágota’s trembling hand distort his image, but I can see his displeasure with our humble cottage.

“How you have fallen, Viorica.”

“Just as you once did,” my mother replies in a curt voice.

“I do not live in squalor.”

“It suits my needs.”

“Playing the village witch instead of claiming your exalted title among the witches. How disappointing, Viorica.”

“My world is no more. Its corpse lies in the shadow of this one. The titles of that world are meaningless in this one.”

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I lift my gaze to stare at Ágota. What do my mother's words mean? She has told us many times the story of how the witches fled their world when magic was drained from its veins by evil sorcerers. The witches had burrowed doors into this world and escaped before they could be destroyed. They had been relieved to find a mirror image of the Witch World in this one. Our mother had been Romanian in the Witch World, too. She was very young when it happened and her parents had not survived. She never told me that they were anything more than common witch-folk, but now I wonder.

Ágota shakes her head, silently imploring me not to speak.

As the devil leans toward my mother, I see the serpent from the Garden of Eden in his eyes. "But the title is yours even if you deny it, Archwitch."

Startled by his words, I toss a questioning look toward my sister. How could he know who our mother truly is? I have been taught, since I was a very little girl, to never speak of our true origins or our mother's exalted status among the witches outside our small home. Our race escaped the witch world when it was destroyed and live in the shadows of this one. Our mother is the only surviving Archwitch, and the most powerful among our kind. It was her choice to raise her daughters far from the other surviving witches and to deny her rightful high position among them to protect us. I comprehend now that she never divulged who she was hiding from.

"I will not serve you, Lucifer. I will not go the Scholomance. I am but a poor humble witch."

"Humble? Perhaps. Witch. True. But poor is an understatement."

The devil steps into our home and Ágota tenses.

The alp lingers in the doorway and my mother shuts the door on its gnarled face. Turning about, she clasps her hands before her. In the tiny image of her dancing on the water, her beauty is otherworldly with the dangerous resolve on her face. I understand that my mother is much more than I ever truly realized.

“I made my choice. Leave now. Respect that you have been rejected, Lucifer.”

“I respect nothing,” Lucifer says, taunting her. He looks about him with disapproval, noting the poppets hiding behind the water bucket. They cower before him, which makes him even more arrogant. “So it is true. You have a daughter. Another Archwitch.”

“I use those as servants,” my mother answers swiftly.

The poppets scatter, rushing about in a panic.

The devil laughs, following them deeper into the room until he is standing on the edge of the buried spell. “The alp pulled your daughter’s face from the dreams of the women, too. She is lovely. Where is she? Hiding in the forest?” His blue eyes sweep about the room, searching every shadow.

Ágota frowns and whispers, “Hurry, mother.”

“I am here alone and I wish to remain alone. Leave!” My mother walks after him, hands dropping to her sides. There is growing panic in her eyes for her plan is going awry.

The devil walks across the floor, still on the edge of the spell, his gaze narrowing on the newly created wall. “What is this?” Stretching out a gloved hand, he strains to

reach where we are hiding.

I glance toward the new wall to witness tendrils of smoke rising from the surface.

“I am alone,” my mother insists.

“Here she is,” the devil says with delight. “My second Archwitch to claim.”

Surging forward, my mother grabs his arm and wrenches him back so that he is standing in the center of the spell. “I will do what you ask, Lucifer. Just let her be!”

“So the little witch is up there.” With a sneer on his lips, he turns to look toward the wall that obscures from his sight. “Come out, little witch. I want to see you. Are you as pretty as your mother?”

My mother’s fingers flex and twist rapidly at her side, her magic unfurling from her like shimmering ropes of light. A second later, the red glow of the spell carved into the floor of our cottage fills the reflection in the water cup and paints our faces in an eerie light.

The devil pivots toward her, visibly surprised. “A trap? You set a trap?”

My mother, the Archwitch of a dead world, darts away from him. Before she can escape the ring of the spell, Lucifer grabs her arm. Smoke rises from his scorching touch, forcing a scream from her lips as her flesh blackens.

“Release me! Or I will burn this place to the ground with you and your child in it!”

Unable to escape his hold, my mother presses her hand to his chest and unleashes her magic. The devil staggers under the power of the assault and falls against the edge of the spell scrawled on the hard earth. There is a loud thunderclap as he is knocked

onto the ground, deflected by the invisible barrier around him. Freed, my mother scampers to escape the brightly glowing spell. She almost accomplishes it when the devil catches her by the ankle, dragging her toward him. His touch burns her skin and she howls in agony.

The beauty of his face is marred by his absolute rage. The devil holds my mother to the ground and yells, “Release me! How dare you trap me, you whore!”

My mother does not answer, but casts another spell, reinforcing the trap.

“I will kill you and claim your daughter! Release me and I will forgive you!”

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Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:31 am

I am weeping, but do not dare make a sound. Huddled over the cup of water with my sister, I am frozen by the fear coursing through my blood. I can smell flesh burning and hear my mother's cries.

Tears staining her face, Ágota says, "Erjy, we need to leave now."

"But Mama," I whimper.

Raising her hand, Ágota rotates her wrist. The roof peels back, revealing a darkening sky. It is dusk and we must flee in the growing gloom.

My mother's shrieks of agony intensify as Ágota throws the cup away. Seizing my hand, she crawls through the opening and onto the roof of the cottage. I see why we must flee. Fire is spreading rapidly along the walls and creeping toward the roof. My sister pulls me to the edge and we jump down into the garden. Sweeping her hand over the dirt near the well, a bag is disgorged from the ground. She slings it over her shoulder and drags me forward once again.

Our little cottage burns brightly, the flames destroying the life we had shared with our mother. The horrific shrieks of her burning alive are unbearable. I try to turn back desperate to somehow save her, but Ágota does not release my hand. She relentlessly pulls me along behind her toward the forest.

The alp leaps from the shadows of the oak tree and blocks our way. Its thick claws burrow into the soft earth of our garden. Red eyes glinting with malice, it hisses at us.

"Nowhere to run, little girls," it wheezes through its gnarled teeth.

Ágota does not reply. She lifts her hand, fingers flexing, and the creature squeals as it is flung over our heads and onto the roof of the burning cottage. I gape at my sister, surprised at her power.

Tugging me forward, my sister hurries us toward the forest.

“We need to get Mama!” I wail.

“Mama told me to escape with you no matter what happened,” Ágota answers through gritted teeth. Tears glitter on her cheeks and the pain in her voice echoes the pain in my heart.

“He is burning her!”

“Yes, he is! He is trying to burn away the spell so he can escape and find us!”

In the sky above, the first stars begin to appear just as we reach the edge of the forest and plunge into the murk.

“The poppets...” I sob, feeling foolish for mourning them.

“They did their job. They tried to distract him while Mama sprung the trap. But he was standing in the wrong spot and she could not escape. We knew it might happen. She told me that if she was trapped with him that I must take you and run. And that is what I am doing.” Ágota speaks in a rush of words. I comprehend she is convincing herself not to turn back. “I will make you more poppets later. When we are safe.”

“But Mama...” I am inconsolable. My legs feel weak and my feet leaden. I trip over every root in my path.

Ágota whirls about, her fingers clutching mine so tight it hurts. “Erjy, listen to...”

The air sizzles with powerful magic, distracting us. A moment later my sister is struck in the chest by a ball of white light with silver crackling over its surface. Ágota is thrown away from me and lifted high into the air. The orb of magic bursts apart, encapsulating her in silver threads that snap sizzle over her skin like lightning. Suspended above me with her head thrown back, Ágota shimmers in the throes of power. I can only gape at her in wonder before I realize what it means.

Distraught and overwhelmed with grief, I race toward the cottage. “Mama!”

I trip over a root, sprawling onto the ground. Lifting m

y head, I see a wall of blue mist flowing toward me from the direction of our little home. I cannot see past the trees to the clearing as the thick fog billows through trunks.

“Mama!”

I blink and Ágota stands before me. Without a word, she takes my arm and heaves me upward, but my feet do not settle on the ground. Instead, I am lifted up and forward at a great speed. The trees stream past us and when I look back over my shoulder to see the mist following.

Is it the devil pursuing us?

We come to a halt at a circle of trees. It is a place that my mother forbade me from ever visiting, so I cling to my sister in fear.

“We have come to fulfill our agreement,” Ágota announces.

From behind a tree, a tiny woman dressed in flower petals appears. Her honey-colored hair flows around her shoulders as though caught in a perpetual breeze and

her large lavender eyes peer up at us from her delicate face.

“Payment, please, witch” she says, her voice filled with sweet laughter.

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My sister reaches into the bag and pulls out a gold ring adorned with a giant emerald.
“As my mother promised.”

“A ring from the Witch World,” the small woman whispers in wonder. Her small fingers take the jewelry from my sister and she lifts it to her head to wear as a crown.
“Payment received.”

“Hurry,” my sister’s voice whispers, but the words do not flow from her lips. They sound as though they are behind me.

I turn about to see me and Ágota running through the trees.

I gasp, startled by the apparitions.

“Ágota, we must go back,” I hear my voice say.

Again I turn about and see us disappearing once more into the mist.

The clearing is suddenly filled with many duplicates of Ágota and me rushing into the forest. It is strange and upsetting to see my frightened, tear-stained face multiplied so many times. When I look to where the fairy had been standing, she is gone.

“They are the fairies in disguise,” Ágota explains. “Mama made an agreement with the fairy folk. They shall keep the devil distracted while we escape.”

“The mist,” I say, pointing.

“It is mama’s last spell. To hide us,” Ágota replies.

I hear the terrible brokenness in her voice.

I feel broken, too.

“Where are we going, Ágota?”

“I cannot speak of it here. Not until we are safe.” Ágota kneels before me. Her eyes are red from weeping and her lips tremble. “We need to fly, Erjy. Fly fast, and far. I have the power to do it now.”

“Mama’s power.”

“Yes. Mama’s power is now mine.” Reaching into her bag, she pulls out a cloak. She fastens it about my throat and kisses my cheek. “It will be cold, so hide your face in my shoulder. We have to go very far tonight and I cannot stop. Understand?”

I nod, sniffing.

Ágota lifts me into her arms, and I cling to her waist with my legs. I sense the power just below her skin warming me. I can almost imagine she is my mother holding me.

As our many duplicates rush through the Black Forest, Ágota’s feet lift from the ground.

Together, we fly to an unknown and frightening future that will doom us both.

Chapter 5

The fetid smell of burned and rotting flesh assails me upon awakening. My arms are

leadens, so I turn my head to bury my face in the ruffles adorning the sleeve of my dress to quell the smell. How many nights has it been since Vlad left me to endure this stench? My mind is hazy, my thoughts lingering on the edge of another time. It is as though I have not existed in this mausoleum for some time, but in the realm of memory.

Why must I remember the night my mother perished?

Why must I remember the devil's loathsome face?

This must be a curse cast upon me by the dark magicks that Vlad wields for I would never revisit the night of my mother's death by choice. It must be Vlad's doing! Only he would know how to rend open these wounds upon my soul. What other reason exists to explain why I am inexorably drawn into the past during my waking hours and forced to suffer through the most tumultuous moments of my long life.

Will he ever cease in his torment?

Damn Vlad!

Though an aspect of my soul is comforted when I remember the love that filled those early years, it is torn afresh by the potency of the memories. It is both heavenly and hellish to recall the life I shared with my mother and Ágota, and its destruction at the hands of Lucifer the devil. How I despise the mere thought of his angelic face! Worse yet, it would not be the only time he devastated my life and stole away someone I loved. As a child, I could never have imagined what ruin he would bring to my life.

Miserable, I stare into the darkness enshrouding my tomb and listen to the patter of rain against the marble roof. Freezing water seeps through the cracked stone around the iron stake and drips onto my broken body. Yet another bane to heap upon me.

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Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:31 am

“Do not be afraid, Erjy. I will protect you. We are safe here,” Ágota whispers in my ear.

No, she is not here to protect me.

I am not safe.

I am in pain and trapped in a damp mausoleum.

I close my eyes, wishing the dark magic assailing me would let me rest just this once.

“Here. Eat these berries,” she says.

Soft, round fruit is pressed into my hand.

“Erjy. Please eat,” Ágota pleads.

I open my eyes to see my sister crouched beside me. We are hiding beneath an outcropping of rocks that provide a shelter from the downpour. We are high enough off the ground that we are relatively dry. I curl up tighter in the cloak Ágota gave me and stare at the berries in my hand.

“You need to eat,” she says again, chewing vigorously.

The dim morning sunlight sifting through the torrent illuminates her face and reveals teeth and lips stained purple from the berry juice. Reaching out a cupped hand, she gathers rain in her palm and drinks it. Her eyes are hazel once more, the vibrant green

having faded since her magic is spent. How far we traveled during the night? It seems such like a great distance.

“I want Mama.” My voice sounds small and tired.

“Eat.” The order is clear. Ágota’s eyes are fierce and her jaw set.

I obey, crushing the berries one by one between my teeth. My stomach is empty and my thoughts wander to the venison stew my mother had been preparing before the devil arrived the evening before. If only we had shared that meal in the quiet of our home and never been accosted by the fearsome creature, I would now be sleeping safely in my bed.

“Are we going to return home soon?”

“Our home is gone, burned to ashes with our mama.” Ágota’s tone is harsh with anger and sadness.

I force the chewed food down my tight throat. It is an arduous effort to accept that my life with my mother is over. Why cannot this all be a dream? Why cannot Mama be alive? I want nothing more than to go home, curl up on my bed, and feel my mother’s fingers rubbing my back until I fall asleep.

“Where are we, Ágota?”

“Bavaria.”

“Is that far from home?”

“Far enough. I spent most of my magic. It will take a day for it to return, so you need to do as exactly as I tell you.”

I remember my promise to our mother and nod. I will obey my sister to honor her memory.

“Good.”

I am very tired, but Ágota appears alert. She gazes through the gray rain falling steadily onto the trees and bushes surrounding the rocky incline where we are hunkered.

I eat another berry, but the few I have eaten do not fill the ache in my belly. Before I can ask, Ágota, always prescient, serves me more berries from her apron. The berries are more tart than sweet, but I eat each one.

Muttering under her breath, Ágota opens the bag that had been buried in our garden and withdraws a thick book. I have seen the tome often during my life and tears drip down my cheeks at the sight of it. I helped my mother make some of the thick paper pages captured between the old leather binding. Often I'd watched Mama carefully write her spells with black ink mixed with her blood or paint illustrations with a feathered brush in very precise strokes. The book creaks when Ágota opens it. The smell of old paper fills the small space. With great care, Ágota flips through the pages studying the drawings and reading the neatly scrawled words.

Hope stirs in my chest at an abrupt thought. “Can you use it to bring her back to life?”

Ágota looks at me sharply before shaking her head.

“Why not?”

I know my mother was powerful and Ágota has all her magic. I cannot imagine why she cannot restore our mother.

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“He burned her body,” Ágota answers. Her voice is raw with rage. “You cannot bring back a witch that has burned.”

“Oh.” I stare at my last berry, my appetite vanishing as I recall my mother’s screams of pain and terror. The smell of burned flesh will haunt me forever.

“That is why he did it, you know. Burned her when she was trying to escape. He wanted her to fear truly dying and not being able to return. He thought he could terrorize her into releasing him. He was wrong.” Ágota’s hands clench into tight fists, her waves of fury washing over me like steam from a cauldron.

I flinch and turn from her, burying my face against the mossy surface of the big boulder I am reclining against. Ágota touches my shoulder gently. I answer with a sob with despair.

“I am sorry, Erjy. I’d bring her back and rebuild our cottage if I could.”

Twisting about, I cry out, “What can you do?”

Ágota sighs and flips the book around on her lap so I can view it with ease. A map is carefully drawn onto two pages. “Mama left instructions on how to travel to my father’s home in Hungary. See these lines? Those are called ley lines. Magic is very powerful there and I can use those to pull us forward at great speed as I did last night. But I need to rest before I do it again.”

Sniffing, I stare at the map. It hurts to see my mother’s careful script describing each part of the journey.

“Mama made sure I had all the information needed in case she could not come with us. She even has a list of magical items I can trade with the fairies for free passage through their territory.”

“So Mama knew she would die?”

Ágota shrugs. “I suspect she knew she might. The devil has hunted her for a very long time.”

“Why?” The shrillness of my exclamation makes my sister wince. “Why did he hunt Mama and why did not you tell me?”

“It was Mama’s choice not to tell you,” Ágota answers. “She wanted you to enjoy your life and not live in fear.”

“But she told you!”

“Because I am a witch! Now I am an Archwitch. She had to prepare me for what might happen. You do not have magic, Erjy. You might never have magic. Chances are you are human like your father. She did not want to burden you. So she trained me so I could protect you. I am your older sister. That is my job. My duty.”

I stare at the seventeen-year-old girl beside me who suddenly seems so much older. She appears altered somehow. Minutes of careful scrutiny reveal why. Her clothes are completely black. Even the once colorful embroidery on her skirt is dark as pitch. Her hair, chopped to her shoulders yesterday, is almost to her waist. Stranger yet, her hands are longer, more slender, and her purple stained nails are sharp. Lifting her gaze, she stares at me with ancient knowledge lingering in her eyes.

“You are different,” I whisper.

“I am.”

“Is it scary?”

“A little.” She runs her hands over the pages of the book. Glittery, silver magic threads through the veins below the surface of her skin. “I feel magic like I never have before. I sense the remnants of the portal to our dead world.” She points over my head. “It is that way. Near Moldavia. I have memories that are not mine: off the Witch World, of Mama’s spells, her most treasured memories.” Ágota snuffles, her eyes brimming again with tears. “I know, without a doubt, that she loved us more than her own life, and that is why she died for us.”

My bottom lip trembles and the world wavers as fresh tears come to blind me. “Why did the devil kill her?”

“Because he now knows I exist. He can afford to lose one Archwitch since there is another to take her place.”

“I do not understand why he wanted Mama! Does he not have magic? Evil black magic like he used to kill Mama?”

“He has magic, but he wants more power.”

“But you have Mama’s power. Not him.”

“Mama says that the devil wants to disrupt the order of things—that the natural way of magic is abhorrent to him. He wants to twist it, deform it, and use it to infect the world with pain. It is by disrupting how things should be that he gains more power over the world. Mama is from another world and the magic in her—in me—is more potent than the magic that exists in this one. Our presence in this world feeds the natural magic here. That’s why he wanted to corrupt her magic. It would help corrupt

all magic. ”

“Mama would never help him.”

“And she did not. Even when he promised her all the riches in the world.” Ágota falls silent and eats another berry.

I rub my sticky hands on the cold wet stone next to me. The rainwater washes over my fingers. My stomach hurts from hunger and despair. After a few minutes, I ask, “Is that why Mama was hiding from him?”

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Ágota gestures with a berry-stained finger and the pages of the book flip. “Yes.”

“But how did he know about her?”

Wiping her hands off on her skirt, Ágota lifts the book so I can see an illustration of the doorway between the two worlds. Our mother carefully drew herself as a child stepping through the opening. “When the witches created the passage into this world, all the ley lines in this world trembled with the onslaught of the new magic. All the creatures of magic sensed the arrival of the witches. The devil sensed the change, too, and went in search of the source. He found the lower witches first. Some he turned to serve him. Others fled. One of his new servants told him about the only Archwitch to escape to this world.”

“Mama,” I say with certainty.

“Yes. It took him centuries to find her. When he did, he offered to take her to the Scholomance. It is near a hidden lake called Lake Hermanstadt in the Carpathian Mountains.”

“What is it?” I recall my mother refusing to leave with the devil to travel to the Scholomance. At the time, I had not understood what she was speaking about.

“It is a school of black magic that only opens every hundred years. The devil teaches ten students the blackest of magicks there, and at the end of ten years, he keeps one student as payment. He tried very hard to persuade Mama to attend, but she refused. Every hundred years, he would appear on her doorstep to beg her to attend. Every year, she told them she would not. Finally, he decided to force her. She escaped and

hid for a very long time, but she knew he might someday find her.”

“He wanted to make her wicked like him,” I say, disgusted at the mere thought.

“Yes, he did.”

A terrible thought occurs to me and I burst into fresh tears. “Now he shall come for you!”

“He does not know my name. Mama kept it hidden from him. It will be very hard for him to locate me.” Ágota smirks with satisfaction.

“But Enede knows it. So does her mother. And the other ladies in the village.”

A look of pain flits across Ágota’s face at the mention of her beloved. “Mama cast a spell so they would not remember our names when they weren’t in our presence. And now that we are no longer in the village, they will not remember us at all. Mama cast powerful spells to erase us from the memories of the villagers. After she was tracked down by several people from the other villages we lived near, she knew she had to expend the strongest of magicks to protect us.”

“So the devil cannot find you because he does not know your name?”

Ágota nods. “Exactly. Names are powerful.”

My mind drifts to the promise I made to my mother. I must never tell anyone, not even Ágota, my true name. I pull the hood over my head and stare at the toes of my shoes. My feet are cold.

“Do you miss Enede?” I ask.

“I do not know. Maybe. I suppose I will miss her, but she is not the only girl I kissed. Mama was right. Enede and the other girls will marry and have babies. My future is not in that village.”

“Where is it?”

“With you. For now.” Ágota leans over to kiss my forehead. Her lips are so hot I flinch. “You are cold. You should have said so. The magic in me is so hot, I cannot feel damp or cold.”

Ágota’s fingers twist into elaborate shapes and a small golden ball of light forms above our heads. A warm glow fills our tiny haven, and soon my fingers and toes begin to thaw. Ágota flips through our mother’s book, her face twisted into a scowl.

“Will I get married and have babies?”

The concept seems so strange and foreign.

“One day, I suppose.” Ágota tilts her head toward me, her eyes starting to turn green. “Yes, I am sure you will.”

“Can you see it?”

“I cannot explain exactly what I see, but, yes, you will marry and have a fine house.”

“And where will you be?”

The green in her eyes fades away and she shakes her head. “I do not know. I cannot see the future for myself.”

Sadness fills my heart. I remember Mama saying that she could not see her own

future either. That is probably why the devil found her and killed her. I wipe away fresh tears, frightened for Ágota. I hope my mother's spells worked and that the devil will never discover her name. My secret name seems more important than ever.

“Where are you?” Ágota unexpectedly asks.

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I lift my eyes to gaze at her in confusion only to discover she is unmoving. Clutching a berry, her fingers hover right before her open lips.

This is wrong.

This is not part of my memory.

This never happened.

“Where are you, Erzsébet?” Ágota demands. “Tell me!”

My sister’s voice does not come from the still form of Ágota, but from beyond our sanctuary. I gaz

e out at the world, transfixed by the rain caught in place, transforming it into a curtain of diamonds. Beyond the frozen rainfall stands Ágota. Not the seventeen-year-old facing an uncertain future, but Ágota as I saw her before Vlad took her from me. Clad all in black, her long hair hangs to her waist in wild disarray. Vivid green eyes stare at me intently.

“Erzsébet, tell me where you are!” she demands again.

“Ágota?” I whisper. “How?”

I am no longer huddled beneath the outcropping, but standing before her in my ragged gold and red dress. I press my hands to the terrible wound beneath my breasts and feel blood seeping through my fingers.

Without moving her feet, my sister moves toward me, gliding like a swan across dark waters. “Erzsébet, tell me where you are!”

“I do not know!” I reply, stunned by this strange turn of events.

“What do you mean? Why are you wounded? What has he done?”

“How are you here after what Vlad did to you?”

Ágota’s lips tilt into her familiar smirk. “I have my secrets, now tell me yours. Where are you?”

She punctuates each word with twitching fingers in front of my face.

“I truthfully have no idea where he has me entombed!”

“Entombed!” She growls out the word.

“As punishment,” I answer, still astonished at this odd turn of events.

The shadow of a winged creature obliterates the sunlight, turning day into dusk.

Ágota recoils and raises her hands above her head. “Damn him and his magic!”

I crane my head and behold the physical manifestation of the ward Vlad cast to hide the mausoleum from the world. The black dragon, made of shadows and fire, surges over Ágota and sweeps her into darkness.

Pain surges through my body. I am drawn out of the depths of my memory and open my eyes to the dank gloom of the mausoleum. I fear that Vlad will be there, sulking in the dark, but I am alone. In the aftermath of my vision, I am distraught and

desperate to be free of my captivity.

Shivering in my rain-soaked gown, I listen as the thunder rumbles overhead. I grip the iron stake, the cold wet metal unrelenting in its torment. I scream with frustration and agony. I cannot wrench my body free of its captivity. I am too weak and Vlad's spells are too strong.

Defeated, I fall back on the bier.

The appearance of an older, more powerful Ágota in my memory is mystifying and disquieting. If I did not know her fate, I would believe she had truly appeared to me. Perhaps it is my own desperate need to escape that is driving me toward madness. It is impossible that my sister is searching for me after Vlad's heinous betrayal.

Weeping, I lie on my bier and await the next torment Vlad will visit upon me.

Chapter 6

Time stagnates in the darkness. Hunger is a constant. Loneliness is my only companion. Slumber has become my only refuge, but it is not particularly kind to me either. My dreams are always nightmares.

When I awaken, I find no relief for I am still here in this foul mausoleum.

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Sometimes I scream until my throat is raw and I am overwhelmed with despair.

Of course, this is what he desires. He plays a cruel game, always anticipating the methods in which I may thwart him. Every small comfort I managed to wrestle from this cursed existence he has quashed.

The most brutal of all his punishments is that I am no longer visited by his Brides. At one time, my greatest pleasure was derived from the Brides spending cherished hours at my side. I miss Ariana's laughter, Elina's dark humor, and Cneajna's sweet touch. I do not know how long it has been since I last beheld the beauty of Cneajna's face. I miss her profoundly, but Vlad will keep her far away to punish me.

The red-haired Bride, Lady Glynis from England, only visited a few times. She was lovely, strong, and rebellious. When I gazed into her eyes, I predicted she would break Vlad if he attempted to recreate the love he once shared with me with her. Her hatred for him was far deeper and stronger than mine could ever be and he would misjudge her fury for passion. I would have adored her if she had survived him. It is a pity that he has once more destroyed a woman that dared to stand against him.

It is because of Lady Glynis that I am utterly alone. He feared that she would divulge where he had hidden me to his enemies and cast a spell to move the mausoleum far from the castle. In all my years trapped in this place, this is the closest I have teetered to losing this battle of wits. I am surrendered to the truth that I am mostly mad and only experience bouts of sanity.

It is raining again. The water seeping through the crack in the roof has left me sodden. Water trickles off the edges of the bier. The smell of mold and wet stone has

finally driven out the reek of burning flesh. The torches are long extinguished and darkness enfolds me.

For several nights I have not experienced the overwhelming tug to return to the past and been free of the excursions that venture deep into my memories. Instead, I have laid here imagining all sorts of vengeance on Vlad, for I must gird myself with anger to prevent myself from weakening when he does return. I am so desperate to escape this place that there are moments when I consider subjugating my will to his power so I can be liberated from this suffering. But I cannot. No matter how much I love him and how much I desire release from this wretched stake, I cannot allow myself to be his slave. It would be a betrayal of those I love and of my own dark soul.

Yet, my misery tempts me to succumb to Vlad. I am famished. My flesh is shriveling upon my bones. My swollen tongue presses against my sharp teeth, yearning to lap up blood. Thunder cracks overhead. I pray to a God who does not hear me for some weary traveler to take refuge in my mausoleum so I might feed.

Will I ever be free of this place?

Will any of those who love me ever find me?

The strange vision of Ágota being lifted away by the manifestation of Vlad's ward bedevils me. It must be a creation of my imagination and I rebuff its false hope. I was witness to Ágota's fate at Vlad's hands and remember her last words to me. It is foolhardy to even entertain the thought of her reaching through the Veil to touch my thoughts. It has been a hundred years since I lost her.

I am mad.

Simply mad.

“No, you are not. I am. Mama always said so,” Ágota answers.

“You are not here,” I whisper, closing my eyes, hoping to evade yet another vision.

Ignoring me, she continues, “You are the sensible one. The one destined for the life of a noblewoman.”

A vast green field lined with thick woods emerges from the darkness behind my eyelids. The endless blue sky is clear and birds soar high on the wind currents. The mountain summits looming over us are a hazy deep blue. The breeze is cool against my heated flesh and ruffles the wildflowers around me. Insects dart about the meadow, buzzing loudly.

Ágota strides through the sea of tall grass, the fingers on her right hand lightly skimming over the green blades that reach her waist. In her other hand is a black raven’s feather that she twirls about by the quill. It is spelled to reveal any dangers lurking nearby and I am glad to see it fluttering in the wind. Her long hair ripples about her shoulders like a cape, and for the first time, I can see shades of our mother’s beauty in her face. The heavy embroidered bag she claimed from our garden bounces against her hip as she walks. Along our journey, she’s traded the precious objects our mother had stored in the bag for food, ale, and heavy cloaks for us to wear. No matter what she adds to it, the bag never bulges.

I trod along beside her, my fingers gripping a walking stick Ágota made for me. At the top is a knot in the wood that always faces in the direction of our destination no matter how many times I spin it around. I fancy it is some sort of magical eye and keep waiting for it to open. The black feather and the staff are the only magic Ágota’s permitted in Styria. The White Woman of the Wood allowed us to pay passage across her territory but forbade Ágota to cast spells. My sister agreed, much to my consternation.

I do not like walking great distances.

I would much rather fly.

“If I am a noblewoman, will I have a carriage?”

“Most certainly. Pulled by the most beautiful of horses.”

“Will I live in a fine house?”

“Oh, yes! And you will have servants to do your bidding!”

I smile with delight at the thought of not having chores. “Will I have fine dresses?”

Ágota hesitates, the feather stilling. Staring off into some far distant place, she says, “I see you in a beautiful crimson dress covered in gold embroidery. Around your throat is a gold necklace with sparkling rubies. Yes, I see you as a very fine noblewoman.”

“I do like that!”

“I thought you would. The closer we draw to the Kingdom of Hungary, the more vivid your future becomes. I do not see all of it, of course. Your choices may alter your path, but the future before you right now is very lovely.”

“Will I like Hungary?” I ask.

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“Yes, I do believe so.” Ágota grins at me. “It will bring you great things.”

“Truly?” The idea excites me. “Are we almost there? We’ve been traveling for such a long time.”

“It’s been only a week, Erjy.” She playfully brushes the feather over my nose.

Batting it away, I say, “Well, we would travel much faster if we did not have to deal with all the fair folk along the way.”

Ágota widens her eyes and wags the feather in my face. “Respecting the fair folk is the proper way to live through life.”

“Humans do not pay attention to them. They just do as they want.”

“And see what that gets them? Famine. Wars. Plagues.”

“Do the fair folk really do all that?”

Ágota shrugs one shoulder. “Mama says that they can nudge events in certain directions. I would rather not get cursed by The White Woman of the Wood.”

“Could you not undo it?”

“Perhaps. I don’t know for certain since I wield witch magic, not fey magic.”

“Is it really different?” I give her a doubtful look. I cannot imagine my sister being

thwarted now that she has our mother's magic within her.

"I assume it is," Ágota replies. "I cannot be sure, so I will not risk it. Besides, Mama said to always re

spect the fair folk. If not for her dealings with The White Woman of the Wood, we would never have been able to enter Styria. So we best follow Mama's example."

Frustrated, I trudge onward on sore feet. The sky is slowly darkening on the horizon, and I hope we can camp for the night soon. We still have a roasted rabbit and some bread we purchased in a village, and my stomach aches at the thought of food.

The feather in Ágota's fingers abruptly flattens and points to the west. I widen my eyes in understanding.

Danger is nearby.

"Hide, Erjy," Ágota orders, sprawling onto the ground.

I mimic her, flattening my body beside hers. The tall grass and wildflowers obscure us from view.

"What is it?" I whisper.

Ágota covers my mouth with her hand. As she shakes her head, I remember that she is as lost as I am without her magic. The pounding of horse hooves echoes around us. Deep voices steadily become louder. The tromp of many feet reveals the approach of a great number of men. Ágota pulls me close and wraps her arms around me. The grass closes over our heads, casting shifting shadows on my skin.

I listen to the clop of hooves, the steady patter of footsteps, and horses whinnying.

My body tenses, preparing to flee if they approach where we are hiding. I feel Ágota trembling behind my back. Is it from fear or anger? She cannot use her powers to better hide us since she has to defer to the fey. I frown at the thought, but do not dare to speak.

To my dismay, instead of passing through the meadow, the men come to a stop in obedience to the barked order of their leader. I am fearful they are searching for us. Had they seen us from afar? The cacophony continues nearby. With a shudder, I realize they are setting up camp.

Ágota lifts the black feather and it still points to the west, unwavering in its warning. The men are a danger to us, so we must remain hidden. The feather is never wrong. I have witnessed how men can be with women. My mother had her share of amorous suitors that refused to be rebuffed. If not for her magic, I dread to consider what they would have done to her. I recoil at the thought of what these men might try to do to Ágota, and perhaps even me.

I roll onto my back and crane my head to gaze at my sister's face. Her head is cocked, obviously listening. She sees my questioning look and pats my cheek soothingly. Laying her head down beside mine, she sighs, surrendering to our situation.

Reluctantly, I curl into her body, accepting we are trapped until we can sneak away under the cover of night. Small insects swirl around our heads and the stalks scratch my skin as I struggle to remain absolutely still and not ruffle the grass. I am hungry, but I do not dare speak aloud. Instead, I lay next to my sister, listening to the noise of a camp being erected. I wish The White Woman of the Wood would come and punish the interlopers on her land. But the fey are fickle, so I soon lose hope.

As the hours pass, I watch the sky slowly turn from blue to vibrant colors to finally black. The stench of fires, food cooking, urine, and unwashed bodies wafts on the night breeze. Laughter, arguments, and conversation blot out the natural sounds of the

night. A few times, men wander close to where we lay. Ágota covers me protectively with her body, but the soldiers return to their camp without spotting us. It is terrible to feel so vulnerable.

The night deepens as the stars blink to life in a great swath of glittering specks. The ripe moon appears over the trees as the breeze turns cold. Ágota covers me with her skirt, attempting to warm me. I wonder how much longer we must wait before we escape. I am hungry, tired, and thirsty.

The men start singing rousing songs about battles and women. Their words slur together as they grow increasingly inebriated. Shivering with cold, I press against my sister's chest, listening to her beating heart. Her arms hold me tight, her fingers stroking my hair. My thoughts drift to the night several men came to our cottage and forcibly kissed my mother. She had attempted to appeal to their decency, but in the end, she had been forced to defend herself. I will never forget their screams when she transformed them into wild boar and sent them scampering into the forest.

Certainly, Ágota could do the same if any of these men attempted to accost us. But what The White Woman of the Wood would do if my sister used her magic to defend us? A terrible thought follows. Perhaps my sister is incapable of using her magic here since she made an agreement with the fey.

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My heart sinks into an even deeper despair.

I am so tired, yet I do not dare sleep. I lift my eyes to the dark sky, hoping that the men will soon crawl into their beds. I cannot bear the suspense of awaiting our discovery or our moment of escape.

When the first startled cry comes, I merely disregard it as part of the men's revelry. But then another comes, and another. Shouted commands, the clash of blades, and screams of pain and terror swiftly follow. Ágota dares to rise to her knees, craning her head to attempt to see what has befallen the encampment. I start to follow, but she presses me down with one firm hand. Shaking her head, she signals for my silence.

The noises emanating from the camp are violent. Grunts, curses, cries of pain, and the clank of metal assure me that a battle is underway. The horses snort and whinny provoking me to stifle sobs at the thought of them being killed. I am childishly relieved when I hear them thundering away at a gallop. Soon the reek of blood is carried on the wind. It mingles with other distasteful smells. I gag and cover my mouth with the collar of my blouse.

Ágota pulls my cloak from the bag and then her own. Motioning for me to be careful, she stores the black feather away and pulls the hood over her head. My fingers are stiff from the cold, but I manage to fasten the cloak at my throat. Gesturing for me to keep low to the ground, Ágota slings the bag across her chest. Together, we slowly crawl through the meadow in the direction of the woods. The grass is coarse against my palms and slaps at my face as I bite back my tears and follow Ágota.

The sounds of combat fades away, not because we are gaining distance from it, but

because there is apparently a victor. In the aftermath, men call out in agony for their mothers, only to be silenced one by one. Perhaps my wish came true and The White Woman of the Wood has inflicted her vengeance on the men who dared violate her land.

Ágota dares to climb to her feet, crouching over to stay out of view, and takes hold of my hand. Hurrying toward the trees, the urgency of our escape makes my heart flutter with fright.

The silence that fills the night is more terrifying than the sound of the battle a few short minutes before. Ágota does not even bother to hunch over anymore as the trees loom closer. I cling to her hand, my legs pumping in the effort to match her swift pace. We are nearly to the trees when Ágota gasps, spins about and snatches me up in her arms. I do not see what frightened her so terribly, but I cling to her as she runs. Staring over her shoulder, I peer at the ruins of the camp. Firelight illuminates the torn bodies of men. Blood splashes the tents and covers the corpses. The victors are nowhere to be seen.

My sister stumbles to a halt, her chest heaving against mine. Gasping for air, she spins about as though searching for something.

“What is it?” I sob in fright.

“Hold onto me. Do not let go,” Ágota replies.

Struggling to run with me in her arms, she rushes through the meadow toward a slope that leads higher into the mountains. Boulders and trees offer a hiding place. We are almost to the base of the incline when something drops from the sky and lands on a large pile of rocks before us. I twist about in my sister’s grip to see what has followed us, hoping that perhaps it is The White Lady of the Wood coming to our rescue.

Instead, I glimpse a tall blonde woman dressed as a soldier. Her black tunic is over a mail shirt and she holds a sword covered in blood. Her long hair is braided and coiled over one shoulder. In the moonlight, her eyes appear black as pitch and her bright red lips slide into a smile.

“What have I found?” she asks in German, but with an accent.

“Travelers,” Ágota blurts out.

The blood dripping from the sword

stains the rocks the warrior woman stands upon. Staring at her face in the moonlight, I observe she is both beautiful and cruel.

I am enthralled and afraid.

“We beg your mercy,” Ágota says. “We are not your enemies. We were hiding from the men and mean no harm to you.”

The dark eyes observe my sister thoughtfully but show no tenderness toward our situation. “Yet, you lie to me.”

“No, I do not. I swear it,” Ágota replies. “We are travelers. We are passing through Styria on our way to our father’s home in Transylvania.”

“Why so far from home, witch?”

Flustered, Ágota is speechless.

“Yes, I know what you are, Ágota. The White Lady of the Wood said she’d allowed a witch and her human servant, Erzsébet, to enter her domain.”

“I am her sister! Not her servant!” I declare, lifting my chin.

To my surprise, the woman smiles. “Oh, my mistake.”

“I am not lying about our journey, but you must understand why I must keep my nature a secret,” Ágota exclaims in her defense.

“You did not use your magic against the men, or to hide yourself. Or even against me. You sustained your vow to The White Woman of the Wood,” the stranger says, one arched eyebrow lifting. “Impressive for someone so young and so afraid.”

“I made a promise to The White Lady of the Wood,” Ágota replies. “I keep my word.”

“Do you know what I am?”

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“Yes.” Ágota tightens her hold on me, her fingers pressing hard into my skin. “And I beg for your mercy.”

The woman wipes her red lips with her gloved hand. I shiver, realizing they were so vibrantly red in color from the blood coating them. My mother told me about the vampires who lurk in darkness and feast off humans. I stare in terror at the woman before us. I do not want her sharp teeth to rend my throat.

“I am well fed. I have no need for your blood or your sister’s.”

Ágota remains quiet, clearly uncertain of a proper response to this declaration.

“You have passed from the domain of The White Woman of the Wood into lands I protect.”

“I ask for safe passage through your territory.”

“In exchange for what?”

Ágota fumbles with the bag. “I have a ring with a ruby.”

“I have many rubies and many rings.” The woman laughs with delight. “But how charming of you to offer. Join me where I am currently residing and we shall discuss this further.”

My sister’s body tenses.

The woman's eyes narrow. "If you come with me, you will be safe beneath the roof of my haven. No one shall touch you. You may eat and rest while we decide what your payment will be for your continued safety in this land. I swear it on my blood. And if you are truly a witch, you know that is a vow I cannot break."

Swallowing hard, my sister nods. "I accept."

"Good." The woman makes a great show of wiping down her sword before sheathing it. "You may call me Lady Dominique. I am currently staying with Count Dolingen of Gratz at his nearby castle. Those men –" she points dismissively at the corpses "–were on their way to kill him. Obviously, I could not allow them to hurt my host. Besides, they were quite delicious."

"You did not kill the horses," I say gratefully.

Lady Dominique smirks. "Once they are rounded up, they will be a nice addition to my host's stable. I am not one to squander assets." With terrifying swiftness, she grabs Ágota by the arms. "As you will see."

The ground falls away as we are lifted high into the sky.

Chapter 7

As I languish on this bier, I cannot help but dwell upon my sister's prophecy. The portent had been lost in memory until last night. Recalling Ágota's proclamation coaxes a bitter laugh from my dry lips. The crimson and gold dress she saw in her prophetic vision is frayed beneath my fingers. The gold and ruby necklace is a heavy shackle about my throat. If only she'd seen beyond the regalia of my mortal life maybe I could have avoided this fate. Perhaps she would have been saved from her own. That was always the curse of her power. Ágota could only witness glimpses of the future and often struggled to discern the meaning of what she observed. What

good is a power that cannot save the ones you love?

The mausoleum smells of rotten meat while the air is stagnant and heavy with moisture. I am frail in my opulent gown and have not the strength to move. How long will it be before I feed again? How long before I am visited by my husband? Will he come to taunt me, or bring me a victim to feast upon? I am at the mercy of his whims.

Should the visions come again, I will eagerly welcome them. Even though the pleasure of beholding the faces of my loved ones will be transmuted into pain once my mind returns to this damp mausoleum, I desire refuge from this hell. I am crushed beneath my loneliness. The absence of my loved ones becomes a sharp blade through my heart.

My mother, Ágota, and now Dominique.

Oh, how I miss Dominique...

Gazing upon her face once again, even if only in a remembrance, has renewed my longing for her companionship. To be separated from my dearest friend matches the agony of the stake. Ironical, since at our first meeting I was terrified of her. With good reason, of course. Dominique was a fearsome vampire.

I was convinced she intended to do us harm when she absconded with us that night, regardless of her promise to Ágota. Upon reflection, I wonder if my fears were an omen, for it was Dominique's hand which set me upon a course in life that would eventually result in my present imprisonment. My anger does not stir against her despite this truth. How could she have known her actions would usher me to Death's door and beyond?

Oh, bliss! I feel the strings of whatever curse has been laid upon me drawing me deep into my memories. I will not struggle. Tonight I wish to abandon the mausoleum and

find refuge in the past. I long to stare upon Dominique's face and hear her voice. Even if it means I must also see him...

The pull intensifies as I close my eyes against the gloom of the mausoleum. What follows is the sensation of being untethered from my flesh and slipping free from earthly bonds.

The agony of my captivity vanishes.

A moment later, my eyes open to a wide expanse of the heavens and a pale moon. I am a mortal girl, small and inconsequential. I stare with fright at the treetops below us. Buffeted by the cold night air, I am half frozen in my cloak and certain my demise is close at hand.

Pain returns with startling power, causing me to cry out. But it is not the familiar sting of the stake skewering my chest, but waves of agony radiating from my shoulder to my wrist. Dangling from the vampire's grip, I do not dare struggle despite the crushing power of her hand nearly wrenching my arm from its socket.

My sister does not resist our captor but floats alongside the vampire. I have faith in Ágota, but I worry about how compliant she appears. Does she have a plan? Or is she intimidated by the vampire's power? I wish I could speak to her about our predicament and know her thoughts. Instead, I endure our passage through the night skies in silence.

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I am afraid, hungry, and freezing. I wish to be done with this flight and have my feet once more on the ground. I tilt my head to gaze at the blonde vampire effortlessly gliding upon the wind.

“I am cold!”

She takes no notice of my words for her focus is on a castle atop a hill, its many windows glowing a bright orange in the night.

My teeth chattering, I pull my cloak tighter around me with other hand.

A road meanders through the trees and ends at a secured gate set in heavily fortified walls. The guards on the walls do not even glance upward as we sail over their heads to alight on the battlements. I gape at the heavily armored men with fear, but they continue to stare outward at the darkened terrain.

The vampire guides us to an open doorway guarded by intimidating sentries, but they do not appear to observe us. I study the rugged face peering out from a heavy helmet and notice his eyes do not follow when we pass. I dare to touch his arm, but he does not detect me.

“They have no sense of your presence,” Dominique says with a smirk. “I am hiding us with my power. Impressed?”

“No,” I answer. “My mother was a witch and so is my sister.”

Ágota lifts her eyes toward the ceiling with annoyance. At me? Or the vampire? I am

unsure.

Dominique laughs with delight at my answer.

“Do not mock me,” I say irritably.

The vampire ruffles my hair. “You are an amusing little thing, are you not? Come along.”

As I trail behind the vampire, I stare pointedly at my sister, my gaze demanding she defend me. Ágota observes my expression of frustration and lifts a finger to her lips. Frowning, I nod in acquiescence. If my sister insists I remain silent, I will obey. But it will be no easy task, for I am afraid and angry.

We are guided through narrow corridors and steep stone stairways until we pass through a door into a much more hospitable portion of the castle. Torches burn along the walls, chasing away the darkness, the flickering flames casting off elusive heat. The cold permeates the stone walls and floor, chilling me further.

For a brief moment, I witness the torches in the mausoleum bursting to life. The pain of the stake returns and my vision distorts.

“Who’s there?” I attempted to say, but I am swallowed by the past before there is an answer.

I press a small hand to my breast, but the pain is gone, and my awareness of my captivity within the mausoleum fades. I rejoin the continuing drama of my recollections, losing myself in the mind of the younger version of myself.

“Do not dawdle. Come along,” Dominique orders, gesturing for us to follow her.

Beneath her tunic, she wears a skirt that brushes over the top of her boots and her scabbard swings at her side. She is an unusual woman, appearing as formidable as the sentries on the wall. I reluctantly admire how she carries herself and speculate how she came about to gird herself like a warrior.

After descending a winding stairway, we

enter the great hall of the castle. One end of the room is dominated by an enormous fireplace and heavy ornate furniture is arranged before it. The ceiling is high and curved with banners hanging from the rafters. I have never seen such a place before, so I openly gape at my impressive surroundings.

“Wirich, I return,” Dominique announces, her voice echoing.

From a particularly large chair rises a very tall man. His black hair rests against his shoulders and his beard is streaked with gray. I find myself lifting my head to look at a face which appears to be carved from white granite that has been chipped away over time. Maybe he was handsome at one point, but now he reminds me of the trolls from stories.

“Dominique, did you feast well?” He smiles, surprisingly transforming his face from cruel to kind.

“They were delicious.” Dominique greets the man with a kiss on his scarred lips. “Such a small contingent was no threat to your power. Your enemies lack resources to adequately attack you.”

“They were flies in need of a spider,” he answers with a chuckle, his fingers flicking her chin. “Now, who are these young ladies?”

“Introduce yourselves,” Dominique instructs us.

Bristling slightly at being ordered about, Ágota steps forward and says, “I am Ágota, Archwitch of the Lost Witch World. This is my sister, Erzsébet. We ask for safe passage through your land. Who are you?”

The big man laughs. “I like you, Ágota, Archwitch of the Lost Witch World. I am Wirich, Count Dolingen of Gratz in Styria.” Turning to Dominique, he says, “An Archwitch? How did you ever discover such a treasure?”

“The White Woman of the Wood informed me that an Archwitch was traveling through your territory. I found the girls hiding in the meadow near the encampment of Rolf’s men. I killed your enemies before they discovered the girls.”

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“Hiding? Why were you hiding? Could you not fight them with your magicks, Archwitch?” Wirich asks Ágota, raising bushy eyebrows.

“I promised The White Woman in the Wood I would not use my magic in her territory. Otherwise, I could have easily evaded them,” Ágota answers. “I did not know I had passed out of her territory.”

“So you respect the fey?” Wirich appears amused by this confession.

“Yes. My mother told me that their curses are potent and not easily dispelled.”

“That is true. Where is your mother now, Ágota the Archwitch?”

Ágota straightens her spine and lifts her chin. “My mother died. We are journeying to our father’s home.”

The temptation to correct her is great, but I remain silent. Ágota must have her reasons for insinuating we are full-blooded sisters.

“You have Hungarian names and speak German with an accent, so I assume this father lives in the Kingdom of Hungary?”

“Transylvania. He is a castle warrior.”

“And his name?”

“Balázs, beholden to Ladislaus Kán, Voivode of Transylvania,” Ágota answers,

raising her chin higher with pride.

Dominique flicks her gaze toward Wirich, a sly look upon her face.

The large man returns her look, and nods. “Well done, Dominique.”

“I thought you would be pleased.”

“Sit down, young ladies. You look cold and tired. Are you hungry?”

My stomach is rumbling and empty, but remain quiet. I do not trust the big man or the vampire, so I obediently stay in Ágota’s shadow.

My sister stands before them, her manner fearless and a bit arrogant. “You do not seem impressed by the presence of vampires and witches, so before we partake of your food and drink, I must ask: what are you?”

Tucking his hands behind his back, the big man walks toward my sister. His tunic is crimson with a raven embroidered on his chest. Looming over us, he regards my sister with eyes as black as pitch. My sister meets his stare, unflinching and defiant.

“You are a very clever girl to ask such a question.”

“I am a very clever witch.”

“I am part fey, the great-grandson of The White Woman in the Wood, but I do not wield the power of the fey. It is safe to eat my food and drink. I do not have the power to bind you to me through such trickery.”

“So what power do you have to bind us with?”

“Alas, only mortal power,” he says with an exaggerated sigh and a significant look at Dominique. “I would rather be hospitable, so please, sit.”

Grudgingly, Ágota takes a seat, and I perch on the chair next to her. I clasp my trembling hands in my lap in an attempt to still them but fail. Lifting my eyes, I gawk at the enormous boar head over the fireplace. Its tusks and glassy eyes scare me even though it is dead. Though I cannot quite determine why it thoroughly unsettles me.

Observing my sister out of the corner of my eye, I am bothered by her countenance. Her usual scowl is absent. I have never seen her so quiet or calm. I am unnerved by her behavior, but do not dare speak.

Meanwhile, Wirich summons servants out of the dark corners of the room, and soon, food and drink are set upon the table. I regard the pie placed before me with some trepidation, but Ágota breaks the crust on hers and digs into the chicken and peas hidden inside. Starving, I shovel the food into my mouth. It is too hot to actually taste, but I eat with relish. I gulp the cold, fresh water in the cup set beside my plate to soothe my burned tongue before eagerly continuing to eat.

Wirich and Dominique sit at the end of the table talking in lowered voices and occasionally casting thoughtful looks in our direction. A few times they burst into laughter, their voices boisterous and triumphant. Again, I worry that they are plotting against us. I steal another look at Ágota. She appears unfazed as she ignores them.

A door opens with a loud clank.

Startled, I whip about and peer into the gloom dwelling outside the light cast by the fireplace. Footsteps announce the arrival of another person. I gulp down the food I was chewing and stare at the dark figure approaching. My almost full stomach flutters with trepidation.

A boy, a few years older than I, steps into the firelight. He's tall, lean, and clad in a tunic similar to Wirich's. Hair the color of raven's feathers and eyes black as night stand out against his pale skin. His delicate lips are very red and set into a hard line when he notices me staring at me. Narrowing his eyes, long lashes cast shadows over his cheeks resembling wings. He's the most beautiful boy I have ever seen.

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“Albrecht, take a seat!” Wirich calls out to the newcomer.

“I already ate, Father,” the newcomer answers testily.

“Did I ask you to eat, boy?” Wirich's heavy eyebrows lower over his dark eyes. “I told you to sit down.” The big man points at the chair next to mine.

Albrecht reluctantly sits next to me, his nose crinkling with distaste.

I stare at him openly, fascinated with his appearance. I have never seen a boy who was so clean and finely dressed. Furthermore, he is so pretty I find myself blushing. I look toward my sister to see if she's taken notice of Albrecht. Instead, she's staring at the boar's head. I return my gaze to the older boy and smile.

“Do not look at me,” Albrecht sniffs.

“I want to,” I answer.

“Why?”

“You are pretty for a boy.”

A small smile creeps onto his lips. “You'd be pretty if you weren't so dirty.”

“I am dirty because I had to hide from your father's enemies.”

“Oh?” This clearly ensnares Albrecht's interest. “What happened?”

“We were walking through a meadow when they approached. We hid in the high grass all day and most of the night. Then Dominique came and slew them.” Realizing I may have said too much, I scoop more food into my mouth.

Albrecht observes the two conspiring adults at the end of the table. “She will not show me her fangs.”

“Why not?”

“She says it is vulgar.”

Albrecht scowls and I instantly find him even more attractive.

“Well, she is a vampire

, so that is very vulgar. Drinking people's blood is very crude even if it is rather exciting.”

Albrecht leans toward me. “I saw her bite someone once, but from a distance.”

“I saw all the dead bodies in the camp. All your father's enemies torn apart. There was blood everywhere.”

Regarding me with newfound respect, Albrecht asks, “Were you afraid?”

“Very! It was very gruesome! I did not know what had killed the men and if it would kill me, too. When Dominique revealed herself, her sword was covered in blood.”

“I can fight with a sword.” Albrecht puffs up his thin chest. “One day, I will fight battles and kill my enemies.”

Attempting to impress him, I say, “My father was a great warrior.”

“He still is,” Ágota says, interrupting us.

I remember her lie and blush. I forgot I was supposed to pretend to be her full sister.

“Who is he?” Albrecht asks with interest.

“A castle warrior from Transylvania,” she answers.

“So he’s not titled,” Albrecht says dismissively.

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“No, but he is a witch. Like me.” Ágota’s smirk returns as she twists her fingers and embers dance around them.

“Well, that is not very impressive,” Albrecht says with a shrug. “I once saw a magician make a hare appear out of his cap.

The entire table surges across the floor with a loud scraping sound and stops a few scant feet from the fireplace. It is so large and heavy it would take many men to maneuver it about. The bowls and cups remain perfectly in place, not spilling a drop.

With a feral grin, Ágota says, “What were you saying?”

Staring in shock, Albrecht does not answer.

Chortling, Wirich says, “Please return the table to its proper place, Ágota.”

Flicking her fingers, Ágota summons the table back.

Wirich rises from his chair and walks along the length of the table. His fingers drag over the smooth surface, and when he stands opposite of us, he leans forward on his knuckles.

“I have decided on your payment for passage through my lands,” Wirich informs Ágota.

“I might decide to be agreeable,” Ágota answers.

“I want you to deliver a sealed letter to your father for me.”

“That’s all?” Ágota is as surprised as I am.

“In these very uncertain times, it is wise to create relationships with other men of power.”

“Or women.” Dominique’s voice is as piercing as her gaze.

Wirich flinches. “Yes. Especially those with sharp teeth and a sharper tongue. My apologies.”

Lifting a shoulder, the vampire turns away from the conversation and disappears into the darker part of the room, which makes me rather nervous. Her teeth are very sharp, as is her sword.

“Your friend does not seem too pleased with you,” Albrecht says, smirking.

“She dislikes when I do not grant her the proper due,” Wirich answers. “Something you should keep in mind for your future. Do not upset the woman in your life.”

Albrecht scoffs at his father. “Yet you upset my mother.”

“That is a talk for another time.” Wirich focuses on my sister. “Are you agreed?”

“What will be in the letter?” Ágota asks.

“It will be a simple letter of introduction. That is all.”

“May I read it before you seal it?” Ágota meets the man’s gaze.

I sense the conversation has undercurrents I do not understand. Perhaps it is because he has fey blood in him, and she is possibly testing him.

“You may read the letter, Ágota,” Wirich promises her.

“And you will not alter it before the letter is sealed.”

“I will not.”

“Or have anyone else alter it.”

“Agreed.”

“No enchantments of any kind will be imbued on the paper.”

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Wirich bursts into boisterous laughter. “You are a clever witch, but I promise you that it will be merely a letter of introduction.”

Ágota sits back in her chair and taps her fingers on the table. At last, she says, “Very well. I will deliver a letter to my father in exchange for safe passage through your land.”

“I am glad we are agreed. Now, Albrecht, lead the young ladies to the bedchamber next to yours. That’s where they will sleep tonight.”

“I am not a servant,” Albrecht protests.

“No, but you are my son and you will obey.”

With a snort, Albrecht stands and gestures for us to follow. “Come on then.”

As Wirich trails after Dominique, we scurry behind Albrecht. The boy obviously isn’t too pleased with being tasked with our escort and walks so quickly he is soon far ahead of us. I am glad to have a few more minutes with the boy. Despite his surliness, I rather like him.

Ágota slows me with a hand on my shoulder and leans toward me to whisper, “Do everything I say and do not falter. Despite their hospitality, all is not well here.”

“Because of the vampire?”

She shakes her head. “Did you see the boar’s head?”

I nod. “It is really frightening.”

“Did you see anything wrong about it?”

“I noticed something was amiss, but I could not sort it out,” I confess.

Ágota glances back toward the fireplace and sucks a breath through her teeth. “It has the eyes of a human.”

“What does that mean?” I gasp.

“It means we are not safe here.”

“Are you coming or not?” Albrecht barks at us from down the corridor.

Gripping my hand tightly in hers, Ágota guides us deeper into the castle.

Chapter 8

Reality blurs around the edges. I shift between the world that once was and the one I inhabit now.

Am I wrapped in my sister’s embrace, attempting to sleep in a darkened room in a strange castle?

Or impaled on a bier in a mausoleum, watching shadowy figures moving about me through half-closed eyes?

“Who are you?” I whisper through cracked lips.

No one answers.

My mind flits back and forth from the present to the past, pain swelling to nearly unbearable intensities before it recedes.

I feel Ágota's fingers combing through my hair while another trembling hand bathes my face and neck with a damp cloth.

I am both ravenous with hunger and full with a warm meal.

I am small and delicate in my sister's embrace and shriveled and weak on the bier.

I hear bones rattling as they are swept from the mausoleum, and the wind howling against a narrow window on the far side of an elegant castle bedroom.

I feel safe and loved, and afraid and alone.

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I cannot tether myself to only one time, so I drift between both.

The scrape of metal against stone startles me from my trance and—at last—I find my anchor. With relief, my mind settles into my younger form. My sister and I are curled together in the center of a large bed, her arms around me as sleep tugs on my eyelids.

Again, the sound of metal grinding against stone reverberates through the room.

“What’s that noise, Agy?” I whisper, stirring from my drowsy state. “Is it the door? Is the vampire coming to drink my blood?”

“It is not the door,” she answers, pointing to the closed one across the room. Sitting upright, she searches the corners of the room. “I am not certain the vampire would need a door. What is that sound?”

The dim illumination from the smoldering fire in the hearth does very little to dispel the murkiness dwelling on the edges of the room.

The grating noise stops.

“I hate this place,” Ágota grumbles. “It is too big, with too many corridors, and too many rooms, and far too many men.”

“And a vampire. And a boar’s head with human eyes,” I add.

“You are not very comforting, Erjy.”

Ágota tenses as the scraping noise starts anew. She lifts an arm, her palm erupting into light, and the brilliance presses away the shadows and reveals Albrecht standing a few feet from the bed with his fingers shielding his eyes. Clad in a tunic and leggings, he holds a scabbard in his other hand. Behind him is a gap in the wall. A narrow metal door stands open, and I realize it was hidden by the stone façade.

“What are you doing here?” Ágota demands, rising onto her knees and shoving me so I fall behind her.

“I venture where I like. This is my castle,” Albrecht answers testily.

“You are intruding nonetheless,” Ágota retorts with a snarl.

“Is that a secret passage?” I point to the darkened doorway with excitement. “Where does it lead?”

“Yes, it is a secret passage and it ends at my room.” Albrecht sulkily regards us with his dark eyes. He is rather pretty in the illumination of Ágota’s magic. “And I cannot intrude in my own home.”

“Well, you are! My sister was attempting to sleep when you so rudely woke her.” Ágota tosses the ball of light into the air where it hovers over the bed, bathing us in a white glow.

“I wanted to show Erzsébet my sword.”

Ágota’s eyes narrow. “Explain yourself, pervert!”

Albrecht raises the scabbard in his hand. “This is my sword. A gift from my father. I told your sister I will be a great warrior one day and I want to show her my sword.”

“How dull.” Ágota sniffs with disapproval. “But at least it is not the sword between your legs.”

“It is a fey sword,” Albrecht snaps, blushing. “Magical. Powerful. The White Woman in the Wood had it made for our family.”

I wonder how involved the powerful fey is with her human progeny. “Have you ever met her, Albrecht?”

“Or does she avoid your family because you are a nuisance?” Ágota wrinkles her nose at him.

“You know nothing of her,” Albrecht responds with a defiant tilt of his chin.

“Yes, we do. I negotiated our passage through her land,” Ágota replies.

Albrecht’s shoulders sag. “Oh.”

“So you have not met her have you?” ?

?gota climbs off the bed to stand in front of him. They are nearly the same height, but Ágota makes a point to take advantage of the slight difference to look down at him. I suspect that beneath her skirt she’s on her toes.

“No, not yet. I will when I am older.”

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“She is utterly terrifying. You will piss yourself.” Ágota smirks.

“I will not. She is my kin!” Albrecht fidgets with the hilt of his sword and appears to ponder Ágota’s remark. “What does she look like? Is she awful somehow?”

Ágota lifts a shoulder. “She is very, very white. Everything about her is white. Hair, eyes, skin... even her gown. You can barely look upon her because she glows brighter than the moon.”

“I covered my eyes with my hands,” I confess, and that is all I truly remember about the encounter.

A few nights ago, Ágota and I had been sleeping in the high boughs of a tree when I was awakened by a bright light. Raising my head, I had observed what at first I believed to be the moon plummeting from the sky. The shimmering orb of light halted its descent beside us, hovering majestically. Staring in awe, I noticed there was a woman in the center of the sphere. I had only a few seconds to observe her beauty before the presence of the fey rendered me into unconsciousness. I awoke hours later when the sun broke the horizon to find Ágota nervously pacing around the base of the tree. I had no recollection of the conversation between The White Woman of the Wood and Ágota, which my sister said was for the best because she was truly terrifying.

I doubt that Albrecht would fare much better in the presence of such a creature. He appears to be as mortal as I. Assuming I am mortal. I might manifest magic when I reach adulthood.

Albrecht regards us with contempt. “Well, I have her blood in my veins. I doubt I would cower in front of her.”

“I did not cower. She was just very bright,” I say, bristling. I deliberately do not tell him I swooned before her.

“This was such a nice visit,” Ágota says with exaggerated pleasantness. “A shame you must depart so we can sleep.”

Albrecht scowls in response. “I want to show Erzsébet my sword. You really should not be so suspicious.”

Ágota places her hands upon her hips, her fingers moving in very precise motions against her skirt. Albrecht glares at her, appearing not to notice her gesticulations.

“You trespassed in our room—”

“This is a room in my house.”

“—to show my sister a sword given to you by someone you’ve never met—”

“But I will one day.”

“—and you expect me not to be suspicious?”

I am rather impressed that Albrecht is not in the least intimidated by Ágota. She can look very fierce when she desires to intimidate someone. Instead, he stands tall and regards her with a very calm demeanor. Only his dark eyes flash with indignation.

“Be suspicious all you like, Ágota. I told you why I am here.”

“I suspect you are a liar.” Ágota sneers at him. “Your too-pretty face is not so innocent.”

“Your attitude is why I would rather marry her than you. I do not like you,” Albrecht answers, surprising us.

“What?” Ágota’s eyes flare with indignation. “Who said anything about you marrying me or my sister?”

With a knowing smile upon his lips, Albrecht deftly takes the upper hand in the conversation. “My father. He hopes to negotiate a marriage contract with your father. He said I could choose one of you. I prefer Erzsébet. She’s pretty and not so insolent.”

Ágota’s face flushes crimson. “Is that why he wants me to deliver his message to my father? To arrange a marriage?”

“He wants a letter of introduction so he can create an alliance with your father.” Albrecht shrugs. “It is not irregular. A political marriage in the future would be a wise move for both our fathers.”

“Why would your father want you to marry me? I am not noble.” I am utterly surprised at this development for my fears have centered on the possibility of being stalked and bitten by the vampire, or turned into a boar, not discovering I was a potential bride for a young aristocrat.

“You are witches. Father is saddened by the loss of magic in our bloodline. He wants me to marry a woman who will restore powers to our family.”

“Marry one of your fey cousins then,” Ágota sniffs.

“I cannot. The fey are forbidden to sire any more children with humans. Their numbers are dwindling, so they have to preserve their bloodlines. My father says humans are destroying magic bit by bit.”

Ágota grunts in agreement. “They are a sordid lot.”

Albrecht pointedly steps to one side so he can view me without Ágota blocking his way. “Would you like to see my sword?”

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I actually do, but I say in a rather bored tone, “I suppose.” Though I am intrigued by this handsome boy, I do not want him to see me as too eager.

“Do not point it at either one of us,” Ágota orders.

Albrecht dismisses her with a sneer of his perfect lips while I climb off the bed and venture close to my sister’s side.

“This blade can kill any creature,” Albrecht says proudly while drawing the sword.

It is beautiful and unlike any weapon, I have seen before. Albrecht slowly rotates the blade so I can admire its beauty. Intricate engravings on the blade shimmer with white magic. I am awed by the great power I sense infused into the metal. He slashes it through the air and white light trails behind it.

“It cannot kill witches, so do not even try,” Ágota warns him.

Giving her a disbelieving look, Albrecht says, “I have no intention of killing you, but if I wanted to, this would be the blade to end you.”

“You can only kill witches in very particular ways. Ways you do not know, little boy.”

“I am fourteen. Nearly a man.” Albrecht straightens his spine and lifts his chin. “One day I will be Count Dolingen of Gratz, so do not underestimate me.”

Ágota lifts her eyes, muttering in Magyar under her breath.

Ignoring her, Albrecht points to the blade. “See, Erzsébet. It is infused with the greatest of magicks so no man can defeat me on the battlefield.”

“Does that mean you do not even have to try?” I ask curiously.

A startled expression shadows Albrecht’s face. “No, of course not. I must learn to fight without the benefit of this sword.”

Ágota laughs with dark humor. “But you will still cheat in battle with it, correct?”

“I really do not like you.” Albrecht pointedly glowers at her and I adore him all the more.

Though I love my sister, I am aware of how terrifying she can be in the eyes of others. Albrecht does not even cower one little bit before her. Not only is he handsome, but fearless. I am utterly smitten. I have never felt so enthralled by anyone before. It is a giddy sensation.

“And I do not like you, Albrecht. Good thing you decided to marry Erzsébet and not me, hm?” Ágota lifts her eyebrows. “Though, you will not marry either one of us. I will make sure my father never agrees to such a thing.”

Sliding the sword back into its sheath, Albrecht ignores her. “Erzsébet, I promise that one day you will be Countess Dolingen of Gratz no matter what your sister says.”

Ágota’s portent from the day before springs to mind and I give her an inquiring look. She deliberately averts her gaze from me, her lips twisting into a frown. The castle is grand with its tall towers, battlements, large rooms, and elegant furnishings. Will this one day be my home? Will I one day be a countess? The thought excites me beyond measure.

“You really should return to your bed before I set you on fire.” Ágota summons the shimmering orb of magic from where it hovers in the air to her palm and it transforms into flame.

“You really should treat me with respect. This is my home.” Albrecht’s fingers tighten on the hilt of the sword.

The flames in the center of Ágota’s hand grow taller as she sneers.

“She is in a foul mood,” I say,

stepping between them. “Thank you for showing me your sword, Albrecht. It is lovely.”

Placated, Albrecht bows his head. “Until the morning, Erzsébet.” He steps into the secret passage and closes the door behind him. It melds seamlessly into the wall.

Ágota extinguishes the fire hovering over her palm with a dramatic wave of her hand.

“You could have been nicer,” I say.

Flicking her fingers, Ágota sends all the furniture in the room sliding across the floor to pile against the secret door. The covers on the bed spill onto the floorboards as it joins the barricade.

“How are we supposed to sleep now?” I ask testily.

“We are not. We are leaving. Now.”

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Longingly staring at the bed, I pout. “But I am tired.”

“We are also in danger.”

“Because he wants to marry me?”

“No, Erjy! Because of the boar with the human eyes! The vampire! And that awful boy carrying a sword about that is far too dangerous for him to wield! This is not a safe place!” Ágota claims her bag and stalks over to the window. Peering through the panes of glass, she frowns. “I will have to use a lot of magic to hide our flight, but there is a ley line over those hills, so I will be able to replenish what I expend. Put on your cloak. It is near the door.”

As I regard the pile of furniture, I consider arguing with Ágota. I was not lying about my exhaustion, but I also want to see Albrecht before we depart. I am completely enamored with him, and therefore, the castle does not seem as foreboding as before. Perhaps the boar with human eyes was an enemy of some sort. I had witnessed my own mother transforming evil men into wild boars. If we were closer to our former home, I would suspect the boar’s head over the mantle was one of those villainous men.

I start to open my mouth, an argument rapidly forming on my tongue before I notice the tears of frustration in Ágota’s eyes. Instantly, my heart softens. How difficult it must be for her to be entrusted with my care as we journey through treacherous mountains, forests, and fey territories when she is barely a young woman. Though I never thought we would be in danger from mortals, I realize how mistaken I had been. She is burdened with my mortality. I am shamed by this revelation.

I sigh in surrender and don my cloak.

“Come now.” Ágota insistently holds out her hand and I reluctantly take it.

Holding her fingers against the window panes, she closes her eyes. The glass dissolves beneath her touch and flows like water over the stone façade of the castle. Cold air swirls through the narrow opening, chilling me to the bone. Ágota steps onto the narrow windowsill and gazes upward into the darkened sky. The air quivers as her magic begins to build.

“Leaving in the middle of the night is very rude.” Dominique swings into view and regards us with a cross look. She hangs upside down on the outer wall of the castle with her long blonde braid swaying in the wind.

Ágota grunts with annoyance. “I should have known you were spying.”

“Yes, you should have. But you are a young and naïve. I am old and cunning. Back into the room with you. Wirich has bestowed his hospitality upon you and it would be very bad form to leave. You did promise to deliver his message to your father.”

“He wants one of us to marry his insipid son,” Ágota retorts.

“Marriage is a political game among the wealthy, titled, and powerful. You should know this, but I suspect you have lived quite a long time away from your father. You have none of the manners of the well-born.” Dominique crawls along the wall as she speaks. She reminds me of a spider with her arms and legs stretched with her head tilted at an inhuman angle.

Ágota watches the vampire warily. “I will not have it. I certainly will not marry him and neither will my sister.”

“Deliver the letter to your father, Ágota. Allow him to make an allegiance with Wirich. Your father will most likely need it with the upheaval in the Kingdom of Hungary. Besides, have you considered your sister may like being a noblewoman? A countess with her own castle?”

Ágota gives me a sharp look as I attempt to stifle any sign of excitement in my features.

“You brought us here to be broodmares,” Ágota says crossly.

“I brought you here to assist a friend that I care for dearly. He desires to renew the magic in his bloodline. You have to understand how important that is to him. Can you imagine sensing the wells of untamed magic around you, yet being unable to wield it? He does not want that for his grandchildren.” Dominique pushes Ágota back from the window.

To my surprise, my sister allows this action.

Perching in the window, Dominique regards us with her dark blue eyes. “Besides, you cannot leave. If you do, The White Woman of the Wood will curse you for violating your promise. You may not be in her territory, but you are in the home of a member of her family. I am keeping you from a terrible fate.”

“What fate is that?” I ask boldly.

“Being turned into a boar, hunted, and eaten at a great feast,” Dominique replies.

“The boar over the mantle...” Ágota’s voice is hard. “Who was it?”

“Wirich’s uncle. On the mortal side of his family tree. His uncle decided to claim his title and lands for himself. The White Woman of the Wood intervened. So you see...

it is really best you stay in this room. Tomorrow, you can depart for your home.”

Ágota grunts with annoyance. “With a letter of introduction to my father that I will be able to read first, correct?”

Dominique grins. “Much better than being a boar, is it not?”

“I hate you,” Ágota growls.

“One day, we will be friends. I promise.” Dominique reaches out and lightly pinches my cheek. “Such a pretty little girl. One day you will be a beautiful woman. Albrecht will be pleased.”

“She will not marry him,” Ágota fiercely declares.

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“Restore the window and return to bed. Sleep well. No one shall interfere with you tonight. I promise.” Dominique propels herself out the window and vanishes from sight.

With an irritated flick of her wrist, Ágota repairs the window and tosses her bag on the floor. “So that is that. We are trapped.”

“Until tomorrow,” I remind her.

Ágota picks up the bed covers and flings them onto the slightly askew bed. “Sleep, Erjy. In the morning we leave to never return. I promise.”

I remove my cloak and join her on the bed.

It is strange to rest next to my sister after she has so boldly lied.

We both know the truth of the matter.

One day I will return and I will be Countess Dolingen of Gratz.

Chapter 9

Awareness comes gradually and a woman’s form sharpens into focus. Her soft skin is dark and her luminous eyes are black as coal. I do not recognize the young woman leaning over the bier to brush and pin my black tresses into place. The deft fingers twisting and curling my hair tremble against my scalp. I am so cold and tormented in my agony, but her gentle ministrations lull me into a stupor. She smells deliciously of

fear and life. I want to touch her and feel her warmth, but I am too weak to lift my arms. Tears tremble on the edges of my eyelids. The tenderness of her hands reminds me of another time, another place.

“Where is he?” I ask, my voice cracking due to my dry throat.

“Outside,” she answers.

“You are one of his gypsies,” I state.

Bristling at my insinuation that she belongs to Vlad, her spine straightens

The gypsies often visited my mother when their caravans passed by our home. Though they claimed to be from Egypt, my mother told me they kept their true origins a secret. My beloved mother had an affinity for the swarthy people in their caravans and they for her.

Vlad, though, regards them with disdain and enslaves them to do his bidding with magic and trickery. The young woman with the large dark eyes is doomed and I wonder if she understands this truth.

Finishing my hair, she picks up a damp cloth to run it over my hand. My frail fingers are feeble against her grip, but her warm skin is soothing. I am surprised when she carefully runs the edge of the cloth under my sharp nails. Surely she must know the brown flakes are all that remains of a previous victim. Cleaning away the dried blood, she does not flinch from her duty.

“What is your name?” I ask.

“Magdala.” There is the slightest tremor in her voice.

She rinses the cloth in a basin and starts to wash my other hand.

“When... when did he capture you?”

“We serve him because he offered us gold. A season of servitude and we will be able to travel on to better lives.”

The desperation to believe the good fortune of her clan weighs in her words. I do not mock her with laughter, but grant her a sorrowful smile of understanding. I, too, was once seduced by dreams of a grander life.

“You know what he is,” I say. “What I am.”

“Yes, but there are many monsters in the world.”

“Have you seen many?”

Magdala somberly nods. “Sometimes it is best to make deals with them instead of fighting or fleeing if you wish to survive.”

I almost chuckle at her naiveté. I, too, had once believed as she does. Her eyes drift to the stake that skewers my body. I bristle with fleeting anger, her judgment unwanted, yet correct. There had been a time when I’d placated monsters instead of fighting or absconding. When at last I did fight back, I sealed my fate.

Magdala is gentle with my hands, which I appreciate. With very little difficulty, because my limbs are withered, she removes my rings and washes them in her basin. Though her people are believed to be thieves, even if tempted, she will not steal from me. Vlad looms close by and she will not dare risk his wrath. I flinch when she returns the gold ring with a large ruby to my finger. I despise this particular gift from Vlad. Though originally given as a token of love, it later became a symbol of his

domination.

At last, she sets the basin aside. I expect her to depart, but instead, she sets a sewing basket next to me on the bier. Vlad must despair observing me in such a terrible state to have set her to this task. With delicate stitches, she repairs my gown. I watch her in the torchlight admiring her handiwo

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rk as the tatters and frayed lace are set right.

“Is it winter yet?” I ask.

“Autumn,” she answers.

“The castle is so cold in the winter.”

“We are preparing for the snow,” she assures me. “The larder is full and the firewood is piled high.”

I notice Magdala’s hands do not tremble anymore. Perhaps I am not so terrible now that we are engaged in conversation. She is bold, clever, and kind. I appreciate these qualities and my heart softens a bit more toward her.

“It will be so cold here,” I lament.

“Aren’t the undead always cold?”

I do not answer. I am a vampire. I steal life. When I feed, I am flush with life, warm to the touch, and mortal in appearance. That is the veracity of my existence.

“Who is Countess Dolingen of Gratz? Her name is on this mausoleum. Why was she buried so far away from Styria?”

“She was a naive woman from the Kingdom of Hungary who married young, for she craved love, security, and the life of a noblewoman. A handsome young count from

Styria offered all she desired and she willingly left her home for him.”

“And did she find all she desired in Styria?”

I hesitate, measuring my words. “She did indeed.”

“Was she happy?”

Again, I pause. “Yes. For a time she was very happy.”

I listen to the gentle beating of Magda’s heart and the whisper of the needle piercing the satin of my gown. I am at peace despite Vlad lingering outside my prison like the darkest of thunderclouds waiting to erupt.

“Was the count handsome? Did she love him at first sight?”

“He was very handsome,” I reply, tears slipping free to wet my temples. “She loved him because he chose her. Fought for her. No one had ever truly noticed her before. She had always lived in the shadow of her sister and mother.”

“When did she know she would give her heart to him?”

I close my eyes. “When he gave her the rose that morning...”

Darkness comes.

The heartbeat stills.

The scuff of the needle quiets.

I open my eyes to see Ágota leaning over the bed. “How can you sleep so soundly?”

She shakes me again. “Let us be on. I do not like it here.”

Sliding my legs out from beneath the bedcovers, I stare at the opulence of the room. Ágota’s magic has restored the furniture to their rightful spots. Chains crisscross the section that hides the secret passage and are bolted to the wall. My sister has definitely made her point.

“I am still tired,” I whine, wishing to fall back into the warm comfort of the bed to sleep longer.

“You just need to move your limbs,” she answers. “Hurry.”

Rubbing my eyes, I watch Ágota pacing about the room. Her clothes are unfamiliar in color and cut.

“There is a wash basin in the corner. A new dress and leggings are beside it for you. Gifts from our host. I already determined they are free of magic. Make sure to place your clothes in my bag. Mama made them for us. We cannot lose them.” Ágota falters, wiping at her eyes with the heels of her hands. “I wish she was here. She would know what to do.”

“You are taking care of me as you promised,” I say, attempting to console her.

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“I can handle taking care of you. You are not a nuisance. Well, not all the time. It is not you I am concerned about, but the occupants of this castle. I am a peasant girl. I am not experienced in dealing with people such as these. They are far more devious and clever than I am.”

“I know for certain you are quite clever,” I assure her. “And devious.”

She quirks a smile. “You are jaded by sisterly love. Hurry, dress. Let us be done with this place.”

I obediently pad across the cold floor to undress and bathe. Ágota prowls about the room, wringing her long hands and mumbling in Magyar. The water is lukewarm, so I rapidly wash my body before donning my new clothing. The dark brown color isn't very pretty and it does not have embroidery on the hem and sleeves like the clothes my mother made for me. Nonetheless, I do see the wisdom of dressing simply like other poor folks. I roll up my blouse and dress and stash it at the bottom of my sister's bag. Again, I notice that it does not appear any larger on the outside despite everything Ágota has stored inside. I ponder if I could hide within it.

Taking the bag from me, Ágota loops it about her neck and takes my hand. “We are leaving as soon as I have the letter for my father. My obligation will be satisfied. I do not trust anyone within these walls.”

Though I am quite lost in the maze of corridors and stairwells, Ágota guides me with surety. We pass servants and guards along the way, but none seem surprised to see us or attempts to stop us. Each room we pass through is more elegant than the last and it is far too easy for me to imagine myself as the lady of the house.

When we enter the great hall, I am even more impressed than the evening before. The gloriousness of the great hall was shrouded in the darkness when we had arrived. Sunlight streams through the high windows and illuminates the grandeur of sweeping arches, elegant columns, artwork, tapestries, and armor.

Wirich stands at the end of the long table talking with several men. He is taller than the others and I wonder if it is because of his fey blood. Dressed in a red tunic with a raven embroidered on his broad chest, he is just as frightening as the night before. Ágota stalks across the heavy rugs strewn across the stone floor dragging me in her wake. I stumble along for I am enthralled by my surroundings and crane my head to view everything veiled from me the previous night.

“Ágota! Archwitch of the Lost Witch World!” Wirich throws out his arms in greeting. “How nice of you to join me!”

The men he had been conversing with make a hasty departure through an arched doorway. Through another smaller door, several servants appear with trays of food.

“Thank you for your hospitality. We will be off now,” Ágota answers. “Can I please have the letter for my father?”

“After you eat,” Wirich says with a smile, but his comment is most definitely an order. He is a man who expects obedience. He seats himself at the end of the table where writing utensils await him.

I eagerly eye the fruit, porridge, and bread on the trays. I am famished and fear Ágota will force us to leave without taking advantage of the hospitality of our host. The stiffness of her spine and defiance in her eyes does not bode well for my hunger pangs.

“We have a very long way to travel, and it is best we start now,” Ágota replies.

“Yes, but you have a younger sister who is staring at the food like a starved beast. Be kind to her. Allow her to fill her stomach.” The dark eyes of the count meet my sister’s and he does not falter beneath her baleful gaze. “Sit down and eat. I insist.”

With an annoyed exhalation, Ágota drags one of the chairs out from beneath the table and nudges me toward it. I obey while she sits next to me. Of course, she has chosen a spot far from where Wirich resides. He appears to take no notice of her agitation and takes a quill in hand.

The servants move forward to set down the trays of food and I eagerly grab a pear. Biting into the fruit, I am grateful for the meal, for I know how keen Ágota is on continuing our travels to Transylvania. Every delicious bite makes me grin wider. My sister, meanwhile, spoons porridge into her mouth while glaring at Wirich. He ignores her while carefully writing on a piece of parchment. I look about for Albrecht, but he does not appear. I eat more than my fill and my stomach protests. Ágota stows several pears and some flat loaves of bread in her bag. If the count notices, he does not say a word. The scratch of his quill against the paper is the only sound other than the rhythmic tapping of Ágota’s fingers against the table.

Finally, Wirich motions to Ágota to approach him. “Read it, Archwitch, and tell me if it suits you.”

Shoving back her chair as noisily as she can, Ágota approaches Wirich while I watch. My sister moves with slow purposeful movements. I cannot discern if she’s

behaving like the predator or prey. Wirich’s gaze never leaves her as she nears him. There is respect in how he regards her, which surprises me. It occurs to me that I do not fully understand the undercurrents filling the room. Wirich does not have magic like Ágota, but he is not powerless. There is a certain aura about him that is intimidating. Is this the result of his fey blood? Or is it from years of ruling over his land with a sword in hand?

Bending over the table, Ágota peers down at the letter Wirich sets before her. Fingers flexing at her side, she silently mouths the words as she reads. I suspect she is weighing each one carefully, seeking hidden meanings. She finishes and starts over.

Wirich chuckles at this, settling back in his chair to await her verdict.

I watch him more than my sister. I have not been around many men. I was always sent away when my mother's suitors arrived at our cottage. I am frightened of Wirich, but I also crave his approval since if I am to marry Albrecht, I would like to be in the good graces of his family.

It occurs to me that I have not seen Albrecht's mother. The night before Dominique had presided over the table at Wirich's side, but she cannot be Albrecht's mother. Vampires cannot have children for they are undead. Perhaps, like me, Albrecht has lost his mother. The thought softens my heart even more toward the boy. Again, I look around the great hall, hoping to see him appear.

Ágota finishes reading a third time and steps back from the table.

"Is this acceptable?" Wirich asks, pointing to the letter.

"Yes, it is." Ágota sounds certain, but I notice her hands twitching at her side.

Wirich places a thick finger on the paper and drags it to him. With great flourish, he folds the letter before sealing it with wax and the indentation of his signet ring. The count pushes back his chair and rises to his full height to tower over Ágota. He bows over the letter as he hands it to her.

"Thank you, Archwitch, for your patience and for delivering this to your father."

"Do not take my delivery as a sign of my approval." Ágota drops the letter into her

bag and holds out her hand toward me. “Now that we are done here, we shall be on our way.”

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“I have arranged for some of my men to accompany you dressed as peasants. They will keep you safe until you reach your father’s land.”

“We have come this far on our own. We will continue onward without assistance,” Ágota replies.

“Archwitch, I acknowledge your great power, but there are fearsome creatures in this world. Not just fey, witches, vampires, and other mystical creatures. There are brutal men who would take advantage of you.”

“I am very aware and will avoid such manner of men. I do not need your guards when I have my own magic and fortitude.”

“And if I insist?”

“They will not be able to follow where I travel,” Ágota replies.

Wirich tucks his hands behind his back while slowly walking in a circle around Ágota. If he means to intimidate her, he will fail. Pressing her lips together, she twists her fingers in a familiar way and her feet leave the ground. Whipping about in the air, she faces the big man eye to eye.

“I have fulfilled my obligations to you and The White Woman in the Wood. I will now take my leave with my sister.”

Lifting his heavy eyebrows, Wirich takes two steps back from her. “More impressive than I dreamed.”

“We are done here.”

Ágota drops to her feet, takes my hand and pulls me along behind her toward the door on the far end of the room. Wirich does not call after us, but the sound of his heavy footfalls follow. Ágota weaves her way through the hallways to the lower castle ward. When we exit the castle, I crane my head to look at the towers looming over our head. Ágota draws me across the courtyard toward the heavy gate at a brisk pace.

Several men in plain peasant clothing are gathered near the gate. I suspect they are supposed to be our chaperones. Ágota snarls at them as we approach. When they shirk away from us, I tilt my head to gaze up at my sister’s face. I am not surprised to see her eyes shimmering a radiant green. It is a show of power that is impressive and terrifying. Even I feel a little frightened of her.

We are nearly to the gate when I hear my name called out. Whipping about, I am happy to see Albrecht rushing across the courtyard. In the early morning sunlight, Albrecht is even prettier than I remembered. My heart beats faster at the sight of him as he sprints toward me, his dark red tunic fluttering around his long legs. On his shoulder is an enormous raven that flutters its wings to maintain its balance as the boy runs.

“Erzsébet! Wait!”

“Ágota, it is Albrecht!” I exclaim. “He is coming to say goodbye!”

I whip about to see my sister with one hand raised over her head. The enormous gate creaks open under her power. The castle sentries surge toward her and she thrusts out her palm toward them. They fall back as though they have struck a barrier, terror blooming in their eyes.

“Let her pass!” Wirich calls out. “Do not interfere.”

The gate finishes opening and Ágota reaches for me. I evade her, determined to say goodbye to Albrecht. The look of astonishment on her face gives me a pinch of guilt, but I dart away to meet Albrecht.

Breathlessly, he arrives before me. The raven settles its wings and tilts its head to regard me thoughtfully. “Erzsébet, you are leaving so soon?”

“Yes, Ágota wants to leave. She does not like it here.”

Albrecht scowls at my sister. “Of course. I suspect she does not like much in this world. But you do like it here, do you not?”

I lift my eyes over his dark head to gaze at the imposing castle. The very notion of living in such a grand place with Albrecht at my side is enthralling. The castle is not so frightening anymore despite Ágota’s misgivings. This is Albrecht’s home and he is fond of me. I do feel welcomed here.

Grinning, I nod.

Relief fills his eyes and he returns my smile. “Excellent. You will come back one day?”

I enthusiastically exclaim, “Yes!”

“I know you have magic to protect yourself since you are a witch, but I want to give you this to keep close to you. It is wise to always be armed in dangerous times, or so Dominique says.” Albrecht holds out a dagger in a fine leather sheath. “She gave it to me when I was your age. It is suitable for someone your size.”

I take the gift with some trepidation. I do not have magic, but I cannot correct him. Ágota has her reasons for our deceit. The dagger is rather small when I slip it from

the sheath. A rose is engraved on the very sharp blade. It is pretty despite its deadliness. I am uncertain I could wield such a weapon to protect myself, but I am grateful for his concern.

The raven regards my actions with great interest but does not move from its perch on Albrecht's shoulder. I become aware of the cawing of other ravens perched above my head on the wall. I wonder at the significance of the birds, for their image adorns the banners strung over the gate.

"This is very nice. Are you certain you should give it to me?" I ask.

"Very certain. This way you will remember me always until you return," Albrecht says. "I will be older, handsome, and a warrior. You will be beautiful, wise, and an Archwitch. We will be very happy. I promise."

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I giggle at his words. “It sounds very grand.” Growing sober at another thought, I say, “But it will be a very long time until I see you again.”

“Perhaps, but we will spend much more time together once you return.” Albrecht leans over and kisses my cheek. His lips are soft and his breath warm. I blush and press my fingers to my cheek, imagining the imprint of his kiss lingering there.

“Erjy, we need to leave at once,” Ágota orders.

I reluctantly return to her side, casting longing looks over my shoulder at Albrecht. Wirich moves to stand behind his son, his hand on his free shoulder. The raven continues to observe me with one keen black eye. Impulsively, I wave to it and I am not so surprised when it lifts a wing in return.

“Safe journey, Ágota, Archwitch of the Lost Witch World!” Wirich calls out. “Until we meet again.”

Not answering, Ágota leads me through the gate and down the steep slope to the bigger gate in the outer wall. It rasps open as we approach, not at her bidding, but Wirich’s order.

Soon we are on the road, marching toward the ley line that will carry us from Styria. Ágota mutters under her breath in Magyar, the magic in her hand burning ever hotter. I raise the dagger clutched in my hand and notice that roses are tooled into the soft leather sheath. Once my sister is calmer, I will ask her to help me fasten it to my waist. Casting one last glance toward the castle before it is hidden behind the woods, I smile with happiness at the knowledge that one day I will return.

Darkness flows over my vision and is replaced by torchlight. Magdala's needle flows in and out of the silk and satin of my dress.

"What did she do with the rose when he gave it to her?" Magdala asks, and I grasp that no time has passed in the mausoleum while I was trapped in my past.

I press my lips together at the memory and find it difficult to answer. At last, I say, "She plunged it into his heart."

And I weep.

Chapter 10

Despite my piteous, shuddering sobs, the gypsy remains at my side, mending my dress. My heightened vampire senses detect the mortal's wildly beating heart and her shallow breathing, all signs of frightened prey. I taste fear in the air, yet the needle continues to stitch the hem of my dress. Magdala is a daring young woman, which is her undoing.

The agony of the stake is more potent since I am starving. I endeavor to lift one hand to grip it in a futile attempt to rip it from my body, but my fingers merely quiver at my side. My vulnerability is yet another indignity. I am a fearsome creature by nature, yet Vlad has weakened me to the point where I am at the mercy of lesser creatures. Magdala could strike me down if she so desired and I would be unable to defend myself. Worse yet, I am a very old vampire, which only adds to my misery. I long for the bliss of sleep or madness to escape this hunger, yet my mind remains observant even as my body shrivels to a mere husk.

Another escape from my t

orment makes itself known, but I do not welcome it. My eyelids quiver as I attempt to

force them to stay open. I do not wish to revisit the events of long ago. The curse that is upon me is potent and persistent. The tendrils of its power wrap around my mind, subsuming me. I am too weak to resist. The haze of time has not stolen away this particular memory and I do not wish to live it again. I fight to remain in the mausoleum, but it is a futile struggle, for my eyes close only to reopen in another time.

The world is a hazy blur of greens and blues. We travel with terrifying swiftness along the vein of magic threaded through a world ignorant of its existence. Hidden from the eyes of mortals, we travel faster than any horse could ever carry us. The hum of the ley line buzzes in my ears and the constant, unrelenting pull of its power makes me queasy. Ágota clutches me close as we fly and I cling to her with my arms and legs.

We are in the Kingdom of Hungary at last, but we cannot allow ourselves to drop our guard for we have yet to reach the border of Transylvania. There are violent clashes occurring among the men who rule sections of the kingdom. Since we cannot always travel the ley lines, we have had to hide more than once from men in heavy armor while Ágota convalesced after expending too much magic.

Furthermore, my sister's negotiations with various supernatural creatures for passage through their territory often forced her into spectacular displays of magic in order to impress them. By the time we arrive in Transylvania, her reputation as a fearsome Archwitch will be firmly entrenched in the hidden world, but at a cost. The magic is consuming her. She is thinner in frame, so the bones in her hands are sharp beneath her skin. Perhaps this is why she looks older and feral. Her eyes appear larger in her slimmer face and her wide mouth more pronounced. Ágota has never been particularly pretty, but now I find her oddly bewitching in appearance. She will never be beautiful, but she is formidable.

Sometimes, she even frightens me.

The closer we draw to Balázs's domain, the grimmer she becomes. When I'd learned that we did not share a father, my mother told me about her flight from Balázs's land after his wife had attempted to kill my sister out of spite. I suspect she is afraid to face her father after so many years apart. She has never spoken of him fondly and a dangerous fire sparks in her eyes whenever he is mentioned. This history does not bode well for Ágota's reunion with her father, but we have no other choice. With Lucifer searching for Ágota, we need the protection of the witches.

When the ley line abruptly vanishes around us, Ágota screams as though wounded. My sister's hold on me lessens as we reel about as if caught in a funnel. While plunging toward the ground, I bury my face in Ágota's shoulder, my fingers digging into her arms. We smash through the trees, leaf-laden boughs scratching our limbs and slashing our clothing. Arms flailing, I attempt to stop my fall but bounce off branches before I can gain purchase.

There is a bright burst of magic seconds before we crash into the ground. I fall into something soft and pliable and it saves me from a terrible death. I lift my head to discover we are caught in a lattice of golden magic. It shimmers beneath us, holding us safely aloft the hardened dark earth of a clearing in the woods. Ágota's arms slacken about me as a low agonized groan slips from her sickly pale lips.

"Ágota, what happened? Why did we fall?"

Ágota's eyelids quiver, her gaze unfocused.

The magical net sputters beneath us before vanishing. We drop the last few feet to the ground and strike it with such force the breath is forced from my lungs. Gasping, I lie next to my sister, stunned by the fall. Although breathless, I am not terribly hurt.

With some difficulty, I drag a deep breath into my lungs, relieving the unpleasant sensation of suffocating. My body aches when I push myself upright to study my

surroundings. In our travels, we visited places of deep magic and this is yet another. Admittedly, all magic feels wild and dangerous, but the aura of our surroundings is foreboding. The woods are murky and disquietingly noiseless. The ground beneath me is barren and smells vaguely of smoke.

I bend over my sister, grip her shoulders and shake her. Ágota's eyelashes flutter, her eyes rolling back in their sockets.

“Ágota! Ágota! Wake up!” I cry out.

The battle to focus on me is evident on my sister's face. The whites of her eyes roll down to reveal dulled irises. “... draining me,” she whispers.

“What is draining you?”

Her lips barely shift when she answers, “This... place...”

The silence of the woods is most likely the harbinger of something evil lurking nearby. The air weighs heavily on my body as I force myself to my feet. The impression of my head being wrapped in thick fabric gives rise to strangling claustrophobia even though I am standing in an open space. I bend over my sister and shake her.

“Please, Ágota! Wake up! I am afraid!”

To my dismay, my sister does not respond to my plea. Her head lolls to one side and her body falls limp, her pose reminding me of my lost poppets. I grasp her hand and attempt to pull her upright, but she merely slumps over.

Again and again, I attempt to rouse her, but she does not stir. The menace lingering in the air pricks along my spine. I cast worried glances into the gloomy woods encircling us. Though I do not wield magic like my sister, I sense an insidious entity of some kind watching from the shadows. Or, perhaps, it is the forest or the land itself.

The air feels heavy, making very difficult to take full breaths. Terror engulfs me for I am alone in a foreign land and my only protector is unconscious. I lower my hand to the sheath hidden in the folds of my skirt. The small dagger Albrecht gave me is most likely useless against a supernatural beast.

Kneeling beside Ágota, I struggle not to weep. I must somehow save her and myself before we are both lost to the evil that has felled her. I hook my hands under her arms and attempt to drag her, but she is far too heavy. I try to heave her over my back, but she's too long and I am too small.

In my failed effort, her bag falls from her shoulder. Bending over to claim it, I am surprised at its light weight. Opening the top, I peer into the dark interior. When I put my hand inside, my fingers graze over the bottom stitches. I know it is not empty. I saw my sister place berries inside earlier.

To my surprise, my fingers promptly close around the fruit.

Curious, I concentrate, picturing the skirt my mother made for me and soft fabric fills my hand. Understanding fills me as I excitedly summon several more objects from the depths of the bag.

“Oh!”

A mad thought occurs to me.

Is it possible?

What other choice is there?

I have to save my sister.

I eat a handful of berries before commencing my task. The sour yet sweet fruit revives me while I sort out my plans. Whatever has rendered my sister unconscious is still watching but is held at bay for some unknown reason. Is it because I am mortal? Perhaps it cannot hurt me for some arcane reason.

“Ágota, you will not wake up, so I must do this.”

I lay her flat and straight upon the ground, fold her arms over her breasts, and smooth her skirt over her legs. I open the drawstring as wide as possible and bend to my task. Sweat rolls along my neck and dampens my clothing. Carefully, I poise Ágota’s feet just inside the bag.

“I am not sure if this is safe or not. I hope it is for there is no other choice,” I say aloud.

I pull the magic relic over her ankles, tuck the skirt hem inside, and drag the bag over her legs. It is very disconcerting to see her disappear inch by inch while the opening grows larger to swallow her thighs and hips. I continue my task until all that remains outside the bag is her shoulders and head. The image at my feet is quite obscene and disturbing. It appears she has been cut asunder. I slip my hand through the opening of the bag to see if her heart still beats. I am heartened to feel it thudding against my palm, seeming a bit stronger than before.

“I love you, Ágota,” I whisper, kissing her cheek.

I draw the bag over her head.

Standing, I lift my precious package and find it no heavier than before. I will take care of her as she has taken care of me. I tuck my hand into the bag to run my fingers through Ágota’s hair lovingly.

“I shall save you,” I vow.

I pull the strings tight and knot them.

Looping the bag over my shoulder, I apprehensively study my surroundings.

Whatever attacked Ágota must be watching. Why has it not moved against me? Again, I wonder if my mortal nature is protecting me from a supernatural attack.

Remembering my mother's admonitions to always follow well-traveled paths and not wander from them, I seek out a passage through the shadowy forest. I walk about the edge of the large clearing, my nose wrinkling at the stench of burned wood. I am excited to come across a narrow pathway illuminated by sunlight. Lifting my gaze, I see that the trees do not grow over the path, allowing sunbeams to pierce the gloom. I take this as a sign that the path is safe from the evil that dwells here.

"I will save you, Ágota," I whisper.

Determination fills my heart as I daringly walk along the narrow passage. Again, I am struck by the absolute absence of forest sounds. Even my footfalls are strangely muted. The tree trunks are encompassed in thick moss and gnarled roots border the path, but do not cross it. Thick shadows repel the daylight, confining my vision to only a few feet on either side of the footpath. Unnerved, I concentrate on the band of sunshine highlighting the trail.

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Though dread sits heavily in my chest, I walk onward. The bag bumps against my hip with every step, my fingertips grazing over the embroidery. It is so lightweight my mind begins to doubt that Ágota is truly inside. I remind myself of the great magic my mother and Ágota can wield. I must have faith that she is secure inside, protected from whatever dragged her out of the sky.

The ominous atmosphere does not lessen as I continue on my trek. The soundless, darkened world feels eternal, and only my lighted pathway gives me any measure of hope. I walk for hours through what seems to be an unchanging landscape until at last I hear the rushing of water. It is the first sound I have heard other than my breathing since my ordeal began. Thirsty, tired, and encouraged, I sprint along the trail.

The path ends at the edge of a stream, water splashing merrily over stones. Relief fills me when I observe sunlight flooding the woods on the opposite side. I maneuver across the stream, stepping on the bigger rocks so as not to soak my shoes. I arrive on the sun-drenched streamside to be greeted by the hum of insects and the song of birds.

Sagging to the ground, I let out a cry of joy. I unknot the drawstrings and open the bag. Placing my hand through the opening, I fear for a moment that I will not find my sister. When my hand settles in her thick dark hair, my shoulders slump with relief.

“What do you have there?” A masculine voice speaks in Magyar, startling me.

Twisting about, I spot a man upon a boulder, staring at me. Sitting in the shade of a tree, he blended into his surroundings until he spoke. His craggy features make it difficult to determine his age and his clothing is ragged and dirty. He looks like a

beggar, but I know from my journey that appearances can be deceiving.

I yank the drawstrings taut and lower my hand so it rests close to the sheath hidden in the pleats of my skirt. “Nothing. Go away,” I retort.

“Strange accent. All alone. Young. A runaway.” He says the words to himself, not me. Dirty fingers grip his knees as he rocks back and forth.

“I am on a journey, not a runaway.”

“Surprising nothing has eaten you yet.” He laughs without mirth. “Especially if you came from there.” He points to the murky woods.

Slinging the bag over my shoulder, I ignore the man. I do not like his face or his manner. He reminds me of the men who came to our cottage late at night demanding my mother’s affections. I may not have her power to send him away, but I have two feet to carry me far from him. I face downstream and march along the burbling water.

“What is in the bag?”

I am shocked when fingers dig into my shoulder and whirl me about. Leering eyes peer down at me and rancid breath wafts over my face.

“Nothing but berries. Find your own!”

His broken nails dig into my flesh through my sleeve as he gazes down at me. Fear courses through my veins, cold and paralyzing.

“Give me the bag,” he orders.

“No!”

Anger chases away the chill in my blood and I kick him in the shins. His hand grips the strap of the bag, attempting to wrench it off me. The fire of rage fills me, burning away the remains of my fears. I am infuriated that he dare rob me, a child, of all that I possess. Fueling my fury even more is my need to protect Ágota.

“Give me the bag, or I’ll smash your brains against the rocks and take it anyway,” he threatens.

“Release me, or you will regret it!” I smash my fists against him and strike his shins with the toe of my shoe.

With a gleeful expression, he raises his walking stick over his head, intending to strike me. My hand flies to my waist. I draw my dagger and plunge the blade into his throat. It slides in easily, like a sharp knife piercing raw venison. Blood sprays into the air, splashing my hand and face. Shocked at my attack, he misses my head, hitting my shoulder instead. Pain nearly topples me, but I will not relent. I drag the blade free and thrust it into his flesh again. His hands find my neck as I strike over and over again. I do not stop until he falls to the ground, eyes growing hazy.

Breathing heavily, I stare at the man and feel no remorse. Kicking the beggar over onto his back, I sink the blade into his chest and through his heart. I must make certain he is dead and unable to hurt me or my sister. My fury seeps away gradually as I stare at the man’s corpse. How rapidly he had brought about his demise. Only a few scant minutes have passed since I first saw him upon the boulder and now he lies dead at my feet. I drag the dagger free and stare at the blood slathered on the blade. The coppery scent trails on the breeze.

Victorious, I breathe it in.

Do I feel remorseful? Sad? Sickened?

“No, I do not,” I answer aloud.

Spinning about, I bend over the stream to wash the dagger, my hands, and my face. My wavering reflection reveals a young girl splattered in blood. My dark hair rests heavily on my shoulders and my golden eyes are stern and ruthless. The water sweeps the blood downstream, the red wisps swirling in the water.

Once the dagger is returned to the sheath and my hands are clean, I open the bag and touch Ágota’s forehead. She’s warm to the touch and I feel her breath on my fingertips. Securing the bag once more, I wade into the water, crouch in the shallows, and wash my body and clothing. When I am done, I drink deeply and feel refreshed. The breeze shifts direction and the reek of death reaches my nose. It is time to move onward. I once again turn downstream and begin to walk.

As I journey, I question my lack of remorse or disgust at my actions. Should I feel guilty for taking a life so easily? Should I feel any concern over how easy I killed? All my life I have been told stories of men fighting other men, monsters, and beasts to save those they love, but I do not recall them being guilt-ridden. Yet, my mother always told me life is precious and to be preserved at all costs.

“I do not care,” I state aloud. “He deserved it. Why should I bother feeling anything at all for such a man?”

I have always been the sister most like our mother, but now understand that a piece of me is like my father. He had been a warrior, a ruler, and merciless from the stories my mother told about him. I am not the gentle soul my mother had been. I may have her beauty and charm, but my strength lies in my ruthlessness.

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As the sun starts to sink below the trees, I make a small camp and build a fire, burning the tips of my fingers for I am very inexperienced. Ágota always starts our campfire with a snap of her fingers. I drag the bag to my side, open it, and reach past Ágota to pluck a loaf of bread from the magical depths. Nibbling at the dry crust, I watch the glorious beauty of the sunset. The sky is brilliant with orange and purple fire.

The bag jolts abruptly to one side as a long, bony pale hand thrusts out. It flips over and Ágota's fingers dig into the ground. I start to move to help her, but the sheath digs into my side and trepidation holds me back. She will be disappointed if she discovers what I have done. Ágota believes me to be her innocent mortal sister she must protect. If she recognizes that my heart is murderous and cold, will she love me less? I fear the answer.

Another hand emerges, and, bit by bit, my sister drags herself free.

Gasping, she lies on the grass and stares at me in disbelief.

"Are you all right now?" I ask.

"Yes, yes!" Ágota crawls toward me and grabs my face between her hands. Staring into my eyes, I feel as though she is examining my soul. I am afraid of what she sees until she says, "You are a brave, wonderful girl! You saved me from that thing!"

"What was it, Agy?"

"I do not know. It felt like the opposite of magic. It was draining me of power and

life. I could not stop it. I thought I would die for certain.” She kisses my cheeks and gathers me in her arms. “You saved me!”

“I could feel it watching me, but it never attacked.”

“Perhaps it could only harm me because I am not mortal,” she answers thoughtfully. “To hurt you, it might have needed a host body, like a wolf.”

“There were not any animals about.” I remember the man on the shore and wonder briefly if he was somehow possessed by the entity that had assaulted Ágota. He had acted peculiar. “I put you in the bag and followed a path out of that awful place.”

Laughing with relief, Ágota rocks me in her arms. “Oh, my brilliant little sister, how brave you are! I am so proud of you! We are a formidable team, you and I! Nothing can stop us. Nothing!” She kisses my forehead again before rising to her feet to dance around the fire. “I can feel magic flooding into me! Restoring me! All because of you, my delightful little sister!”

I resolve never to tell her that I killed to protect her. She is all that I have left in this world. I do not want to disappoint her, or worse yet, lose her love.

“Come dance, Erjy! Dance with me!” Ágota c

alls out, her face almost pretty in her joyful reverie.

As the sun becomes an ember on the horizon, I rise to my feet and join my sister in dance.

“Do not weep. That was long ago,” Magdala’s voice whispers in my ear.

The mausoleum shifts over my vision, returning me to my imprisonment. Magdala

stands at my side, her hand on my cheek. Her dark eyes regard me with unexpected compassion. Disoriented, I struggle to free myself from the visions of the past while her fingers stroke my sunken cheek in an attempt to console me.

“You were sobbing as you slept,” she continues. “Albrecht is not the one you killed. It was the man at the stream you struck through the heart.”

Startled, I stare at her with dismay. “What did you say?”

A compassionate expression shadows her face and understanding fills her dark eyes. “You were speaking as you slept. You spoke of saving your sister and killing a man at the stream with your rose dagger.”

“The first of many,” I admit, unnerved that she knows one of my deepest of secrets. No wonder she is being so kind-hearted toward me. She feels sympathy for who I once was and has forgotten who I am now.

“It must have been awful. You were but a child.”

“No, it was not awful. It was liberating,” I reply.

Her fingertips are warm as they still against my cheek. “How so?”

“It was then I learned I am a killer by nature,” I answer, turn my head swifter than a viper, and sink my fangs into her wrist.

Chapter 11

The creak of the metal door announces the arrival of a guest in my mausoleum. Craning my neck, I watch the entrance in anticipation. Footsteps on the stairs resound in my small prison before falling silent. The flickering light cast by the low-burning

torches refuses to illuminate my visitor.

In hiding himself, Vlad has revealed his mood.

This will not be pleasant.

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Yet, I can endure his sour presence for I am flush with blood and life and restored to my former self. The taste of blood, warm and coppery, lingers on my tongue, and I long for more even though I drank until gorged. The exhilaration of the hunt, the delight of the kill, and the pleasure of the feast are aspects of my nature that are denied by my entombment. My little interlude with Magdala has assuaged some of these longings, but if I were set free, I could easily consume a small village.

Magdala's body is draped over mine. I relish the last bit of warmth left in her flesh. I miss the heat of a human body and the pleasant memories it stirs within me of the many nights I slept beside my sister until Ágota finally ousted me from her bed. Those days are long gone and Magdala's body is growing chill. I slip her small sewing shears under the folds of my dress before tossing her body onto the floor. The crack of her skull against the stone floor reverberates through the mausoleum.

"I drank her to a husk," I say aloud. "That is why you sent her, is it not? To make me presentable and beautiful? You cannot bear to see the results of my imprisonment even though you have done this to me."

"This is of your own doing," a precious voice answers.

"Cneajna," I gasp, my freshly beating heart thrumming ever faster. I stretch out my hand to the patch of darkness. "Vlad has brought you to me at last."

Vlad Dracula's power shifts the shadows to reveal his tall, muscular frame beside my other love's lithe beauty. Cneajna's face is dear to my heart. I drink in the beauty of her high arched brows, sapphire-blue eyes, delicate cheekbones, and lush mouth. It has been so long since I last beheld her beauty and my passion for her inflames my

flesh. How I long to hold her close!

While Vlad is formidable in black evening attire with a dark red vest under his long coat, Cneajna wears a shimmering white gown under a thick pale blue velvet cloak. With her golden hair arranged elegantly on her head in a mass of braids and curls, she resembles a modern aristocrat with her small, glittering tiara. In the castle, Vlad insists that his Brides dress as concubines. Therefore, her attire indicates that her status has been elevated in the absence of Lady Glynis Wright. Vlad only allows his current favorite Bride to wear modern clothing when accompanying him in public.

Tilting her head upward to gaze at Vlad, she gives him a questioning look.

He responds with a sharp nod.

With a delighted smile upon her lips, Cneajna hurries to the bier in a rush of silken petticoats, the heels of her slippers tapping against the floor. Her gloved fingers grasp my hand and she leans over me. Eyes glittering with tears, she chokes back a sob.

“Dearest Erzsébet,” she whispers before bending down to press her soft lips to mine.

My mouth catches hers in an ardent kiss and the taste of her lips is as sweet as I remember.

When we part, she presses her brow to mine, and whispers, “Beg for forgiveness and return to me. Let us be as we once were long ago.”

I relish the feel of her delicate skin against mine, which only makes my refusal that much more difficult. I lament that I must deny her request for I do miss those nights when the three of us were united in our desire for blood, conquest, and each other. I touch the soft golden curls framing her face and my heart stutters. We’d spent so many years together, but now all is lost.

“Erzsébet, please,” she begs.

“I cannot,” I answer, my words hoarse with dismay.

Drawing away, she pierces me with her fragile expression. “Erzsébet, why do you torment us? It has been long enough now. How much longer must you stand against our husband?”

The powdery scent of her cosmetics reminds me of the many times we had carefully applied rouge and powder to each other’s faces since we lack a reflection. We had disguised our ethereal beauty in order to present a more human appearance to our prey before we ventured out to hunt among the wealthy of society. Cneajna is my weakness. Vlad knows this to be true. I can feel his gaze, heavy with consternation and hope. He believes she can break me. I will not bow to him.

“Though I love you and miss you, my dearest, I must stand against him.”

It wounds me to see the pain in her gaze, for in her estimation, I am the cause of my imprisonment, not Vlad. Despite my great efforts, she has never fully grasped why I set myself against Vlad. It grieves me that she regards me as the one who destroyed the life we once lived together. I doubt she will ever see the truth.

“Why must you both be so stubborn? I miss you! Your absence weighs heavily on me! The castle feels so empty without you. Elina and Ariana are not like us. They are peasants. And that other one—that red-headed devil—betrayed me.” Cneajna’s loveliness gives way to a hard, fierce mask of anger, and she casts a baleful look in Vlad’s direction. “He wanted her. When I sensed that her rebelliousness would never abate, I warned him. Of course, he would not listen to my admonitions. I attempted to restrain her temperament, but failed.”

“She is gone now,” I remind Cneajna, my fingers caressing her hand. “You are still at

his side. You are the First.” The title means so much to her. She clings to it whenever one of Vlad’s new Brides becomes his favorite. Of course, most of them are stored in the walls of this mausoleum while she remains at his side. Despite his cruelty, he cannot quite bring himself to completely turn away from Cneajna.

Taking my hand, she presses a kiss to my palm. “I wish for you to be at my side again. Ask his forgiveness. Be restored to your position.”

I close my eyes so I will not witness her sorrow when I deny her appeal with a shake of my head. I cannot relent. I will not subjugate myself to Vlad. I fought for many years to be the master of my own life. Though I was willing to share it with Vlad, I was never inclined to be his slave.

“Please, Erzsébet. How many years has it been? Have you not proven your point?”

“What is my point?” I ask her.

“To... to...” She flounders. “I am uncertain. I have never understood your defiance. You love him. You have said so, yet you refuse to return to his side.”

With a weary sigh, I cradle her han

d against my bosom. “I would rather lie here than be his slave.”

“Not his slave. His Bride.”

My laughter is mocking.

“It has been long enough,” she whispers. “Please.”

“Never!”

Anger coiled in his voice, Vlad says, “Cneajna, it is time to depart.”

“A few minutes more,” she begs. “Vlad, you said I could visit with her.”

“For a short time. Now it is over.” Vlad’s voice is low, clipped and cold. I can feel his anger burning against my skin. His presence fills the mausoleum like great dark wings.

After another fervent kiss, Cneajna murmurs against my lips, “Do it for me. Return so I may not be alone. I love Elina and Ariana, but they are like daughters. I miss you at my side in the darkest moments of the night. Please, Erzsébet. Come home.”

“Though I love and miss you with all my heart, I cannot,” I answer. “I will not.”

Vlad draws close enough to take hold of Cneajna’s arm. “Come away. We are done here. As I told you, she will not be swayed.”

He is lying. I can see it plainly. His words are a ploy, an effort to lay a burden of guilt upon me for abandoning Cneajna. He hopes that I will buckle to his whims after witnessing Cneajna’s despair. Just as he restored me by sending Magdala to bathe me, mend my dress, and become my victim, I suspect he did the same with Cneajna.

How many times has Vlad starved Cneajna and the other Brides in the past few months? Shunted her and the others off to the side while he entertained himself with his Austrian princess? When did he restore her beauty and adorn her with modern clothes and jewels? Tonight? Is she just now restored to his good graces?

She returns to his side, love and devotion radiating out of her like a golden glow as she gazes at him. I clench my hands at my sides until they bleed. The tenderness of his touch against her cheek when she steps into his embrace and the savage passion of his kiss against her mouth are deliberate temptations—a reminder of what we once shared and is now lost.

“Beg for forgiveness and you can return,” Vlad says, turning to me, his green eyes flashing with red fire. “Bow before me and be restored to your place at my side.”

“You ask for that which I will never give,” I retort.

The shadows swallow the couple again, blotting out Cneajna’s stricken expression. I listen to them withdraw from the mausoleum and the heavy clang of the door.

Pressing my knuckles to my lips, I withhold the sobs of despair and the screams of fury threatening to erupt from my mouth. I will not give him the satisfaction. I tremble with pain and sorrow, but do not call out for them to return.

My joy at once again seeing her lovely face and hearing her saccharine voice fades in the aftermath of their departure. Vlad will forever be the wedge pushing us apart. Ironic, since he is the one who brought us together so long ago. She may love me, but her devotion is to him. It will always be to him. I have known many women like Cneajna throughout my long lifetime. Women devoted to the men in their lives, bowing to their whims, willing to suffer in silence to make them happy. Vlad has inflicted great pain upon Cneajna, but she will never waver from his side. Even should her love for him one day turn to hate, she will remain. This is the curse of her

existence.

I rest my hand against the stake, but resist the fruitless action of attempting to wrench it from my body. My rejuvenated body continues its attempts to heal the grievous wound surrounding the stake, to no avail. I yearn for the release of another vision. How quickly have my sojourns into the past become a treasured escape from this hell! If I cannot be free to dwell at Cneajna's side, then I wish to be with my sister in the realm of memory.

The hours are ticking away, one by one. My heightened vampire senses discern the slightest sounds outside the mausoleum: the whisper of the wind, the scampering of night creatures, the shifting grass scraping against the masonry. Tears linger in the corners of my eyes while I stare at the spot in the discolored ceiling where the stake plunges through the stone.

"I want to be free," I whisper.

"We all do," Ágota answers. "It is all anyone wants. But the world is not safe for two girls."

"But you are an Archwitch," I protest, my adult voice chorusing the girlish one in my memory.

I close my eyes to the mausoleum and reopen them to gaze upon my sister.

Sweet relief is finally mine. The past is my sanctuary.

"An Archwitch who is still learning."

"We should go off and make our own fortune as our mother did." I am emboldened by our journey and Ágota's powers. I fancy her making us a fine house with her

magic and establishing our own rule over a small town. Then when I marry Albrecht we will be equals.

“I have power, but I do not know all the ways in which I can wield it.” Ágota holds our mother’s book of spells in her long hands. The sunlight dances across the strands of her dark hair, forcing her to squint when she gazes up at me.

The last few miles of our journey have been on foot, so I am tired and bad-tempered. I kick at the grass with irritation. “You seem to wield it quite well. I have seen it.”

“Well enough to get us here, but there is so much more to learn. Mind the circle. Do not break it,” she admonishes me.

The circle she drew on the ground with the end of the stick glows a vibrant gold in the vast field of wild grass and flowers swaying in the wind. The cool mountain breeze flows over our sun-warmed bodies and cools my heated face. For the last few days, my sister has been plucking all sorts of leaves, herbs, flowers, seeds, stones, bits of bark, insect wings, and even bits of fur she found on a thorn into a small bag. Now she has it set before her on the ground with white crystals set around it.

“I do not see why you could not fly us.” I squat next to her, pouting.

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“My father is a witch. His wife is a witch. Most likely a good portion of their court are witches. Who knows what wards he has cast that I could accidentally trip if I were to approach using magic. I want to appeal to him in peace, not have him descend on me like a demon. We are just outside of his territory. I want to be properly prepared before we enter it.” She plucks a black strand from my head and ignores my protest.

“Why did you do that?”

Ágota ignores me. Digging into the moist ground with her fingers, she mutters under her breath. She takes my hair and the pinch of dirt and mashes them together before adding the mess to the small pouch. Lips silently moving, she consults the book again.

I grow bored watching her and gaze over the field toward the castle in the distance. It is not very large, and the town at its base is a modest size. The walls are high and banners with a flaming tree flutter in the wind. Carts, horses, and travelers on foot wind their way along the mountain pass toward the large gate. I crane my head to peer up at the Carpathian Mountains shrouded in thick gray clouds. The air is moist and smells of coming storms. I have never been here before, yet Transylvania seems very familiar. Though my father ruled Moldavia, he was born in Transylvania. Perhaps my affinity for this new place is because of my heritage.

Ágota’s breathy chanting draws my attention back to her. Eyes rolled back into her skull, she sways as her hands hover over the small pouch. The protective circle around us glows ever brighter and her fingers twitch as arcs of white magic pulse out of the tips. There is a burst of white light from the small bag and then the world grows very still. Even the grass and wildflowers stop swaying as the breeze comes to

a halt. Magic trembles in the air and pricks against my skin. There is a loud pop and the world springs back into motion.

“Did it work?” I am uncertain of what she is doing, therefore unclear as to what I should expect.

Ágota’s eyes return to normal and she plucks the pouch from the ground. With a gleeful grin, she pulls it open and upends it onto her lap. A small ring falls out.

“It worked!” Ágota plucks the ring from the folds of her skirt and stares at it with delight. “Is it not lovely?”

The ring appears to be made of bronze and is adorned with intricate carvings on the band. Peering closer, I see that the engravings depict the elements Ágota used in its creation, including a tree, a wolf, herbs, flowers, and more. The stones are fused together into a large oval, one the color of my hair. The center of the stone is engraved with a mysterious arcane symbol.

Ágota grabs my hand and thrusts the ring onto my forefinger. “Never take this off.”

I stare at the ring, a little repulsed by its appearance, for it is rather ugly. “Why not?”

“This ring will allow me to protect you. It is a channel for my power. It connects us.” Ágota kisses me on the cheek and stands. “Now I am ready to face my father.”

“Why did not you make this before?” I recall the foreboding silent forest and the strange man beside the stream.

“I had to wait until we were here. In the land where we will live. I needed earth from the soil we’ll live on, eat from, and probably die on.”

“That sounds awful, Ágota.”

With a bright laugh, she says, “Does it not? But magic is sometimes awful.”

“Can I wear it around my neck on a chain instead?”

Ágota wags her head at me. “No. On your finger. That’s what the spell says. Do not be difficult.”

“I am not! Cannot you make it prettier?” I waggle my fingers at her.

“Ugh!” My sister throws up her hands in annoyance as she scuffs out the protection circle with her toes. “It does not have to be pretty!”

A thunderous roar rumbles across the field. I jump with fright, lifting my eyes to the darkening sky. Lightning flashes through the cloud cover in a burst of vibrant, almost blinding light.

“Ágota, what is it?”

My sister does not answer me.

I turn about to see her standing between me and maybe a dozen men and women clad in long dark cloaks. Arms thrust out to her sides, she flexes her fingers, a clear warning to the newcomers. Dark hair rippling about her shoulders, she says, “

Erjy, come stand behind me.”

Warily, I obey while the strangers watch my every move.

“Announce yourself!” an enormous man, taller than I have ever seen before, barks at

Ágota. He is obviously the leader, for his cloak is more ornate and he wears a simple bronze circlet on his head. Masses of dark curly hair fall to his wide shoulders, but his beard is fiery red. White scars crisscross his face beneath heavily-lidded hazel eyes. I perceive my sister in his features and deduce this is Balázs.

“Ágota, Archwitch of the Lost Witch World,” my sister answers, lifting her chin defiantly.

Standing at Balázs’s side, a middle-aged woman with blonde hair braided and looped over one shoulder snarls with contempt. “A liar.”

“There is only one Archwitch,” Balázs says, his dark eyebrows lowering over his fierce gaze.

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“Viorica, my mother, is dead at the hands of Lucifer the Devil,” Ágota answers. “I am her heir and the new Archwitch.”

Balázs’s fierce look softens, and he takes a hesitant step forward. “Ágota? Truly?”

“More lies! Kill her!” the blonde woman orders.

The men and women standing behind her shift their gaze to Balázs, waiting for him to confirm this command from his wife.

“Soffia, she must be tested! She knows the name I gave my daughter,” Balázs responds. “She knows the name of the Archwitch.”

“A pretender! There have been others!” Soffia pivots toward her husband and meets his worried gaze with her own venomous one. “Viorica is long dead and her bastard with her. Do not fall for the lies of your enemies.”

Balázs regards Ágota with a thoughtful, yet dangerous expression upon his scarred face. “She looks like me.”

Soffia scoffs at him. “She looks like a peasant.”

“Who is that?” Balázs asks, pointing at me.

“My younger sister,” Ágota replies. “Erzsébet.”

“She looks like Viorica,” Balázs says to his wife.

This remark does me no favors for I witness raw hatred fill Soffia's eyes when she regards me.

“Kill them. They are pretenders. This is a ruse of your enemies. Viorica is dead. There is no longer an Archwitch.”

I tilt my head to observe my sister's fury plain on her face. Fingers flexing in the air, the air shifts and distorts about them. I can feel her magic building, fully expecting for her to unleash it. I take another step back, accidentally stepping out of the circle.

A burst of red magic engulfs my body and sends me hurtling through the air. The magic fills me, boiling my insides, and the agony is unbearable. Soffia's laughter rings in my ears as I burn. I try to call out my sister's name, but all that comes from my lips is a shrill scream. Instantaneously, I am released from my torment. The magic flows back out of me, pouring through my mouth like a red flame, and engulfs Soffia in an inferno.

Held aloft in the air by the magic, I am stunned.

Have I finally manifested magic?

“Stop!” Balázs commands me.

Soffia staggers as the magical assault vanishes. One of the other male witches hurries to catch her as she falls. The terror in Soffia's eyes matches her loathing. She will not be so easily dissuaded from attempting to kill me again.

I float to the ground and land at my sister's side. My clothing and flesh are unscathed, the magical assault leaving no wounds. My forefinger tingles where the ring rests, revealing the purpose of it. It was not I who deflected the attack, but my sister through me.

“If my little sister can do that, imagine what I can do,” Ágota says haughtily.

Balázs chuckles. “Ágota, my daughter, Archwitch of the Lost Witch World, I welcome you home.” Throwing out his arms, he approaches her slowly and warily.

Ágota smirks and hugs the massive man. “And what a welcome it was!”

I gaze past Ágota and her father to the other witches and see that they are not so inclined to receive her. The faces of these lower male and female witches are suspicious and aloof. Soffia climbs to her feet and is steadied by the other witches.

I clasp my hands before me, my fingers tracing over the engraving on the enchanted ring. Over and over again, I trace the delicate lines, memorizing them as I watch my sister embrace her father and a new life.

My vision dims, so I close my eyes to the past.

Drawing the shears from beneath my skirt, I set the sharp point against the surface I am lying upon. Carefully, I carve the symbol into the stone. Will it help protect me? I am not certain, but I must do all I can to escape this place. I run my finger over the carving, then set the instrument to its task again.

If there are any remnants of Ágota’s power in this world, perhaps I can summon it to me so I can at last find freedom.

Chapter 12

I awaken in my mausoleum to the clatter of Magdala’s shears striking the ground. Disoriented, I sense that the sun has fallen below the horizon. I had fallen asleep while etching Ágota’s protection sigil into the bier, the shears still clutched in my grip. My fingers must have twitched as the vampire slumber released me. I lament the

loss of the instrument, but I am satisfied with how deep I managed to carve the symbol. My fingertips lightly trace over the lines. It is crude, but perhaps it will gather whatever is left of Ágota's magic. She made a promise, wove a spell, and I hope it still remains embroidered into the fabric of this world.

Hope.

I have so little left within my soul, yet I cling to what remains despite my circumstances. Should I find a way to escape, I will be woefully alone. I cannot return to Vlad's side no matter how much I yearn for him since he will only attempt to subjugate me once again. Therefore, I have lost Cneajna because she will never leave his side. Worse yet, my sister is long gone from this world.

The memory of the first time we met Balázs has stirred long forgotten moments I shared with my sister. They drift upward, like dust stirred by a footfall, filling my mind. Ágota was so bold the day we first faced Balázs's coven. I had been so proud of her. Little did we understand we were stepping deeper into a snare that would set us on a course that would eventually rip us apart. In spite of my resolve, I weep for my sister, myself, and the choices we made that sealed our fates.

In our innocence we doomed ourselves.

Yet I cannot surrender myself to this existence. My mother never yielded to her enemy and neither did Ágota. Both of them fought against the men that sought to destroy them, and though they lost in the end, it is their defiance that emboldens me. I am not foolish. Should I escape Vlad will follow to kill or enslave me, but I will fight him to the bitter end.

"Oh, sweet memory, come to me and grant me the illusion of freedom," I call out, hoping I can somehow summon the magic that transports my mind through the ages.

The tendrils of magic arise in the mausoleum.

I feel the call of the past and, elated, surrender to it.

My passage from one reality to another is in the blink of an eye. One moment I am staring at the ceiling of the mausoleum, the next I am standing at my sister's side. I welcome the breeze on my face, the storm brewing overhead, and the presence of my sister at my side. I am not as keen on the gathering of witches that are glowering at me and my sister. Revisiting the past involves remembering the not so pleasant aspects of my life.

I peer around Ágota at the man embracing her. Gripping her shoulders, the harshness in his face fades into a smile

“My Ágota, all grown and beautiful.”

“Beautiful?” My sister scoffs at him. “I look like you and you are ugly!”

“You wear these features better than I!”

“Truer words have not been spoken this day,” she retorts.

I definitely see the resemblance: the slightly hooked nose, the wide mouth, the slight tilt to their eyes. No one could look at the two and not presume they are related. They even have the same arrogance in the angle of their chins while they regard each other.

Balázs shifts his gaze to me

, and his eyes narrow slightly. “Explain who this is?”

“I told you. My sister, Erzsébet.”

“She is definitely not mine. Far too pretty. The age is all wrong.”

There is hurt in his voice, which I find ironic. He was married to Soffia when my mother gave birth to Ágota. Surely he must have realized my mother was free to find another man should she choose to since they were not wed.

“I am not yours,” I reply. “I am the daughter of—”

“An unknown man,” Ágota says, cutting me off as deftly as a sharp knife.

“A witch according to her power,” Balázs says thoughtfully. “Who would dare sire her?” His gaze flicks to the men in the group gathered around Soffia.

The comment is disquieting and I ponder the meaning of it.

“It does not matter who her father is. She is my sister, and I ask that you take us into your household and treat us as equals.” Ágota’s fingers tighten around the strap of the magical bag hanging across her torso. Would Ágota leave if he denies her request?

“Let us speak of that in...” he glances at his wife and the other witches “... a more private setting.”

Seeing him look her way, Soffia cries out, “These are not witches! They are changelings sent to undermine you. Cannot you see that? Viorica and her daughter are dead.”

“What proof do you have of the Archwitch’s demise?” Balázs shifts on his feet so he can face his wife. “Did you send assassins after her after I forbade you not to?”

Appearing offended, Soffia retorts, “No, of course not! But they have not been seen in years!”

“That’s because mother was in the Kingdom of Germany,” Ágota whispers to Balázs.

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His bushy eyebrows lift in surprise. “Oh? I did not think to look that far away. I searched for her in Moldavia and Bohemia.”

Ágota shrugs a shoulder. “Someone trying to kill me did not sit well with her. She wanted to make sure I was safe by moving us far away.”

“Which was her right. Sadly, I have a jealous wife.” Balázs admits, rubbing his brow with thick callused fingers.

“What are you saying? Speak louder!” Soffia takes a few steps forward, but stops when she sees me staring at her. It seems that our hatred and fear are mutual.

“I am telling my daughter that we are returning home,” Balázs says, his voice booming. Lowering it again, he says to Ágota, “I will explain everything once we are in a more private setting.” With a wave of his hand, the air shimmers with the colors of the rainbow. “Follow me.”

With a cocky grin at his wife, Balázs steps into the vibrant swirls and vanishes from sight.

“What is that?” I whisper to my sister.

With a wild grin, Ágota answers, “Magic.”

“I know that! But what does it do?”

“Let us find out!”

My sister takes hold of my arm and guides me after her father. I am a little leery of the shimmer. Magic is not always kind to mortals and, additionally, I fear it might be some sort of trap. Ágota may be ready to trust her father, but I am not. Rubbing the symbol on my ring, I resolve to trust my sister and be brave.

“This is rather exciting,” Ágota declares with a gleeful expression on her face.

When we step through the rippling air, I instinctively hold my breath, for it is as if we are being submerged in water. Instead of swimming, we stand on a very narrow path that resembles frozen ice inside a long, iridescent tunnel that arches over the valley to the castle. As though it is a prism, the rippling air transforms the sunlight funneling through it. Splotches of color dance over our skin and we giggle together with delight.

“What is this, Father?” Ágota calls out.

Striding ahead, the big man says over one shoulder, “A ley bridge. There are a not many left in this world. When I found this one, I built the castle near it.”

“So you did not make it, Father?”

Chuckling, he shakes his head. “Oh, no. The Ancients created this and they are long gone from this world and the Witch World.”

The other witches appear through the portal and follow us, but at a careful distance.

I stare with fascination through the distorted image of the world outside the path. I am tempted to touch the undulating, colorful magic, but fear it may pop it like a bubble.

“Can they see us? The people out there on the farms and in the town?” I dare to query.

“No, little one, they cannot. We are hidden from them.”

“Are you afraid of your enemies finding this bridge?” I continue my questions while we walk behind him, my curiosity spurred by this strange passageway.

“No. Only witches and fey folk can use it.”

I cast a sharp, fearful look at Ágota. Will I suddenly be ousted from the bridge when it discerns my mortal blood?

She winks at me while mouthing, “Ring.”

“Since I rule the witches and have accords with the fey, I do not fear an incursion. Of course, fairies sometimes find their way inside and cause a bit of trouble, but that is their nature.” Balázs strolls along the pathway as it descends at a slope toward his castle. “Besides—I have wards to warn me when peculiar witches appear in my territory.”

“I set it off on purpose, you know,” Ágota says, a bit insulted.

Balázs’s chuckle is his only response.

I peer down at my feet to see the bridge undulating with colorful lights. There are cracks in the surface, which I find curious. Is the magic fading? And who are the Ancients? I glance over my shoulder at Soffia and the other witches following in our wake. Soffia’s face is set in a scowl and the witches behind her look none too pleased either. The men and women of Balázs’s coven definitely are not inclined to be welcoming to Ágota or accepting of her as the Archwitch. Ágota is worthy of the title and their hostility provokes me to dislike them all.

When we arrive at the castle, we pass through a stone wall—that flows around us as

though it is dark water—and step out into a great hall as formidable as the one in Gratz. The ceilings are high and curved with rafters crossing overhead and the hanging banners have a gold backdrop with a flaming tree emblazoned in the forefront. The furniture is heavy and decorative with carvings of all sorts of supernatural creatures. Sunlight pours through high stained-glass windows to paint the stone floor with dazzling hues. The hearth is enormous and a fire burns bright beneath a massive black cauldron. Scattered across the room, lounging in the warm pools cast by the sunbeams, are cats of all colors and breeds.

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The other witches arrive behind us through the portal and I scrutinize each one as they appear. I like the looks of a rotund lady with masses of red hair and rosy cheeks. A warm smile touches her lips and she does not regard us with contempt. Much to my surprise, a dour man with lank silver hair and a scruffy face unexpectedly winks at me. A younger man with brown hair, pale brown eyes, and a handsome face downright scowls when he spots me scrutinizing him, so sides are obviously being taken.

“This is your new home,” Balázs says, gesturing to our grand surroundings. “I will arrange for a room to be prepared. I assume you will want to bed together.”

“Yes,” Ágota says rapidly. “At least for now.”

“Balázs, you cannot!” Soffia protests.

“I rule here, Soffia. I am the leader of this land and this coven. I am choosing to offer a home to my daughter and her sister. This is my right. No one is to come against either one of these young ladies. If you do, I will unleash my wrath. I may not be an Archwitch, but I am a Grandwitch.”

“Should they not be tested?” the scowling handsome man asks.

“A test, Fülöp?” Balázs smirks. “She resembles me in face and manner, knows the name I gave her and her mother’s name, and carries the Archwitch’s magus bag. I suspect her mother’s book is inside. Yes?”

Ágota dramatically pulls out the book and the witches gasp.

“See! What other test should I give her?”

Soffia approaches us warily, her eyes flicking between Ágota and me. “The Mirror of Verity. Let it reveal if there is any duplicity. A hidden glamour.”

With an exaggerated sigh, Balázs motions to one of the younger male witches closest to him. “Petri, bring forth the mirror.”

The blonde-haired witch dashes off into the depths of the castle, his long tunic flapping around skinny legs.

“What does the mirror do?” I boldly ask.

“It reveals the truth of who you are even through spells and glamours of all kinds,” Balázs replies. “Nothing can hide from it.”

“That belonged to my mother,” Ágota says, her mouth close to a snarl. “When she had to flee with me, she left it behind.”

“We will speak of all that later, Ágota.” Balázs’s visage and tone demonstrate the need for Ágota to set the matter aside for a more appropriate time.

With a huff, Ágota crosses her arms and glowers at anyone who dares catch her eye.

“Afraid?” Soffia asks, her gaze cruel and her tone taunting.

“Of you? No. I am not a mere babe in my crib anymore. I am the Archwitch.”

“We shall see if your claim is true.”

My sister and the woman who attempted to murder her regard each other with

contempt. My fingers fall to the sheath at my side as the desire to sink my little blade into Soffia's heart surges to life. I would not dare do such a thing in front of so many formidable witches, but the thought appeals to me.

Petri returns with a handheld mirror draped in a black cloth. The handle is bronze and green with age. With great care, he offers it to Balázs. I discern he's a little afraid of the magical mirror, which I find very intriguing since it was once one of my mother's possessions. She must have been very frightened indeed to leave such a powerful object behind. I finger the hilt of my dagger while casting a malevolent look at Soffia.

Ágota taps my arm, captures my attention, and signals with her eyes that I should be attentive to the ritual at hand

.

Feeling rather obstinate and bold, I ask, "How does it work?"

Balázs bends toward me while pulling the cloth from the reflective surface. The handle and back of the mirror are most certainly bronze and very old. The reflective surface shimmers without a scratch despite the passage of time. On the reverse side there are sculpted figures of women dancing, but the finer details have eroded.

"You peer into it, Erzsébet." He holds the mirror in front of me and I am surprised to see my face in vivid detail. I stare at the much younger version of my mother's face tucked between matching black braids. This is the first time I have ever seen myself with such clarity. Our old mirrors in the cottage had been warped and cloudy.

"I am pretty!" I exclaim.

This elicits a laugh from several of the witches, but Soffia fumes.

Balázs leans his face next to mine and I am shocked to see a very handsome young man. The scars, the wrinkles, and the silver in his hair have vanished. I gasp and turn my head to stare at his much older face.

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“It is a glamour. I need to appear to age to my mortal servants. Witches age very slowly after we reach maturity. We live many lifetimes with different names and faces. One day, I will change my face and name and this version of me will supposedly die.”

“You look a lot more like Ágota with your true face,” I remark.

Ágota peers at the mirror and smirks. “I do wear your features better.”

In the mirror, she is the same young woman as always. I do notice her eyes glow slightly in her reflection, but otherwise, there is no difference. Soffia tromps over to us to peer into the mirror to scrutinize Ágota’s reflection and mine. I glimpse a much younger, prettier version of Balázs’s wife when she leans close. She, too, is glamourous.

Without a word, she storms across the floor and through a doorway. It clangs shut behind her.

“Is this proof enough?” Balázs’s voice sounds dangerous.

The coven members all nod, some with great reluctance.

“I need to speak to my daughter and her sister. You may go.”

I am satisfied when a few witches, including the red-haired lady and the man with the silver hair, bow their heads to Ágota before departing. When the last of them leaves the great hall, Balázs covers the mirror and gestures with it toward a different door.

In silence, we follow him.

“We need privacy to discuss what I plan to do with the two of you,” he says to us, winking.

The new room is tidy with a large desk covered in ledgers and papers, a bookcase filled with books, and a huge chair with a back that is carved to resemble a burning tree. Seating himself behind the desk in the impressive chair, Balázs holds the mirror toward Ágota.

“This is yours by right, Ágota. You were correct. Viorica did leave the mirror behind when she fled with you.”

Ágota plucks it from his hand with a satisfied look and stores it in her bag. “What else do you have that belonged to my mother?”

“A few items that I will return to you. They do rightfully belong to you. Especially since you are the Archwitch.”

With a nod of her head, Ágota leans her hip against the edge of his desk and waits for him to speak. I linger near the door, still uncertain of how much we should trust her father. Balázs settles back in his chair and drops his glamour. It is strange to watch him become a much younger version of himself. He now looks more like Ágota’s older brother.

“I am glad you’ve come here, Ágota, but your presence does complicate matters.”

“Why should that matter? You are my father. I am an Archwitch. The coven will have to accept the truth.”

“Oh, they are already accepting it, but they are not happy about it. In the old world,

the Archwitches taught the newly ascended ones the exalted magicks. Unfortunately, they all died attempting to hold the portal open between our world and this one.” With a sad sigh, he runs his hand over his hair. “Viorica was young and untrained. She had to learn on her own. I will guide you to the best of my abilities, but your power far exceeds mine. That is why the book you carry is so valuable. It will guide you when I cannot.”

“How many Grandwitches are there?” Ágota asks.

Balázs holds out his arms. “Only me.”

“Oh!” I approach his desk and lean my elbows on the surface to stare at him. “Are you the king of the witches?”

“No, no. Maybe. A little like one. There are not many of us left, you know.”

Ágota frowns. “We are hard to kill though. How can that be?”

“Our enemies learned to burn us. That is why we hide and tread carefully when interacting with humans.”

Ágota sets her long hands on the edge of the table beside me and leans toward her father, eyebrows lowering. “My mother told me to come to you if she died. She also said you loved me, but she could not trust you to stop Soffia. That you were smitten with her.”

“I arrogantly believed I could broker peace between them. I married Soffia because I loved her deeply. I still do, I suppose. Viorica was the woman I had loved since childhood, but I was wise enough to understand she would never marry. She could not. So much of the magic of our old world was hidden inside her and her legacy would be a new Archwitch. She refused to marry because she did not want a man to

claim that power and raise the future Archwitch to serve him.”

“Men are fools,” I say. “Mother always said so.”

Balázs casts a sorrowful look in my direction. “Men are fools. They love power. All kinds of power and they will do just about anything to obtain it. That is why there are so many wars. Your mother was correct in that regard. I also acknowledge my own foolishness in not recognizing the danger of Soffia’s jealousy even though she agreed that I should sire the new Archwitch.”

“She agreed?” Ágota gaps at him in disbelief.

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“I did love your mother, Ágota, but I was chosen by the coven elders to be your father. It was a decision made to preserve the Archwitch power and legacy.”

“Because you are a Grandwitch and there were no other Archwitches about, you were the most likely candidate to father a new one with my mother.” My sister lowers her head, her hair falling over her face as she ponders this new information. At last, she raises her eyes to gaze at her father. “I see the wisdom in that decision. And you complied out love for your people and my mother. ”

“I am glad you understand. I worried you would believe you were born out of duty and not love.”

“I was born out of both.”

“Yes, which is why I am so pleased you have returned.”

I pound a small fist on his desk. “But your wife was so jealous and angry, she tried to kill my sister!”

Balázs exhales with frustration. “Yes. When she saw my great joy at your birth, Ágota, she could not accept what I had done was for our people and to preserve the magic of the Witch World in the ascendance of a new Archwitch. Soffia was aware that I had long hoped your mother would marry me and she feared that your birth only solidified my love for your mother. Soffia did not believe me when I said my love rested with her.”

“Does it still?” I ask.

“You are so bold, little one. Just like your mother.” Balázs frowns, then shrugs. “I love her, but what she did to Viorica and Ágota changed much between us. Now that you are here, Ágota, what was left between my wife and I will be sorely tested.”

“We can leave and spare you,” Ágota says, lifting her chin and sniffing loudly.

“I longed to have you with me, Ágota. I have loved you since before you were born. You are my daughter, and you are an Archwitch. My duty lies with you on both fronts.”

Ágota’s shoulders slump and her chin sags. She lets out a deep breath before she cocks her head to one side to regard her father with relief. “Thank you. The last few weeks have been difficult.”

“I can only imagine.”

“Which reminds me!” Ágota reaches into the bag and withdraws the letter from Albrecht’s fa

ther. “We were guests of Count Dolingen of Gratz, a descendant of The White Woman of the Wood. Do not worry. He is mostly human and very, very dull. He asked me to deliver this letter of introduction to you. It is all rather boring.”

“Boring or not, this is very worrying. The White Woman of the Wood is powerful. Making deals with her descendants is dangerous, Ágota. The fey can be very tricky.”

“I only agreed to deliver a letter of introduction. I read it before he sealed it. It is fine.” My sister sounds confident, but her expression grows uncertain. “I was very careful.”

Concerned with this revelation, Balázs flicks his fingers over the letter and blue light

washes over it. “No warding.” He breaks the seal and unfolds the letter. “But there is magic in this... and... there it is.”

I watch as the letters on the page slide across the parchment to reorder themselves. Ágota stares aghast at this development, her lips parted as though to protest.

“He fooled you.” I cluck my tongue at her.

“No! That is not fair! He said I could read it before he sealed it!”

“And you did. As I said, my daughter: the fey are tricky.” Leaning over the correspondence, Balázs reads, his lips slightly twisting, a habit he shares with Ágota. “Well, Ágota, you have agreed by delivering this letter to the arranged marriage between Erzsébet and Albrecht, the son of the count.”

“No!” Ágota whirls about in a fury. “No! No!”

Turning his attention to me, Balázs says, “You do not seem upset at this development.”

“I like Albrecht. I want to marry him,” I reply.

“Ah, which explains how the spell slipped past your sister. You had already agreed.” Balázs smiles at me. “Well, I do not have to worry about your future, do I?”

I shake my head. “No. I will be a noblewoman. Someday I will wear a fancy red and gold dress and have a ruby necklace.”

“This sounds very particular, Erzsébet.”

“Ágota told me.”

Balázs focuses on his daughter, who is pacing about muttering furiously to herself. Pointing at her, he says, “I do that too when I am upset.”

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Ágota stops, spins toward him, and waves a shaking finger in his face. “Undo it!”

“Your sister wants this marriage.”

“She is a little girl!”

“Who seems of a strong mind.”

“No! You do not understand! She needs to stay with me! I need to protect her! Mother told me so!”

“Ágota, you have done exactly as you promised. Yes, the situation here will be a bit dramatic for a time, but I will protect you and Erzsébet. I understand and accept what Soffia and some of the other witches are capable of and I will not abide any hostility toward you. I am the greater witch. I will not abide anyone coming against either one of you. Ever.”

“You are not my father,” I point out.

“No, I am not, but we are both witches. We share the blood of another world.”

“Can I call you father?” I have decided I like Balázs very much. Everything about him reminds me of Ágota. Additionally, he has honored my wish to marry Albrecht.

“Not in front of Soffia,” he says, and tugs on the end of my braid.

“You do not understand, Father!” Ágota leans over the desk and stares at him in

desperation.

“You love your sister. I understand you do not want to be parted from her. You will have many years with her here in the castle before she departs. That is the way of life, Ágota. One day, you, too, will make the choices for your future. Who will father the new Archwitch with you? Will you stay here? Or venture out into the world? This is life, Ágota.”

Close to tears, Ágota mutters, “I have seen many possible futures for her and I do not like most of them.”

“That I completely understand,” her father answers. “You have just returned to me and I already fear the moment you will leave.”

Rushing around the table, Ágota throws herself into his arms and clings to him, sobbing piteously. I sense that all her fears and sorrow she has hidden from me so well during our journey have at last manifested. Balázs holds her close with one arm and stretches out his other to me. I join the embrace and lean my head against his shoulder.

“Nothing bad can happen to her. Nothing,” Ágota sobs. “I will not let it. I will stop it.”

Those words break the spell and echo in my ears as I am drawn away to the mausoleum.

Fingertips tracing the carving on the bier, my thoughts linger on this last recollection. I had completely forgotten that moment in Balázs’s study. Muddled with pain and frustration, I ponder my sister’s warning. Ágota was long gone by the time Vlad imprisoned me in the mausoleum, but she had sworn to protect me and vestiges of her magic linger in the world.

“Help me, Ágota,” I whisper in desperation.

Even from beyond the Veil, Ágota may yet be my salvation.

Chapter 13

The curse upon me is particular in which memories it allows me to recall with such lucidity it is as though I am reliving my past. Upon rumination, it appears evident that this dark magic does not dawdle with the mundane days of my life, but only those formative to my evolution. I wish the curse would allow me the pleasure of reliving one day alongside my sister where we simply went about our lives in Balázs’s castle. Those are the memories I long to remember, but I fear are lost to the haze of time.

My recollections of growing up in the castle are sparse. I do recall my sister pretending to teach me spells while funneling her magic through me, the opulent bedroom we shared that was fit for a princess, and some of the happy moments we spent with Balázs. Though he was not my father by blood, he regarded me as his ward and was very fatherly in his attention. In return, I adored him even though he could be a strict disciplinarian when I defied him.

“I miss him,” I say aloud to the darkness of the mausoleum.

The only answer is the scuffling of rats as they feast upon the remains of the gypsy girl.

My isolation is crushing my spirit.

The curse provides both solace and agony. It is comforting to see Ágota’s wild smile, Albrecht’s dark eyes, and Balázs’s fatherly admiration again, but, in the aftermath of my visions, I am lonelier than ever before. In spite of my determination to defy my husband, I find myself yearning for Vlad’s comfort to assuage the isolation I suffer. It

is in these weak moments it is easy to forget his cruelty and only remember the passion between us. Even now, lying here as his captive, I struggle to remind myself as to why I have chosen to turn away from him. The temptation to relent is always enticing, but tonight I am close to surrendering.

For that reason, I hope Vlad does not make an appearance tonight or brings Cneajna once again to visit. I need to harden my heart and strengthen my resolve before I see either one of them again. I cannot falter. I will find another way to liberty that will not send me to my knees before him.

“Will I ever find release from this torment?” I murmur.

“Loving someone so deeply is often difficult,” Balázs says from the shadows.

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“Why does love fade?” I ask turning my face to gaze upon the apparition conjured by either the curse or my distraught mind. “And must it always? Am I doomed to a broken heart?”

Stepping from the darkness, Balázs crosses his muscular arms over his chest, his chin tucked close to his neck as he ponders my question. “I pray not. I do not wish for you to suffer such a fate. If not for Ágota and you, my heart would be a cold, empty place indeed.”

“Do you love me? Even though I am not your daughter?”

The big man smiles and lays his hand on the top of my head. “Of course, dearest, Erjy.”

The mausoleum fades away until I stand before him, a young woman of fourteen. The sun blazes through the windows, illuminating the red in his hair and beard. He is not glamourised but appears as his true self. His study is cold despite the sunshine this wintery day. The flames in the fireplace only press back the worst of the icy air, but I am warm beneath the fur mantle of my cloak.

“Why do you even ask?” He ruffles my hair before retreating behind a desk overburdened with reports, letters, and ledgers.

“I overheard some members of the coven discussing the possibility of Soffia having a child. She has not been particularly well in the mornings,” I answer. “It was implied that I will finally be set in my proper place if this happens.”

The notion rankles. I rather like the station I carry in his household. As Balázs's ward, I am given respect and treated well. Ágota mocks me for she rather dislikes the airs she is expected to exude when dealing with servants, the coven, and dignitaries while I take to such behavior quite easily. Perhaps it is because I am aware of my future as a countess, but I enjoy being taught how to be a proper young lady of a certain standing.

Balázs shakes his head. "Soffia is not with child. She merely ate something that was tainted."

My fingers flex around the hilt of my rose dagger. I always wear it on my belt as a reminder of Albrecht. "Why do not you have children other than Ágota?"

It is a question I was warned to never ask by my tutor, Henrietta, the red-haired witch from England. I dare to ask now since my position in the castle household is being questioned. It annoys me immeasurably that members of the coven anticipate the day I am ousted from Balázs's good graces.

With a sigh, he settles in his grand chair. The carved branches sprouting from the back of his seat cast shadows over his face, deepening the lines of worry. "There is much I have not discussed with you about the Witch World. Why we came here, why Ágota is so important to our future, and why you may be important to our future. I have withheld information from you so that you could enjoy being a young lady of my household until such a time when the burdens that rest of my shoulders must also weigh on yours."

"And when will that be?"

"When you marry," Balázs answers. "That time may come sooner than you anticipate, Erjy. You will be fifteen in a few months. Wirich has made overtures for us to arrange your marriage within the year."

“Truly?” I am not certain I find the idea enticing or not.

“I would rather wait until you are eighteen.

&nb

sp; “And if he should ask, what will happen?”

“Should that happen, I will delay your marriage a few years in order for Ágota to properly train you. Though you have demonstrated formidable magical abilities, you may not have yet come into your power fully. There is still the possibility that you will become an Archwitch like your sister when you reach full adulthood.”

“Oh?”

Ágota still hopes I will manifest my own magic soon, but she hasn’t discussed with me the possibility of being an Archwitch.

“Most likely you are not an Archwitch. You might be a Grandwitch, like me, or even a Battlewitch. You are already showing signs of being a great warrior,” he adds with a slight smile.

I have never told anyone about the man at the stream or how unaffected I was by taking a life. I ask cautiously, “Why would you say that?”

“You have become deadly with that,” he replies, gesturing with one finger toward my dagger.

Upon observing my attachment to the weapon, Balázs arranged for me to be instructed in the proper way to wield it. It pleases me that he trusts that I am able to defend myself. I can now wield my knife as effectively as any man in battle. I am

very proud of this fact.

“But in time, we shall see your true power. Of that, I have no doubt.” Balázs laces his hands together and rests them against his chest as he leans back in his chair. “Wirich is anxious to bring you into his household. He hopes that you will restore magic to his lineage, but that may not be so easy.”

“Oh?” I tilt my head, regarding him with interest.

“This is not known to many outside our race, but because you are a witch you may struggle to bring children into this world. We are very long-lived and have many years in which to try to procreate, but it is a great struggle.”

“Why? Is it because we are not native to this world?” I have learned to address myself as a witch to preserve my standing with the coven.

“That is one theory. The other is the reason why the coven is not particularly fond of your sister and was often hostile to Viorica. When the Archwitches realized the Witch World was dying, they decided to abandon it to our enemies. They conspired to drain what remained of magic from the ley lines of the Witch World and rupture the barrier between worlds so we could escape. They did not consult anyone outside their chantry and their plan horribly failed. They drained us, too, the regular witches. We are not nearly as powerful as we once were and many survivors resent what we lost. We came through the rift into a new world weakened and at the mercy of new found enemies. The Archwitches died defending the exodus and closing the portal, but their actions sowed a bitter seed in our hearts. Viorica was the only Archwitch to survive and the magic of our world that dwelled in her is now in Ágota. And, possibly, in you.”

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“So instead of holding the Archwitches in high esteem for their ingenuity and sacrifice, they are vilified because they weakened the lesser witches?” I frown at the ridiculousness.

Balázs chuckles. “You sound and look exactly like your mother at this moment.”

His words unsettle me and he notices.

“What is it, Erjy?”

I hesitate, uncertain if I want to divulge what I had overheard from members of his coven. How could I tell this kind man that people suspect he wishes to replicate his affair with Viorica with me because I strongly resemble her? I do not for a moment believe the gossip. Balázs has treated me as a daughter. Perhaps his fondness for me has only added to the resentment among the other witches because I do look so much like my mother.

“I just do not understand how they could be angry at Ágota and my mother. They were not the ones who made those choices,” I say instead of expressing my true thoughts.

“When you are long-lived, you tend to remember the injustices more than the joys of life. Something which I grapple with myself. It would be good for our kind if you were an Archwitch as well. And if your children were, too. In Ágota I see the revitalization of our race. She is a child of this world and the magic that was so foreign to us when we first arrived here welcomes her. I see the same in you.”

It bothers me that we lie to him about my abilities. Ágota's ring on my finger protects me in more ways than one. If he knew I was merely a mortal young girl would he still love me?

"So why does the coven despise Ágota if she is the promise of a new future?"

Balázs wearily sighs, his fingers plucking at one of the ledgers on his desk. "Has she said something to you about their hostility?"

I giggle, amused that he would think I would be oblivious to the poison stares my sister and I receive whenever we are included in the coven activities. "It does not bother Ágota, but it does upset me."

"It upsets me as well, Erjy. I am saddened to hear you have noticed the conflicts within the coven."

Balázs has kept us apart from Soffia and her coterie as much as possible. We only see her on a rare occasion. The castle is large enough that we can spend many weeks without interacting with Soffia's faction. While I study with my tutor to become a proper young lady, Ágota spends much of her time with Balázs practicing her magic.

"I suspect my sister rather enjoys provoking those who dislike her," I admit. "She is not wholly innocent."

Balázs starts to chuckle. "I suppose the conflict has been far more evident than I would like to admit. I do try to protect you and Ágota."

The door to the study is opened with such ferocity it bangs against the wall. Ágota hovers a few inches above the ground on the other side of the threshold with her hair in wild disarray and her black gown and cloak disheveled and flecked with snow. She glides in on her toes and the door slams shut behind her. Eyes gleaming bright green,

she scowls at her father.

“This will not be pleasant,” Balázs mutters.

“Your wife has forbidden me from speaking to her maid,” she says, voice low and furious.

“The one you seduced, I take it.” Balázs looks like a weary father all at once.

“It was a mutual seduction,” Ágota sniffs.

“We have had this discussion before, Ágota. When you distract Soffia’s servants from their duties, it upsets her.”

“She also complained about the town seamstress when I bedded her,” Ágota grouches.

“Because you delayed her gown for the solstice being completed on time.”

“And the cook.”

“Who burned the boar because she was entangled with you in the cold-room.”

“It was not that cold when we were done.”

“Ágota...” Balázs rubs his brow wearily.

Ágota rolls her eyes. “I am not to blame for all that goes awry in this castle.”

“You have seduced more fair maidens than I did in my youth, Ágota. There will be drama!” Balázs attempts to sound stern, but he looks too amused. “If you picked just one-”

“I did and she was married off to that imbecile, Fülöp.” Ágota scowls at the memory.
“I loved her so and she loved me. We were so blissfully happy.”

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“She was Fülöp’s intended, Ágota. Your romance was doomed to end.”

“They are all doomed to end.” Ágota slumps over his desk, lying upon the piles of reports and ledgers.

“Your adoration of pretty young girls is legendary in this castle, but you must understand that most of those pretty young girls will be marrying handsome young men.”

“It is so unfair,” Ágota whines.

I step forward to pat her back. “There, there, Ágota. One day you will find your true love.”

“I want many true loves, otherwise I will be so very, very bored.”

“Must I remind you that one day you will need to pick a male witch to have a child with, Ágota?”

“Not this conversation again.” Ágota lifts her head, her lips twisted in a snarl. “A male lover! How grotesque!”

“Unless Erzsébet ascends to being an Archwitch, you are the hope of our race.”

“Ugh! So disgusting!” Ágota slumps

onto the floor and lays there sprawled upon the wolf fur rug.

Staring down at my sister, I admire her dramatics. She always expresses exactly how she feels. I envy her for I find that it comes rather naturally to me to pretend to be unperturbed by the world around me. I rather people believe I am obeying the rules of society than see the true darkness inside my soul. I rather be underestimated.

“Your wife hates me,” Ágota laments. “She deliberately makes everything so difficult.”

“My wife is a complicated creature with her own struggles,” Balázs answers. “As you well know.”

“She followed us out into the garden during our lover's rendezvous and screamed at me like I am a child. I was sorely tempted to shift her to the top of the castle, but I refrained. For you, Father!”

“For which I am immensely pleased for she would have complained for days like the last time.”

“How was I to know that common witches cannot fly without rituals cast by the coven?”

“You are powerful, Ágota, and must use your magic wisely. Tormenting Soffia is a waste of your time and only causes the coven to distrust you and your sister.”

Ágota sits up abruptly. “Erjy is innocent. She is pure and good. They have no right.”

“We have had this conversation before, Ágota. Today I repeated it with Erjy. You know the difficulties Soffia and the others suffer because we are not of this world. You must make allowances for their frustration.”

“I did not take their power! I was not the one who reduced their abilities! I refuse to

be blamed!”

Listening to father and daughter speak, it is evident that I have been excluded from much of the coven intrigue. I resent being sheltered in such a manner. After all, I have endured in my short life, I am no naive child. Though I appreciate the sentiment behind shielding me from the drama of the coven, I resolve to not be so ill-informed in the future.

There is a rap on the door and Balázs summons the person into the room. It is Fülöp, the handsome young man I noticed the first day of our arrival who obviously disdained Ágota and me. As one of Balázs’s closest aides, I have to deal with his dour looks in my direction quite often. Ágota loathes him with good reason since he married her beloved. He regards both of us with his usual contempt, but is smart enough to step past Ágota with caution. He, too, spent time atop the castle in a snowstorm thanks to my sister.

“The girls should leave the room,” Fülöp says. “I come with important information.”

“My ward can remain,” Balázs answers. “She rather enjoys hearing about political maneuverings in the Kingdom of Hungary.” I have never said such a thing, but I suspect Balázs enjoys the flustered response he induces in his aide. “Furthermore, Ágota as Archwitch should be privy to any troubles that might face us.”

“Very well. If you insist. There are troops moving in this direction,” he says. “They are in service to the King of Hungary.”

“Oh?” Ágota rises to her feet in one graceful motion and stares at Fülöp with interest.

“He is attempting to move against Transylvania to solidify his power.” Balázs shakes his head with disapproval. “When will the king understand Ladislaus Kán will not relent?”

As a castle warrior beholden to the voivode of Transylvania, Ladislaus Kán, Balázs is naturally a target for King Charles. There has always been the threat of war with the King of Hungary as news of his battles against those who opposed his reign reached us by messenger. The gossip in the castle about the power struggle between King Charles and the oligarchs of Hungary has kept many tongues wagging, but the king's forces had yet to arrive outside the walls of the castle until now.

“We are the bulwark between the king and the voivode. Our allegiance to Ladislaus is the cause for this impending attack. If we were to swear our allegiance to the King of Hungary, we would not be at risk. You must consider this option.”

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Ágota scoffs at Fülöp's suggestion, but maintains her silence as her father responds.

“King Charles will not stop until he has deposed all the oligarchs and replaced them with his own men. If we surrender to him, he will remove us from this castle and town and hand them over to one of his sycophants. This is the home we established when we arrived in this world. I will not surrender it to any mortal man and have him rob us of our land.”

Fülöp falls silent, chastised by the words of the Grandwitch.

Ágota folds her arms over her breasts and sneers at Fülöp with disgust. “How easily you buckle before your enemies.”

“I strive to protect us, unlike you!” he retorts.

Balázs stands and his face ripples as the glamour takes hold transforming his appearance to the much older version of him. “Sound the alarms, close the gates, and prepare for a possible siege, Fülöp.”

“Make the Archwitch useful and have her deal with this,” Fülöp says, the words clipped, his tone almost abrasive. “If she is all she is supposed to be, is it not time for her to stand for us just as the Archwitches did at the end of our world?”

Ágota's eyebrows rise and her eyes widen in surprise as she swivels about to face Fülöp's fury.

“We are warriors of the blade as well as magic. We will fight our own battle,” Balázs

replies.

“You have foisted your daughter upon this coven and insisted she is our salvation, so let her act as such!” Fülöp insists. “Let her be more than a nuisance and a constant distraction to our coven!”

Clenching her hands, Ágota steps toward Fülöp. “Perhaps you are a nuisance and a distraction to my-”

“Ágota.” A warning is evident in the way her father speaks her name.

“We have all seen her little tricks, but where is her true power? Does it exist? How do we even know she is a true Archwitch? Perhaps she is gluttoned on our stolen powers and unable to use them for more than her childish pranks!” Fülöp trembles with anger. “You indulge her and she must now prove herself!”

“You wish for her to take on the king’s troops. Alone?” The incredulous look on Balázs’s face is shaded with growing anger.

“Send her as well,” he says pointing to me. “This is what the Archwitches did in the old world.”

My fingers clutch the hilt of my dagger while I regard Fülöp. Ice forms over my heart and murderous wrath steals my breath. I see vividly in his eyes that he wants us dead and has seized upon this moment to thrust us toward danger in hopes that we will fail. He is one of Soffia’s closest allies and I regret not finding the opportunity to sink my knife into her. Jealousy clouds her judgment and infects those around her. Now the poison she has spread might force my sister to do what comes so easily to me, but not her.

Kill.

Chapter 14

I watch Balázs's expression when Fülöp, his advisor and member of the coven, demands that Ágota, at last, embrace her role as Archwitch, defender of witches, and witness the struggle in his eyes. Balázs is a castle warrior, Grandwitch of the coven, guardian to me, and father to my sister the Archwitch. He survived the cataclysm that destroyed his world and has lived hundreds of years. He is a man of integrity, wisdom, and goodness. Yet, he will make a choice that will drive a wedge between me and him.

When he makes his decision, his shoulders slump and he averts his gaze from Ágota. Perhaps Balázs has been protecting her from this moment all along and can no longer stand between her and her heritage, but I will not forgive him. I am the killer, not Ágota. She is brash, strong, and independent of mind, but she is not capable of taking a life.

"You want me face the king's troops with my sister? Just the two of us?" Ágota scoffs at Fülöp. "That is not how Archwitches dealt with enemies in the past!"

"Afraid?" Fülöp's handsome face twists into a disapproving scowl. "I thought so."

"No, you imbecile! The Archwitches always fought in groups of five. I will need four other witches as my siphons. You should know that." Ágota glowers at her former lover's husband with disdain. Despite her bravado, I observe what no one else in the room will detect. She's unsettled by the thought of battle. "Or have you not ever been in combat?"

"Ágota," her father says in a warning voice.

"I have fought my enemies with iron gripped in one hand and a shield held in the other," Fülöp retorts. "I have waged war to protect our kind while you play tricks and

lead young women astray!”

“Tricks? Astray?” Ágota’s eyes flame a bright green. “Continue to insult me and you will be shivering on the roof.”

“Ágota, enough!”

Her father’s voice straightens her spine and shuts her mouth. Pivoting slowly on her heel, she turns to face him. Balázs regards her with love, but also fierce resolve. “Ágota, we must completely thwart our enemy. There can be no survivors. King Charles must understand that to come against us is death for all his men. A crushing victory will keep him from our walls for a time. Your power can give us such a victory. Do you understand?”

Ágota visibly swallows, then nods. “I will need siphons. You cannot send me out with only Erjy.”

“Agreed. Choose your siphons, Ágota.”

“You,” she whispers.

“Wise.” Her father nods with approval.

Lowering her eyes, Ágota twists her hands anxiously. “I need the most powerful among the coven. So Soffia.”

“You dare not—” Fülöp starts, but Balázs quiets him with a stern look.

“I should not take Erjy. She’s too young. Not fully trained,” Ágota says.

“We have seen her power,” Fülöp retorts. “We know she is swiftly becoming what you are.”

Our lie has come back to haunt us. If not for Ágota funneling her power through the ring on my finger, all would know I am as weak as any mortal despite my mother’s blood in my veins.

“Erzsébet should be at your side,” Balázs says. Despite the gentleness of his delivery, it is clearly a command. “Choose your fourth, Ágota.”

Closing her eyes, Ágota sways on her feet. Finally, she says, “Henrietta.”

“What?” Fülöp gives Ágota a disbelieving look. “The English witch is one of the lowest witches in the coven. She is barely trained! She was an orphan taken in by mortal parents and barely understands her true heritage!”

“But she is more powerful than you are. Or any of the others in the coven except for Soffia

and my father.” Ágota exhales, her shoulders slumping. “I would rather cart your ass out there, but you would fail me. She will not despite her lack of proper training.”

Fülöp sputters, indignant at this insult, but it is the truth.

Barely hiding his smirk, Balázs says, “So be it. Your siphons are named.”

“Gather the coven in the great hall. We begin within the hour,” Ágota tells Fülöp.

He openly bristles at her order, his gaze switching to Balázs for confirmation.

“You heard your Archwitch. Do as she says.”

Fuming, Fülöp stomps from the room, more petulant than I ever was as a child. As the door shuts, Balázs approaches Ágota while she stares at him with her bottom lip trembling. Settling his big hands on her narrow shoulders, Balázs regards her somberly.

“It is time for you to fully embrace your role. I have indulged you long enough. You have trained hard, learned much, and are powerful. As Archwitch, it is your duty to protect the witches.”

“Mother did not,” I say in a cross voice.

With a sorrowful smile, Balázs says, “Yes, she did. She took Ágota somewhere safe, therefore securing our future. With your sister’s return, the role of the Archwitch must once more rise to prominence in our coven. We have languished too long in our sorrows. We have mourned too long what was lost. It is time for you to remind us of

the true power of the witch heritage.”

“Must I kill the soldiers? Is there no other way?” Ágota pulls on her bottom lip with her teeth.

“You are a wielder of death. That is one of your roles.”

Closing her eyes, Ágota nods.

“Ágota is not a killer. She is good to everyone. And even when they are terrible, she does not kill them. She just makes sure they learn their lesson,” I say in her defense. “I do not think it is fair that you are allowing Fülöp to force her into killing people because he is a coward.”

Balázs meets my angry gaze with a very somber one. “There has been too much strife in the coven—too much animus against Ágota and you, Erjy. It is time for me to stop protecting you and allow you to take your rightful places in our hierarchy.” Returning his attention to my sister, he says, “It is time for you to be an Archwitch not just in name, but in feat, Ágota.”

My sister bobs her head despite the trepidation in her eyes. “I understand.”

“Now, change your dress and cloak, brush your hair, and make yourself presentable.”

Ágota leans into his kiss on her forehead and clings to him for comfort. When he releases her, she takes my hand.

“Come, Erjy.”

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As we depart, I stare at Balázs with fury. A sigh escapes his lips and he lowers his eyes. My anger against him wavers for he does seem to understand the gravity of his decision.

My sister impatiently pulls me along behind her through the corridors to our room. Her fingers are icy and her grip painful. I attempt to pull free, but she does not relent. Perhaps she's afraid I will turn back to scold Balázs.

Once inside our room, she casts a spell to shield us from all prying eyes and ears.

As soon as the spell takes hold, I blurt out my fear, the one that I kept to myself in the study. "I am not a witch. You need four to stand as your siphons!"

"Do not worry." She strips naked and bathes at the wash basin set near the fireplace.

"I will worry. I am your sister. You will not be properly supported by including me and that may cause you harm."

"You are witch born. That is enough. When I pull the magic through you, do not fight it." Ágota finishes and pulls on a fresh black dress. It is one of her fancier ones with ruffles, tucks, and black fur on the hem and sleeves.

"But siphons are supposed to pull magic from the elements to feed to you. I cannot do that. I will weaken you if I join you on the battlefield."

Ágota smirks. "No, you will not. Do you think my father knows how powerful I am? He does not. I only reveal what I want to. I can make do with three siphons."

I stare at her with both frustration and apprehension devouring my usually calm demeanor. “Ágota, they want you to kill.”

“It was only a matter of time.” Ágota draws the comb through her hair, wincing as it catches the tangles in her thick, unruly tresses. “Mother warned me eventually I would have to take a life. She said to not deny the seriousness of the matter and to do what is right. That it is my obligation as Archwitch.”

I give her a doubtful look. “Is it right that you are being asked to kill because mortal men are fighting for power?”

“It is right because I must protect this coven. We own very little in this world. This castle is one of the few sanctuaries for our kind.” Ágota finishes and her hair is wilder and puffier than before with all the snarls removed. Pressing her hands to her waist, she closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. “I am the Archwitch. This is my duty.”

Killing came easily to me, but I can see it will not for her. It hurts to know that she will suffer in the aftermath of performing her so-called duty. I wish our mother had never died and that we still lived in our small cottage far away. Then Ágota would not face committing this terrible deed to defend people who do not truly value her.

“Do as I say, Erjy, and do not be afraid. I can perform my duty.”

When we join the coven in the great hall, there is a victorious gleam in the eyes of Soffia’s sycophants. They already anticipate Ágota’s failure, which strikes me as particularly foolhardy. If Ágota fails, will not it fall to them to defend the castle?

Standing among her supporters, Soffia appears uneasy. When Balázs’s wife notices me watching her, she narrows her eyes and regards me with contempt. My fingers flex about the hilt of my dagger. I will never forgive her for attempting to kill my sister and her desire to see Ágota fail only stokes the fires of hatred burning in my

soul. I force myself to look away so as to not reveal my murderous desire to end her. It is best if people do not regard me as any sort of a threat.

Standing apart from the others, Henrietta gives me a reassuring smile. She, too, is dressed in her best black dress and wears a thick black fur cloak over it. I am surprised to see that she does not look a bit nervous but rather proud. I return her smile even though I worry about what will happen to her and Balázs since I cannot act as a true siphon. I trust Ágota, but magic is a wild element.

Balázs raises a hand to silence the chatter before summoning the witches into a circle. There are sixty witches in the coven and we swiftly stride to our places. I stand at Ágota's left side while Balázs stands on her right. Henrietta hurries to her spot next to me while Soffia joins her husband. The great cauldron bubbles over the fire in the hearth warming my back.

"Rather exciting, is it not?" Henrietta whispers to me.

I arch my eyebrows. "Battle?"

"Witnessing the rise of the new Archwitch," she corrects. "Others think she might fail, but I know Ágota will show them all. I feel it in my very bones."

"She will not fail," I say, dread shading my words. "Which is awful. She has to kill."

"War is terrible, but our enemies are forcing our hand. We have to defend ourselves and Ágota is the most powerful weapon in this castle."

"I still do not like it," I reply truthfully.

A weak smile flits across Henrietta's lips. "You will understand one day why we must fight."

Shoulder to shoulder, the men and women of the coven focus on my sister.

“Join together,” Ágota says, leading the coven for the first time.

The witches cross their arms and hold hands with the person next to them.

“Close the circle.”

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Chills flow down my spine despite the warmth of the fire as the magic rises around us and seals us in its protective embrace.

“Summon the power.”

We release our hold on the people next to us to raise our hands over our heads. My fingertips tingle as magic fills the circle. Sparks

of light float before my eyes and a warm breeze ruffles my hair. The light continues to grow until its golden illumination obliterates all darkness within the circle. I have never seen the magic manifest so vividly when Balázs led the coven ritual. Scrutinizing the faces around me, I am satisfied to observe the others are astonished by the manifestation of Ágota’s abilities.

“Siphons, follow me,” Ágota orders, surprising the coven.

Ágota steps into the circle with me close behind. Balázs, Henrietta, and Soffia obey her while the others move to close the gap. Soffia gives Balázs a questioning look, but he shrugs in response. Henrietta, meanwhile, appears eager to do whatever Ágota asks of her. Though I am uncertain as to what my sister will do with the magic building around us, I know it will leave the coven breathless. My sister has always been a bit of a braggart and she will use this moment to her advantage.

Ágota’s dark hair flows about her, rippling like water. Arms still held aloft, her feet lift from the floor as she spins about very slowly to face the siphons. The magic swells in the circle as it answers to her beckoning. The magic never felt like this potent when Balázs summoned it. Arms outstretched, fingers splayed, and eyes lifted

to the heavens, Ágota floats before us. The sweet fragrance of magic fills my nostrils and a low hum vibrates in my chest. Ágota is terrifying to behold, and, from the expressions on the faces of the coven, it is apparent that they are frightened by this exhibition of her power.

Ágota swings her arms toward her waiting siphons and the golden speckles filling the air rush toward us. I draw in a sharp breath an instant before I am flung into the air. I have not even finished my gasp when I find myself standing on a hillside alongside the other three witches with Ágota standing a few feet in front of us. The enemy camp spreads out at the base of the hill with banners fluttering in the wind over the sprawl of tents. While the chill in the wintry air turns our breath to frost, I blink against the harsh glare of the sunlight gleaming off the patches of snow.

“How?” Soffia exclaims, her eyes darting about our surroundings. Turning about, she looks back toward the castle and the town. “I have never seen such magic!”

“She is the Archwitch,” Henrietta says with a grin.

“Well done, Ágota. Now we must deal with our enemies,” Balázs says to his daughter.

With a nod, Ágota swivels about to face the camp. Fingers flexing at her side, she draws in a deep breath. “Summon the elements!”

“I call forth the earth,” Balázs intones, and the ground rumbles beneath his feet. Sharp spikes of stone rise up to encircle him.

“I call forth fire!” The snow sizzles as a ring of fire forms around Soffia and the flames reflect in her eyes giving the impression that another inferno burns within her.

“I call forth water!” Henrietta sweeps her arms upward and a flurry of ice and snow

spins around her.

I swallow the hard knot forming in my throat. I am no witch. I am weakening the Archwitch in this vital moment. I am failing my sister and myself and guilt gnaws at my bones. Ágota gives me a sharp look over her shoulder so I will continue with our farce. “I call forth wind!”

A gust of wind snatches me up and lifts me off the ground. Suspended in the air, I am startled by the sensation of being held aloft by great invisible wings.

“Well done, Erjy!” my sister exclaims.

I am surprised to see the pride in her gaze. Certainly, she is the one who is hanging me on the winds by an invisible thread? I could not possibly be doing this on my own.

There is no time to ponder my question for we have drawn the attention of our enemy. What a sight we must be up on the hillside! Rough-looking men in long tunics over battered armor emerge from the tents. The few horses with them snort and paw at the ground, unsettled by the magic swelling in the air. “Ágota, do not draw this out,” Balázs says, his voice sounding like an earthquake. “Do not give them a chance to attack. No survivors.”

“What about the horses?” I ask worriedly.

“Do it, Ágota,” Soffia hisses, smoke unfurling from her lips. “Slay our enemies! It is your duty!”

“You can do this!” Henrietta’s small snow storm obscures her face, but she sounds encouraging and not afraid.

I cannot see my sister's expression, but there is tension in the set of her shoulders. Long dark hair whipping about her, she lowers her head. "I have never killed mortals before."

"There is always a first time," Soffia retorts.

"You wield death in defense of your people. There is no shame in that." Balázs's words of comfort are punctuated by more spikes of stone rising at his feet. "Without a Battlewitch, the duty is yours."

One man steps forward, the captain I assume, and draws his sword. He stares at us without an expression on his long, narrow face. The soldiers behind him also draw their weapons despite their fear. A few do not move from where they stand, transfixed by the sight of the witches.

"Do not be afraid. It is a trick! Balázs is known for his illusions on the battlefield!" the captain of the king's army shouts. "Kill them!"

The mortals lift their shields and raise their swords, preparing to attack. The captain gestures with his arm and archers unleash a barrage of arrows. My sister holds out her arms and magic rushes out of me in a great wave. I gasp as the four elements pour into Ágota. Fire and snow swirl around her form while the earth rises up before her as a shield. The arrows slam into the stone barrier, bursting into splinters of wood.

Flicking one hand, Ágota sends shards of ice flying through the air at our enemies. The soldiers lift their shields, and the ice daggers burrow deep into the metal. A few men are too slow and fall dead to the ground. Blooms of red blood spread across the snow. Another wave of Ágota's hand and orbs of fire rain down on the tents, setting them aflame. Men scream in terror as they burn, thrashing around on the frozen ground, attempting to quench the flames.

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Ágota lets out a small gasp. Throwing a stricken look over her shoulder at me and her father, she whispers, “Can I stop now?”

Balázs shakes his head. “Finish it, Ágota.”

A quick thrust of both her hands results in all the living soldiers rising into the air. Ágota holds them aloft, her body trembling. The magic continues to pour through me and into her. I am awed that she can absorb so much and use it to her will. Though I have always known she was powerful, her magic is breathtaking.

Cheeks wet with tears, Ágota turns to face us again. Behind her, the men flail, their bodies twisting about as they attempt to return to the ground. Screams of terror fill the air as the men continue to ascend past the treetops. Below them the camp burns, spewing forth black smoke to smear the winter sky.

“I do this for you,” Ágota whispers.

I realize she is speaking to me.

With a sharp movement, she clasps her hands together, and lightning crackles around her. The men slam into one another, forming a ball of human bodies which is then smashed into the ground. The earth roils and churns, dragging down everything, the dead, dying, and still living, consuming the entire camp in seconds.

Only the horses remain.

I blink and we are in the center of the circle in the castle great hall again. My feet are

on the stone floor and the reek of burning flesh is gone. Ágota stands in the center of the coven for a few seconds before her eyes roll back revealing the whites of her eyes and she collapses to the floor. Balázs surges forward, raising his hands to ward off the people attempting to come to her aide.

“Let us properly close the circle,” he commands.

The coven obeys.

“Release the power,” he intones.

The witches bow their heads.

“Open the circle,” he continues.

The witches take a step back, breaking physical contact with the person next to them.

“Go forth in peace,” he finishes.

The witches move apart, but only long enough for the power of the circle to dissipate. They flow as one toward us.

Fülöp grips Soffia’s arm. “What happened?”

“She is the Archwitch! I have never seen such power! She smote them all! She wielded all four elements and did not falter. Only after the enemy was destroyed did she release the magic and fall into a stupor.” Soffia’s words surprise me, for she is obviously elated, her true young face glowing with joy.

As she explains what happened to the curious coven, Balázs collects Ágota from the floor. Holding her like he would a child, he hurries from the great hall. I follow close

behind.

“Is she hurt?” I ask agitatedly. Anger still burns in my chest against him for forcing my sister into battle.

“Spent,” Balázs answers. “We did not grant her enough time to prepare for battle and she overexerted herself. She will be fine after she rests.”

“She spared the horses,” I blurt out. “You cannot leave them out there.”

“I will have someone claim them,” Balázs assures me before hesitating at the bottom step of a stairwell. “Did it upset you, Erjy? To see all those men die?”

I lower my eyes and lie. “Yes.”

“It had to be done, you understand.”

“Yes, I do.”

When we arrive in the bedroom I share with Ágota, Balázs lays her on the bed. “Stay with her. I need to return to the coven. Once they hear the full story of Ágota’s victory from Soffia, there will be much discussion.”

“She proved herself,” I say defensively.

“Yes, she did. It will change for the better now. I am certain.” Balázs kisses my forehead. “Stay here with her. I will come when I can.”

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I obey the big man and nestle down in the covers next to Ágota. I stare at her face and notice she looks thinner and older than before the battle. I rest my hand against her cheek, stroking it with my fingers.

“Do not have nightmares,” I whisper. “You did what is right. I know it was not easy for you.”

Ágota mutters in her s

leep.

I lean forward to hear what she is saying.

“...so much blood...”

Rolling over, she burrows under the bedcovers.

I fall asleep at her side and awaken to see Soffia standing over the bed. I am shocked to see the affectionate manner in which she regards my slumbering sister. A thick quilt embroidered with the flaming tree emblem is tucked around Ágota and it was not there before we fell asleep.

“What are you doing here?” I demand.

“I came to give her a gift, but I see she is still sleeping.”

“Leave!”

“Come now, Erzsébet. The past must be forgiven for I have repented in the presence of the coven. I will swear my allegiance to the Archwitch when she awakens.”

“You never believed she was an Archwitch before. You said she was a fraud.”

“I believe now. After all that I saw and experienced, I believe.” Soffia sits on the edge of our bed and gives me a sweet smile. “I see the truth now. Ágota will elevate us above the mortals of this world. She will slay our enemies and force them to bow at our feet. She will give birth to more Archwitches and we will claim this world as ours.”

I do not like this proclamation. I saw the pain in Ágota’s eyes when she slew our enemies. Killing is my gift, not hers.

“You cannot use her to take over this world,” I protest. “That is not her role. She is a protector.”

Soffia shakes her head, her laughter mocking. “Once she understands exactly how to use her power in battle, she will be a conqueror.”

“Is this what Balázs wants?”

With a snort, Soffia regards me coldly. “He is weak and does not understand what must happen next. I know you are fond of him, but if you rise to the position of Archwitch like your sister, you will understand what a fool he is.”

I draw my dagger and swipe the blade across Soffia’s throat in one swift motion. Blood soaks the quilt and sprays across my face. Shocked, she grips her neck, her eyes wide with shock. Pushing her off the bed, I climb over my sister to stand over the blonde witch. Her fingers start to move, forming a healing spell. I step onto her palm to stop her. I will not let her hurt my sister. I watch her die with satisfaction and

wait until I sense her soul leave her body before I begin to scream.

My cries bring the guards into the room followed by Balázs. I watch him scrutinize every detail of the scene before him before he falls to his knees before me.

“Why, Erjy?” he whispers.

“She wanted to hurt Ágota.” Tears sparkle in my eyes, not out of remorse, but out of love for my sister. No one shall ever hurt her without feeling my vengeance.

Balázs’s large hand closes over mine and I allow him to take the dagger from me. While his guards watch with uncertainty, he cleans the blade on his tunic before tucking it into the sheath on my belt. “Erjy, what you have done—”

“I defended my sister against the one who tried to kill her before and came into this room to try once more. I have no regrets,” I tell him in a tight, fierce voice.

“I have failed you both in this matter,” he whispers.

“Sir?” A guard steps forward. “Should we take the girl to a cell?”

“No, no. Soffia’s animosity against the Archwitch was well-known. Jealousy is a vile instigator of terrible deeds. Erzsébet defended her sister, our Archwitch. Let that be known.”

I sit in the corner of the room for the next hour watching members of the coven take Soffia’s body, clean the floor, remove the soiled bedding, and tend to Ágota as she sleeps. Henrietta helps me clean my face and hands, but does not ask what happened. When I am finally dressed in my nightgown, I am left alone with Ágota and Balázs. Her father sits at her side, clutching her hand. I hang my dagger in its sheath on the hook near my wardrobe, my fingers tracing the rose on the hilt.

“Erzsébet,” Balázs whispers, gesturing me to his side.

I obey.

“No more killing, please. It comes easily to you. I see that. And it does not frighten you. I saw that when Ágota killed the army. You have killed before, have you not?”

“Yes. When a man wanted to hurt Ágota when she was under a dark spell, I stopped him.”

Balázs nods. “I suspected as much.”

“I will not let anyone hurt her. Not even you.”

“You are angry with me for forcing Ágota to protect us.”

“No, not anymore,” I answer.

“Oh?” He regards me with curiosity.

“You could try to use her to elevate yourself above humanity and rule the world, but you will not.”

Balázs nods. “Soffia told you what she wanted.”

“I may be young, but I am not foolish. If Ágota did not bow to her wishes, Soffia would have not relented. Eventually, Ágota would have had to kill most of the coven to silence their conspiracies.”

“I will not make Ágota kill again, Erjy,” Balázs says soberly. “That is your gift.”

“I am not a witch,” I say to him, confessing the truth. “Just a killer.”

Balázs draws a dagger so rapidly I barely see the action before the blade is moving toward me.

I gasp, my hand darting to my waist to find my dagger waiting for me. I pull it free from the sheath and deflect the descending blade. Balázs’s dagger vanishes in a sparkle of magic. An illusion.

With a dark chuckle, he says, “Yes, you are a witch.”

Breathing heavily, I stare at him in confusion. “I do not understand.”

“You summoned your blade to your side. It was across the room.” He gestures toward the hook that is now empty. “You are a Battlewitch, Erzsébet. A rare and deadly being.”

Tears stream down my cheeks as I sheath my dagger and fall into his arms. He holds me close as I cling to him, my fingers digging into the fur of his cloak. I understand myself and my purpose.

“I will train you, Erzsébet. You will lead the witches in battle and Ágota will never have to kill again. I promise.”

Pressing a kiss to his cheek, I say, “Thank you, Father.”

When I open my eyes once more to the dank, gloom of the mausoleum, I cry out in pain. I miss Balázs and Ágota so desperately that I would sacrifice my soul to once more be at their sides.

That terrible but glorious night was the first time in my short life that I understood my purpose in the world and welcomed it fully. Furthermore, I was not rejected by Balázs for my true nature but embraced with love. I was a foolish, naïve young girl and believed that, at last, I would find true contentment. Little did I know that killing Soffia was the beginning of my undoing and I would never properly fulfill my destiny.

It was the death of Soffia that set in motion the events that would eventually force my sister to do what her father had promised me she would never have to do again. Ágota would kill again to save me.

Chapter 15

“Erzsébet,” a familiar and despised voice says, summoning me to wakefulness.

I stir from the depths of my slumber. Pain greets me first, an old familiar companion in my hell. I pant in agony, gripping the stake piercing my body. Trembling, I struggle to subsume the extreme discomfort through strength of will.

A touch on my forehead brings sweet relief as the pain drains away. A small sob of relief escapes my lips before I can quell it. I wish not to show emotion to the beast who has decided to visit me.

“There. Much better now. No need to thank me, Erzsébet.”

I tilt my head to see Lucifer standing over me.

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“None of that thrashing about during my visit. It is distracting and I want us to have a nice chat.” The devil’s finely-shaped mouth spreads into a charming smile.

“If you are seeking new students for your school of the black arts, I am presently engaged.” I tap the iron stake with one long sharp fingernail before resting my hands beneath my bosom.

Laughing, the blonde-haired creature with the face of a Roman god lightly brushes his fingers over my cheek. “Always defiant. Even he

re in this gruesome place. One of the many reasons I have always held you in the highest regard.”

“You have a peculiar way of showing your respect. Murdering my mother. Conspiring against my sister. Attempting to accost me. Should I continue?”

“You really do dwell too much on the past,” he sniffs, but he is delighted by my refusal to cower in fear. Like Vlad, he loves a conquest. “I am not here to discuss our sordid history together.”

As always, the devil is outfitted as a fashionable gentleman of the times. Tonight he is clad in long white breeches, a bright blue waistcoat, and brocade vest. His top hat is black with a blue ribbon and it sits atop his golden curls at a jaunty angle. I am always struck by his beauty and charismatic presence whenever he ventures into my life. He is so far removed from the stories I was told during my childhood in the Black Forest that I have often wondered if he deliberately spread those tales to disguise his presence in the world. How foolish it seems now in the glow of his

mesmerizing aura that I once thought of the devil as a squat goat-man with horns. The true face of the devil is beautiful beyond compare to lure his victims into compliance so he can steal their soul.

“What terrible purpose drew you to my side?” I ask suspiciously.

He smirks while leaning back against the edge of the bier. “I missed my old friend.”

“We are not friends.”

“You wound me! After all we have endured together!” He presses an elegant hand to his chest, pretending to be aggrieved by my words. It is difficult not to be beguiled by his charming persona, but cruelty lingers below the surface of his striking features.

“Does Vlad know you are here?”

Lucifer shrugs contemptuously. “Does it matter?”

“He is a very jealous man, as you well know.”

“Which makes this visit all the more wicked and dangerous, does it not?” Leaning forward, Lucifer adjusts my necklace about my throat, making sure the ruby and diamond pendants sit just right upon my collarbones.

“Did he send you to torment me?”

Lucifer does not answer. Instead, he fusses with my dress, smoothing the lace and ruffles of my sleeves and skirt. He is very particular about appearances and obsesses with setting things right. It is a weakness that can be exploited in the proper circumstances, but it is rather annoying to see him fussing with my surroundings. He even bends over to collect my slippers from the floor and slides them onto my feet. I

am tempted to kick them off for the sole purpose of frustrating him, but it is in my best interests not to rile the devil when I am in such a weakened state. I am curious about his unexpected appearance in the mausoleum. Is he here for his own duplicitous means, or Vlad's? They are mostly enemies, but sometimes they band together against a common foe.

Kicking at Magdala's rotting corpse, he sneers. "Vlad really should keep it tidier for you since you are the grand love of his life according to his passionate exclamations and bitter cursing whenever I visit him."

My laughter is mocking. "Yet, here I am."

"Oh, we both know that you are here because he cannot bring himself to kill you despite your betrayal. If he merely loved you as one of his possessions, you would be long dead. If he did not love you and was done with your wretched presence, you would be cast out to survive on your own against all manner of monsters and vampire hunters. But this is a true demonstration of passion. This, Erzsébet—" Lucifer traces his fingertips down the iron stake "—is true love."

"I prefer fine gifts suited to my station to impalement."

Lucifer tsk-tsks. "Really, Erzsébet. You must appreciate the passion he poured into this most delicious of punishments."

"If you so admire his handiwork, perhaps you can use it in hell," I reply crossly.

"Oh, come now. You know I do not exist there. That is propaganda espoused by my enemies. I am the god of this world and I rule it as I see fit. The attempts of my foes to deny me my due will not end well for their institutions."

The façade of the romantic dandy slips and the calculating manipulator is revealed for

a mere second as he defends his station. I am glad to see the serpent lingering within the handsome man whose proclivity is destruction. It is a reminder not to be swayed by his charm.

“Why are you here, Lucifer? Is it time for the Scholomance to open? Do you crave yet another powerful dark soul to devour?”

“None has been as tasty as your sister’s.” His bland tone is belied by his malicious gaze.

My hands start to clench into fists, but I force them to stay pressed to my ribs. I will not show weakness to this foul beast. Ágota’s fate haunts me, for much of what happened is still a mystery. Is he lying? Or is this the truth? I resist the urge to curse at the devil for teasing me so cruelly, for he will only find it amusing that he could rile me so easily.

After a few long, strained moments, I recover my temper and say, “Unfortunate that you did not devour my dear husband as payment for his tuition in the black arts.”

“He is a wily one. I will never forgive him for outwitting me. He would have been a delicious feast.” Lucifer takes off his hat and shakes out his golden curls with rakish flair. “As you may have ascertained, I am not here at his behest, but my own.”

“That is no consolation.”

His touch is warm. Fiery sparks trail over the path his fingers rake along my décolletage. “Ah, but I do not love you enough to plunge an iron stake through your body. I merely find you sufficiently compelling to present you with a proposition. You know I admire pretty, powerful objects of all sorts.”

I slap his hand from my bosom. “I am not a pretty object for your collection in the Scholomance.”

Flicking my nose with his finger, he says, “Be nice, Erzsébet. I come as a friend.”

Riled by his impertinent behavior, I hiss at him with my fangs bared. “You are no friend, which we both know. Speak your peace and begone, devil!”

Eyes flashing dangerously with brilliant white flames, he rests his hand on the stake. My pain returns in a great red wave. The agony of the stake is magnified, wrenching a scream from my lips. I thrash my arms and legs, knocking my slippers from my feet. It is as though I am impaled anew, the shock of the wound leaving me awash in blinding torment.

Lucifer releases his hold on the stake and the pain vanishes. I fall back on the bier, shuddering.

“Where were we? Oh, yes. You did inquire about my esteemed school of the black arts. The answer is yes, the portal to the Scholomance shall once more open in Lake Hermanstadt in the very near future and I have chosen you as one of my students.”

“Vlad’s power has me prisoner. None can break the curse but he.” Rage compels me to bite off every word, but he takes no notice, or perhaps my venomous response pleases him. “All attempts to free me are for naught.”

“Ah, but you are wrong, dearest Erzsébet. Vlad’s black magic was born from my instruction. Should I wish to free you, I can.”

A flash of hope fills me, but is rapidly quashed for there will be a high price to secure my freedom. Yet, I am willing to listen to his proposal.

“Ah, I have piqued your interest. In exchange for you becoming one of my students, I shall free you from this abysmal place and grant you all you desire.” The devil leans over me with an alluring glint in his eyes. “Imagine! Freedom from pain. The ability to feast on whichever mortal dares cross your path. Seductions of delectable young men, and if I remember your tastes correctly, lovely golden-haired women. I will give you wealth and security for one year. And when the portal opens, we shall enter it together. At the Scholomance, I will teach you the dark arts and imbue you with power that will make you Vlad’s equal.”

“And at the end of the ten years of learning, you will consume one of your empowered students as payment for our tuition. Chances are that will be me, correct?”

Lucifer shrugs, grinning mischievously. “Who is to say? The selection is random. A drawing of straws. What are the chances it will be you? Most likely you will return to this world and wreak your vengeance on Vlad and reclaim Cneajna. Think of it, Erzsébet. All you desire if you submit to me.” Bending so close I can feel his warm breath on my lips, Lucifer whispers, “All you desire, Erzsébet. Say the words. Say the words you did not say so long ago.”

In the blink of an eye, I am in his arms as he dances with me around the bier. My bare

feet scrabble over the filth collected on the floor as he drags my weakened body about. I gasp with relief, gripping his hand and shoulder tightly. I am unsteady as he twirls me, my long skirt flaring out about my ankles.

“We will dance in all the fine cities of the world. You and I will delight in the revelry as we travel to and fro across the earth collecting my students.”

The mausoleum disappears and a lavish ballroom blooms into existence. Ladies in fine gowns wearing opulent turbans glittering with jewels and sweeping ostrich feathers spin about me in the arms of their handsome male partners. Chandeliers glitter overhead lit by hundreds of small white candles casting golden light over elegant murals painted on the ceiling. The music swells, melodious and unfamiliar while the patter of dancing feet adds a delightful beat.

All is glorious and beautiful.

And then, much to my shock and delight, I see them.

Lady Glynis Wright, the flame-haired Bride of Dracula I thought dead at his hand, and my vampire brother, Ignatius d’Aubigné, cavort gaily among the revelers. Vlad had spoken with contempt and hatred of their secret affair he had uncovered while living in Buda, Hungary. He had plotted to separate them and draw Lady Glynis deeper into his power, yet...

Here they are!

Together!

Laughing and smiling, the two vampires dance beneath the murals of angels that hold no candle to their beauty. I stare as they glide past me, rapturous in their happiness. She is so small and delicate in a filmy white gown. Tucked into her red hair is an

opulent pearl and diamond tiara that sparkles as brightly as her aquamarine eyes. The adoration in her gaze whe

n she regards Ignatius fills me with joy. And my brother! My maudlin brother who used to hide in his priest cassock and drift morosely through the world is dressed as a fine gentleman and, more shockingly, is smiling!

Tears flood my eyes. "Is this true, Lucifer? Did she escape Vlad? Is my vampire brother truly happy at her side?"

"This is true," the devil answers while guiding my steps through the guests so we can follow in the couple's wake.

When they depart the dance, Lady Glynis is besieged with young women in shimmering gowns while Ignatius joins a group of men drinking and boisterously conversing. Both are greeted warmly by the mortals that appear oblivious to their vampire nature. It is evident they have found a way to live openly in the human world without detection.

"At last one of us has thwarted Vlad! I must speak to her! I must know how she escaped!"

I jerk free from the devil's grip to follow Lady Glynis and the opulent world vanishes.

Lucifer chuckles. "Oops! The spell is broken."

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In the aftermath of the inspiring vision, I tremble with overwhelming excitement beside the bier stained with my blood. Elated at the revelation that Lady Glynis has found happiness, I clasp my hands together as hope swells in my heart for my own future. Perhaps I can soon be liberated from this place and set forth to create a new life for myself. Maybe I could even find Lady Glynis and be reunited with my vampire brother.

And then I remember.

Lucifer is the father of lies.

As rapidly as joy filled me, it drains away, leaving me empty of hope and forlorn in defeat.

“Oh? Why the downcast look?” Lucifer tucks a finger under my chin to tilt my head so I face him. “You are free of the stake and have seen what your future may hold. Imagine you and Cneajna far from here, together.”

“This is an illusion. I am yet on the bier. This is all a lie so I will acquiesce to you.”

“Clever.” Lucifer clucks his tongue at me.

I am not surprised to find myself prone upon the bier, still impaled, with his hand upon my forehead.

“It may have been an illusion, Erzsébet, but it is also the truth.”

“You are not one to be trusted,” I reply. “You offer much, but only because you know if I agree you shall win. That is why Vlad vexes you so. He fooled you. You, the father of lies, tricked! And now you wish to abscond with me. This is your vengeance upon him. Steal away his true love and then consume her. I am not a fool, Lucifer!”

Digging his fingers into my hair, he twists my head about so he can glare at me with eyes of pure flame. “Perhaps I should just take you!” There is a hint of desperation in his voice that reveals a bit too much.

He is lying.

But why?

Something Ágota once said resurfaces from my deepest memories.

Some magic requires permission.

“You cannot take me by force,” I whisper, understanding that his threat is meaningless. “There is a provision to removing the curse! Vlad’s magic may have come from you, but you are both bound by the same rules of the curse!”

Lucifer sneers with contempt. “What nonsense are you speaking? I offer you liberation from this personal hell and you prattle on like an imbecile. Accept my proposal and be done with it.”

“Of course!” I discern the hidden requirement to break the spell for he sounds very much like Vlad in his demands. “You need me to grant you permission! That is why Vlad always demands that I supplicate myself to his wishes! Neither one of you can release me unless I surrender my will to you!”

With a snarl, Lucifer pushes away from the bier. “You are as clever as your sister and

mother! Far too clever! But remember their fate! It will one day be yours for defying me! Do you think I will forget this insult? This complete disregard for the offer of freedom and power that I do not dole out so frivolously?"

"Do you think me a fool? That I would believe you offer liberation out of the kindness of your heart? This is vengeance against Vlad for him tricking you and revenge against my bloodline! I am not a simpleton."

"You are worthless!" Lucifer snatches his top hat from the end of the bier and sets it on his curls. "Weak, pathetic, and a poor representation of what was once a glorious race. If your sister and mother could see you now, they would put you out of your misery not out of mercy, but disgust. You are not even a witch anymore, but a vampire. A leech."

"If I am so disgusting, then kill me!" I shout the words, fury enveloping me. I no longer care if I live or die. I will not be a pawn in his war with Vlad. I am done being hostage to the schemes of men.

Clenching his hand tightly, smoke billows forth from between his fingers, but he does not set me aflame. With an irritated sound, he paces about the bier, trailing a thick black haze.

"So you cannot kill me. Vlad's magic thwarts you even now." I sag against the platform and attempt to ignore the agitated devil.

"If only you had listened to my warnings," Lucifer mutters.

"Warnings? You mean threats."

"Your sister was far too obtuse to even grasp the veracity of my warning. She doomed you, you know. All of this is Ágota's handiwork. She destroyed herself and

you. For what? To spite me!”

“You murdered our mother! You held her down so she would burn! Why would we listen to the venomous advice dripping from your lips?”

“If she had listened, you would not be here,” Lucifer retorts. “You know the truthfulness of that statement.”

The devil is correct and it leaves a bitter heaviness in my chest.

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“I take your silence as acquiescence to the truth,” he says.

“You should have let us be.”

“Ah, that was not even a choice. I love power. I am drawn to it. You know this.”

For ten years after the death of our mother, Ágota and I had been safe from Lucifer while he was occupied teaching his students at the Scholomance. I had been naïve to believe we had fully escaped him, though Ágota had always known he would make an appearance again.

To my surprise, I sense the curse stirring, preparing to whisk me away to the past. The magic obviously has no regard for who might be close at hand when it seizes me.

“What is this?” Lucifer whispers, intrigued. “What is this sliver of magic coiling about you?”

“It is the only escape I truly have,” I reply with a sigh.

The mausoleum grows hazy as the magic grows insistent. I am dragged into my memories, the crypt fading into darkness.

Before I awaken in the past, I hear Lucifer say in disbelief, “This is witch magic!”

And then I open my eyes to see Ágota smiling down at me.

Blinking sleep from my eyes, I groggily sit upright, pushing the covers down about my waist. The morning light streams through the high windows of my bedroom in Balázs's castle, yet I am shrouded in shadows. The cause is Ágota standing on my bed, leaning over me with a wicked grin upon her lips. In her long fingers is a sealed letter.

"Is that for me?" My cheeks flush and my heart flutters with anticipation. "Is it from him?"

Flipping the letter about so I can see the raven emblem imprinted in the wax seal, she says, "Why yes! It is from your betrothed!"

"Give it to me at once!" I order, holding out my hand.

Ágota fans herself with it, regarding me with a naughty expression. "At once you say? What could this letter possibly say that needs to be read at once?"

I am freshly awakened and in no mood for her nonsense. "Ágota!"

"Yes?"

"The letter! Now!"

Waving it before me, careful to keep it beyond my reach, my sister says, "You mean this letter?"

I lunge for her, but she bounces across my bed eluding me. I scramble after her, struggling to free myself from the covers. Ágota jumps around me, brandishing the letter. Her laughter taunts me as I untangle my nightgown. I lunge for her, but she leaps away from me

toward the end of the bed, mocking my desperation.

“So slow!”

“Ágota, give it to me!” I command.

“Oh, what passionate declarations did he write this time? Shall I read it and see?”

“You would not dare! It is mine!”

“What was it he wrote last time? Oh, yes! I long to taste your sweet berry lips! I wonder which lips he meant!”

“Ágota!”

“He has become such a romantic! What did he call your eyes again? Golden fires of passion?”

“Give me the letter!” I manage to climb to my feet and face her. I hold out my hand imperiously.

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Ágota slides one finger under the flap, threatening to break the seal. “How about I read it to you?”

“No! Not again!” I made the mistake of leaving one letter upon my bed and Ágota tormented me by reading aloud the most syrupy portions.

It has been a month since I last heard from Albrecht. Ever since I turned sixteen, he has been making a concerted effort to maintain a steady correspondence with me. I love reading about his life far away in Styria. I often imagine what he must look like now, a man of twenty-one. I am certain he is the most handsome man in the world. With my seventeenth birthday approaching, his letters have become much more amorous in tone as our impending nuptials loom before us.

With a gleeful grin, she breaks the seal and lunges to one side as I attempt to catch her. Floating out of my grasp, she dangles in the air while snapping the pages open. “My precious Erzsébet, as I sit at my desk at this late hour, know that these words are not written only in ink, but also with my most avid adoration.”

I leap after my sister, grabbing her wrist. We spin about in the air in a battle for Albrecht’s letter. Ágota blows on it, turning it into a bird that flutters across the room to land on the windowsill.

“Not fair, Ágota!” I shove her away with annoyance and drop to the floor.

My sister howls with laughter while drifting through the air, clutching her stomach.

Cautiously, I approach the avian poppet. The wax seal flakes off as the bird preens

feathers made of parchment. The poppet tilts its head toward me, an eye made of one of Albrecht's florid 'O's, watching me suspiciously. It hops forward on scrawny legs made of twisted paper.

"Be a nice bird and come to me. You were written for me, remember? You belong to me."

The poppet appears to consider my words.

"Yes, come here. Be a good poppet."

Ágota snaps her fingers. The bird cocks its head toward my sister. She whistles and it swoops off the windowsill toward her.

"You are such a cheater, Ágota!"

I pluck a book from my desk and hurl it at my sister. It, too, turns into a bird, a massive hawk which flies about the room chasing the frantic poppet. "Ágota, if your hawk eats my letter—"

The door to my room bangs open. Balázs stands in the doorway with his face flushed and his eyes blazing with fury. Immediately, Ágota, the hawk, and the bird all land on the floor, the two poppets returning to their true forms.

"I was only teasing her," Ágota blurts out.

I fetch the letter as Balázs stalks into the room. His glamour is in place and he has added more lines about the eyes and mouth these last few years. I am always struck by the disparity between his true youthful appearance and his older disguise.

"This is not about you tormenting your sister, Ágota. Important matters are at hand."

“What’s wrong, Father?” Ágota asks.

“King Charles has sent his army to demand my allegiance,” he answers in a grim voice. “They are in the valley below. I have dispatched Fülöp to deliver my terms for their surrender or withdrawal, but I doubt they will agree. King Charles has most likely sent them to lay siege outside our walls until I denounce Ladislaus Kán.”

After Ágota destroyed the troops sent to confront Balázs years earlier, King Charles has circumvented our lands while waging his battle against the oligarchs. Balázs had hoped the disappearance of the king’s men would spur rumors of his great battle prowess. Instead, the tale of the lost soldiers that spread far and wide featured vengeful ghosts and ghouls. Whether the king believed the supernatural stories or feared Balázs, is not known, but he kept his armies far from the castle.

“How will you respond?” Ágota sounds hoarse with fear and one hand flutters nervously against her skirts.

My sister’s trepidation does not deter me from speaking my mind. “We prepare for battle, of course.”

“Violence is not always the answer,” she retorts.

“In this world, it usually is the most viable solution.”

She winces at my reply, averting her face from me. My nature has driven a wedge between us that we do not often acknowledge. Ágota would rather pretend I am her innocent younger sister with a lovely future before me than acknowledge what I am. I cannot be so obtuse. As a battlewitch, it is my duty to fight in defense of the coven and town, just as it is hers to protect it. I honed my craft under Balázs tutelage during skirmishes between Balázs’s forces and a castle warrior loyal to King Charles. My magic is not as impressive as my sister’s, but it is potent. I am able to infuse soldiers

with supernatural strength and agility. They fight harder, faster, and are able to suffer terrible wounds that would have downed them otherwise.

Balázs folds his arms across his broad chest and regards us with a somber expression. “It is a greater force than those we faced in the past. You will need to stand at your sister’s side on the battlefield, Ágota.”

“No, you promised me that she would not have to kill again,” I say in a firm voice. “She casts the protection wards! I fight!”

Out of the corner of my eye, Ágota blanches at our discourse. It took her nearly a month to recover from her first and only battle. I had stayed at her side while she wept for days on end, unable to live with the guilt of taking the lives of mortals. Balázs had been wise enough not to tell her I was a battlewitch until she was in a better state of mind to deal with the revelation. My sister received the news with disbelief. Though delighted that my heritage had manifested, she had been demoralized by the class of witch that is my legacy. Ágota always regarded me as an innocent and sweet girl and was horrified I had killed Soffia in her defense. It was even more difficult for her to accept that I am a warrior in heart and mind.

“She will need to feed power to you, much like the siphons. Ágota will not kill. She will assist you, Erzsébet.” Balázs focuses on his daughter’s pale face. “Ágota, Erzsébet needs you. It is a formidable force that has gathered outside our walls. It is obvious King Charles is done dealing with the oligarchs. He sent this army to crush us or force my surrender.”

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“And if you surrender?” Ágota asks.

“King Charles will appoint his own man in my stead.”

“He will kill you.” Ágota’s shoulders sag as she sits on the edge of my bed.

“Or exile me. Either way, this castle and town will be lost. All we fought to build in the aftermath of the exodus from the Witch World is in peril.”

“We shall never surrender,” I say with steel in my voice. “I will perform my duty. Victory is assured.”

Balázs nods, but does not look convinced.

I stride over to him, my hands clenched at my sides, and peer up at him. “I will win.” Every time I am in battle, I know victory is mine for the taking. I hear it in the clash of swords, taste it in the air fragrant with blood, and witness it as my enemies fall.”

Resting his hands on my shoulders, he says. “Victory today will only ensure that we will battle again in the future. King Charles is determined to subjugate all of the Kingdom of Hungary beneath him, including Transylvania.”

“Then perhaps we should take it from him.” The fire of battle is burning in my chest. I can feel my power stirring, preparing to infuse an army against its enemies. It is very difficult to calm myself once I feel the call of combat.

“Erjy, how can you say such things?” my sister says, obviously stricken by my

declaration.

I spin about to find her downcast and wringing her hands. “What would you have me say, Ágota?”

“You must remember we protect our people. We are not conquerors.”

“Your sister is correct, Erzsébet. We are refugees in this world, not invaders.”

“Perhaps not, but I will not stand for any king coming against you,” I reply.

Affection fills Balázs’s gaze and softens his harsh expression. “Of that, I am certain, Erjy.”

“Can there be peace when the King of Hungary and the Voivode of Transylvania war?” Ágota stomps back and forth before me, a frantic look upon her face. “Is there no way to resolve this without us being forced into battle?”

“I am not bothered by it,” I say to her.

“I know this! Which is why I worry! Every time you wield your powers I fear for you!”

“Ágota, she cannot deny what she is.” Balázs steps in front of his daughter to force her to cease her pacing. “We have had this discussion before.”

“War, death, and blood should not be her inheritance! She should be an Archwitch like me! Connected to the elements. Able to protect, heal, help and—”

“You cannot alter what I am!” I have to interrupt her, for it is tiresome to discuss how at odds I am with her aspirations for me. “Though Balázs had hoped I would be a

grandwitch or Archwitch, he has accepted my legacy, as have I wholeheartedly. Why not you? You are my sister! I love you! I accept everything that you are! I am exhausted by your judgment!”

Pressing her lips together, Ágota nods curtly. Tears sparkle in her eyes when she looks at me. “I do not judge you, Erzsébet. I fear for you.”

“At this moment, the future of the coven, our families, and the people under our protection are in jeopardy. This is our concern. Set aside your differences.” Balázs sounds more like a father than a leader, pleading with his children to behave.

“I can cast a mighty spell to remove us from the map. Make us vanish from their eyes. I will do that!” Ágota lifts her chin with defiance.

Balázs sighs wearily. “Ágota, they know we are here. If you cast such a spell, they will know that witches rule here. We would be in even more danger, for King Charles will dispatch more reinforcements.”

“Then I will wipe us from their memory!”

I snort at her declaration. “Erase the memories of an entire kingdom?”

“If we can hold them off for a few days, I may be able to find a way to amplify my power and—”

“Ágota, cease. We have had this discussion before. The outside world cannot know we are witches. We have already lost so many of our own to fire and water. We came here weakened, at the mercy of humans and supernaturals native to this world. You were born here. You are able to wield this world’s magic. The rest of us struggle.” Balázs lays his big hands on her narrow shoulders. “We must be discreet.”

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“I can be so much more than you allow me to be,” Ágota says in a raw, desperate voice.

“I know, but this is not our world, Ágota. You cannot be all you could have been in the kingdom I ruled beyond the Veil. I am sorry.” Balázs kisses her forehead.

“Enough of this. I need to prepare and so do you, Ágota.”

Ágota grunts with frustration, throws up her hands at me, and storms out of the room.

With a weary sigh, Balázs turns to follow. “Meet me in the great hall when you are ready. We will discuss the battle plans then.”

The door shuts, leaving me alone.

Staring down at the letter in my hand, I realize I will not have the luxury of reading it. The immediacy of the threat is more important. When my maids arrive to help me dress, I tuck it into my chemise to wear close to my heart. I cannot prepare alone for the chainmail tunic I wear in battle is heavy and difficult to put on without assistance. A lightweight cotton slip keeps it from chaffing against my skin. Over the chainmail, I wear a green linen dress with the burning tree embroidered on the bodice. The maids lace me into my attire, help me into my knee-high boots, and slip my belt around my waist. I set my hand on my rose dagger in its sheath and wait patiently for the maids to finish plaiting my hair and pinning it in a bun on my head.

At last, I am prepared, and my blood virtually sings in my veins with anticipation. Leaving my room, I am escorted by two guards down to the great hall. From the

heightened activity inside the castle, it is evident a battle is about to take place. Shouted orders in the courtyard below wafts through open windows and archers rush up the narrow stairwells to the high battlements.

Arriving in the great hall, I immediately sense an uncomfortable prickle in the air. Silence fills the room despite the hectic preparations outside. The coven is obviously awaiting my arrival. Most are assembled in one large congregation facing Balázs and a handful of coven members gathered at his back. Henrietta stands behind Balázs with her husband while Ágota is next to her father. My sister is dressed very similarly to me, though her dress is burgundy, not green. Her expression is tense, her eyes wide, and her hands are pressed to her waist. I notice that the burning tree flags are missing from the walls, and my stomach twists into a fierce knot. Balázs holds out his hand to me and I hurry to his side.

“What is happening?” I demand. “Why are we not we preparing for battle?”

Fülöp steps forward, clearly the spokesman for the majority of the coven gathered in what I can only assume is a protest against Balázs.

“The time has come for us to surrender to the will of the rightful king of Hungary,” Fülöp declares. “It is only a matter of time before the Voivode of Transylvania will bow to King Charles and make peace.”

Balázs remains stoic in the face of such defiance, yet I sense his rage brewing beneath his calm demeanor. “Until that time we stand with Ladislaus Kán. I vowed my loyalty to his family in exchange for this land.”

“That time is past. The Kán will bow or fall as all the others have before the power of King Charles. You are a fool to still stand with the voivode.”

“How dare you speak of the Grandwitch in that manner!” I exclaim.

“Be still, Erzsébet,” Balázs says, not unkindly, but he grips my wrist as though to stay my wrath. “It is not your place, Fülöp, to make such declarations. I rule here.”

“You cannot even control your ward, Balázs. How can you possibly rule? You have become a shadow of the man you once were since their arrival. You even allowed Viorica’s bastard to break your sacred law. Erzsébet murdered Soffia and yet stands at your side empowered by your indulgence.”

Ágota surges forward. “How dare you!”

“Your sister broke our laws, yet she remains unpunished!” Spittle flies from Fülöp’s lips and his eyes bulge with fury. Next to him, his wife places her hand on his arm as if to stay his anger. He shrugs off her attempt and takes a step forward. “Were you so unwise as to believe the coven would tolerate this violation? We petitioned for Balázs as Grandwitch to punish her, but he refused. He is weakened in his resolve because Erzsébet is the mirror image of Viorica!”

“Soffia attempted to kill me!” Ágota shouts. “My sister defended me!”

“She violated our laws—the laws Balázs made us all swear to uphold and then abandoned because of his lust for your sister!” Fülöp retorts.

“How dare you!” I storm toward Fülöp and the other witches. I am only stopped because Ágota anchors my feet to the floor. Forced to stand still, I realize my sister made a wise choice. The witches siding against Balázs have laid a protection spell on the floor, and it abruptly glows red in warning.

“You would use magic against us?” Balázs stares in disbelief at the men and women gathered behind Fülöp. The weight of their betrayal weighs heavily on me, so how much worse must it be for him? These people escaped to this world with him. He has spent years protecting them and now they stand with Fülöp.

“We would use magic to protect ourselves,” Fülöp answers. “I have asked you over and over again to bind the Archwitch and Battlewitch with a spell to the service of the coven. To shackle their headstrong inclinations and punish Erzsébet for killing Soffia. You have refused, unleashing them to destroy us!”

“Binding them would diminish their ability to do their duty,” Balázs responds in an even tone. “You know this, Fülöp.”

“You indulged them and they have weakened us!”

“If you are so enfeebled, why is there a protective circle around you?” Balázs hooks his fingers onto his belt, his hand dangerously close to his sword. “This is evidence that you are not weakened at all by the presence of the Archwitch and Battlewitch.”

Fülöp’s very handsome face is red with the heat of rage, but when he speaks his voice is ice. “I am nearly your equal in magical prowess, Balázs. I can defend this coven and this land against all those who would come against us from within and without. I laid the spell to protect the coven against you and your daughters.”

“I would never harm any of the coven!” Balázs roars.

I am satisfied to see most of the witches shirk.

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“How can we trust you when you allowed Erzsébet to murder your wife and you did nothing? Are the rumors true? Are you bedding her since she resembles your beloved Viorica?”

Ágota throws back her arm, a ball of black energy – a death spell – forming in her palm. Henrietta grabs her wrist, shaking her head.

“He is trying to prove you are dangerous,” she whispers.

With a grunt, Ágota extinguishes it.

Face flushed with fury, Balázs draws himself upright, glaring at the man seeking to usurp him. “Erzsébet is my ward. I love her as a daughter. She is the coven’s Battlewitch and—” Balázs stops himself from defending his decisions, realizing he is falling into the trap Fülöp laid before him. He is only proving Fülöp’s charges that he favors us above his people.

“Your time is done, Balázs. We cannot trust you to defend us, so I have stepped forward to claim that authority. I have signed a treatise with King Charles’ captain. I will serve as his castle warrior and raise his banner above this castle, saving us from a siege. The coven will remain a secret from the outside world and be protected from all harm.”

“Traitor!” on

e of Balázs’s devotees yells.

“No! Balázs is the traitor!”

“You have no right!”

“This is not our way!”

The voices reverberate around me like slung arrows on a battlefield. Every single one strikes deep into Balázs. I feel it acutely. The powerful man is physically and magically strong, but his heart is tender. He loves those in the coven and their rejection of his rule is devastating. Ágota releases me from her spell and I twist around to throw myself into Balázs arms. He embraces me before gently pushing me aside. It is his turn to step forward and make his stand. When he stops within a foot of the protection spell surrounding his former coven, the insults and cries of the witches fade into silence.

The seconds tick by, the tension mounting with each one that passes. Ágota’s fingers flex and twist and a protective circle surrounds us and Balázs. As Battlewitch, I can sense the rising need to unleash violence on my enemies. The rapidly beating hearts of the witches sound like war drums.

“So be it,” Balázs says at last. “I will depart with my daughters and any who wish to follow.”

Fülöp gasps, startled by this abrupt pronouncement. Several witches behind him pat his shoulders and relief sweeps over the faces of his supporters.

“I will not fight to retain my authority here. I will not fight or kill another witch. We are all that remains of our world. We will leave within the hour.”

Balázs does not wait for Fülöp to agree. Striding from the room, Balázs motions for us to follow him from the great hall and we obey. All the witches that stood with us

gather in the hallway.

“Ágota, cast the spell,” her father orders.

Bringing her hands together, Ágota whispers an incantation and a powerful spell ripples through the castle. She weakly slumps against the wall when it finishes, but nods to her father. “It is done.”

“Time is stopped for all within the castle, save us. Pack swiftly and join me here. We leave in a quarter of an hour before the spell finishes,” he instructs the loyal witches.

I take hold of Ágota’s hand, infusing her with a bit of my magic. She gives me a grateful look before we race through the hallways past guards and servants frozen in place. The air shimmers with the power of the spell and I cast a worried look at my sister as she runs at my heels. She looks pale, for she’s exerted a large portion of her power, yet she gives me an encouraging smile.

“How did you know you would need this spell?”

“Father had me lay the sigils for the spell long, long ago. It was agreed I would activate it should this day come.”

“So he knew,” I say, not certain if I am relieved by this revelation.

“He is much cleverer than you think, Erzsébet. Now collect your things.”

In my room, I pack a bag with two of my favorite dresses, the letters from Albrecht, and the book of spells I have been writing since my magic manifested. I hoist it over my shoulder and glance over my room one last time. I feel no sorrow at leaving this place as I did the cottage in the wood where I had lived so happily with my mother. I would rather lose my home than the man who treats me as his daughter.

When I return to the hall, Ágota is waiting with our mother's magus bag. She opens it for me so I may drop my bag inside and she slings it over her shoulder.

"We need to learn how to make more of those," I say.

"Trust me, I am trying to discover the spell."

We sprint through the halls and down the narrow stairwells to the hallway where the others are already waiting. Balázs's army of cats is gathered at their feet. The felines are usually scattered about the castle sunbathing, but they are all in attendance with their ears slightly slanted back from their faces. They only favor Balázs. For years I have tried to pet them to no avail. When he approaches, their ears straighten and they lean forward to watch him.

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“We will depart on the ley line bridge, then journey toward the Carpathian Mountains,” he says.

“What is in the Carpathian Mountains?” Henrietta dares to ask.

“My stash of resources,” he answers with a wry smile. “Do you think I would gather them all in one place?”

Chuckles of relief follow this comment.

“I have a place prepared for us. Do not fear.” Balázs sets his arm around Ágota and my shoulders. “Let us depart this place.”

The portal to the ley line bridge bursts to life at his beckoning and our strange group of witches and cats stroll along the magical path. I gaze down at the castle and town that were our home these last years. Already the banner of King Charles flies above the gates. Scowling, I lift my eyes to regard the hundreds of tents that shelter our enemies filling the valley.

Several cats brush past my ankles urging me forward. Our time here is ticking away for the spell is almost at an end. There is a mad scramble to reach the end of the bridge before the others can follow. Balázs has sworn to not hurt the coven, but none of us trust Fülöp after his rebellion. When we reach the mountainside, I feel the spell snap and time return to its normal course. Twisting about, I gaze down the long, iridescent bridge waiting to see if we will be pursued.

“Are they coming?” someone asks worriedly.

After the last cat skitters off the bridge to join us, Ágota takes a sharp step forward.

“Let them try,” she snarls, thrusting out both hands.

The ley line bridge explodes, balls of colorful magic flooding the air. Ágota spins about, pulling the magic to her. The orbs of shimmering magic rain down upon her, singing like chimes in wind.

“Give it to me!” I shout at her.

Ágota’s fingers flex and twitch and the rainbow miasma floods into her. Her hair stands on end as she laughs with joy. I step toward her and she rests her hand on my shoulder. I am instantly flooded with magic, but it turns red and black in my veins before flooding out into the valley below.

My magic fills every soldier of King Charles’ army, overwhelming them with the need to kill. I permeate their hearts with rage and blind their eyes to the truth. I flood them with visions of their enemies descending on them and spur them to battle. In seconds, the soldiers of King Charles are hacking away at each other, steel clashing with steel, blood spilling onto the soil. They will slaughter each other and none shall remain alive.

“Let Fülöp explain to King Charles what happened to his army,” I say, victory throbbing in my soul.

“Our time here is done,” Balázs says with satisfaction. “Now we depart.”

Spinning about, I join the others on our trek toward the mountains. The sounds of battle fill my ears and magic trembles in the air. I smirk at the thought of Fülöp trying to rule now. The ley line bridge was a source of much of the coven’s magic.

“Do you think we are as wicked as Fülöp said?” Ágota asks me.

“Oh, yes,” I reply.

We both giggle as she takes my hand.

Neither one of us looks back toward the castle. We lost our home before and we know we shall find another. This time we are not alone for Balázs and the loyalist of the coven are with us.

Our future lies elsewhere.

Chapter 17

Time is slipping past me as rapidly as a mountain stream. My memories are a blur of sound, colors, and briefly glimpsed faces of those I love. I struggle to grasp onto the images rushing through my mind, but fail in my endeavor. I am a slave to this curse, my free will stolen by its power. I can only relive that which it desires for me to remember.

I am trapped between existing in the present and the past and frustrated by my inability to awaken. Try as I may, I am unable to rouse myself and escape the spell. Worse yet, I cannot control which memories I revisit, which confirms that the curse is seeking out specific events.

But for what purpose?

I am assailed by questions.

Does Lucifer still stand at my side? Did he truly exclaim that this curse is witch magic? If it is witch magic, who cast it? Is this a remnant of Ágota’s power? Or did

another witch cast it in hopes of finding me? Has Balázs finally forgiven me?

I am torn from my ruminations by a familiar tug drawing me through the miasma of memories to one point in my long life. The world solidifies around me into a dark, icy evening. I shiver beneath my thick fur cloak and my boots sink deep into drifts of snow as I trudge upward through the tree line toward the craggy summits of the Carpathian Mountains. The icy wind stings my cheeks and flutters my hair while snow flecks my clothing.

Balázs and Ágota stroll before me, surrounded by the cats. The familiars leave small paw prints in the snow that I find charming. In the light cast by sizzling torches held by the faithful witches of the coven, we trudge along the narrow path that winds through the trees.

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We have been traveling for weeks, avoiding enemy patrols, the fey, and other supernatural creatures. We are refugees now that our home has been stolen by Fülöp and his followers. Word of his treachery has traveled swiftly through both realms. Balázs no longer wears his older facade and the other witches have dropped their glamour spells, too. This allows us to pass through mortal towns unrecognized, but the supernatural beings have ways of determining our true natures. We have been hunted by vampires, the fey, and werewolves. They thought us weak because Balázs was deposed, but we won each battle. The cats were especially ferocious against the werewolves, growing to enormous size to battle them. I was shocked by this revelation. Their supernatural abilities far exceeded anything I ever anticipated. It was a reminder that I still understand so little of the world of the witches.

Snow twirls about on the wind, howling through the trees. We are closer to the summit and soon will leave the forest behind us. I had assumed we would set camp for the night, but Balázs has continued our trek toward the high peaks. As we ascend, I have come to understand why. This is a place of deep magic. It thrums in my bones and tingles through my veins. Our remote surroundings appear mundane, but I wonder if there is a glamour hiding the truth. I trudge after my sister, the cats scampering excitedly around us, weaving in and o

ut of the witches' legs.

My breath mists and clings to my skin. I have never been so cold in my life. We wade through a thick, icy fog that creeps along through the trees and only the tips of the cat tails are visible above the haze. My teeth chatter and I wish Ágota would cast a spell to warm the air. My sister walks beside her father, her head cocked in his direction. It is evident that they are in deep conversation, so I will not interrupt. The closer our

journey takes us to Balázs's secret stash, the more the two have whispered together. The coven does not seem concerned by their behavior, but jealousy settles into my heart. I am not an Archwitch, so my magic is not needed unless we are under attack, but I yearn to be included in whatever plan they are concocting. Since we left our home, Balázs has invited Ágota into all his decisions. A new hierarchy is forming, one I resent not having a greater voice in.

Ágota whips about to face me, her eyes blazing in the light of the fire. "We are close now. Extinguish the torches."

The witches obey without hesitation. My eyes gradually adapt to the gloom until I comprehend why Ágota ordered the fires smothered. A subtle glow beneath the snow forms a path that leads out of the forest and up to the summit.

With a twitch of her fingers, Ágota brightens the witch path and smiles. "Better. Follow us."

As we approach, the sound of stone grinding against stone reverberates around us as steps slide outward from the steep face of the mountain to form a staircase. Balázs climbs the new steps with Ágota in his wake. I am awed by her appearance as her long black skirts and cloak flutter around her like dark wings. The magic in this place imbues her with an unearthly appearance as her skin glows and her eyes gleam bright green. She beckons me with fingers that appear even longer than usual and I hurry to obey. I am relieved to find the steps free of ice and snow. My feet are nearly frozen, but thaw as I climb. The air grows warmer and is scented with the fragrance of roses.

"It feels of home," someone whispers behind me.

"I had forgotten," Henrietta replies. "It has been so long and I was just a child."

Magic vibrates through the air, swelling as we ascend. The witches behind me are

utterly silent and the cats do not meow as they leap from step to step. Our path to the summit appears perilous. The gap between the stone steps reveals the valley below, and I calm my fears by reminding myself that Ágota can fly. I reach a landing that curves around the face of the summit and rush along the glowing path. A few of the cats pause to make certain the rest of the coven is following. They are much more alert here than they ever were at the castle where they mostly slept in spots of sunlight in the great hall.

Another stairway made of rock leads upward through a thick haze of clouds. I set my hand on the stone face and climb. I can barely see the dark shapes of my sister and Balázs through the icy mist and the glow of the path is my only guide. Despite my resolution not to be cowed by the great height, I slow my pace. One of the black cats takes the step ahead of me, then waits for me to arrive. Seeing my hesitation, it swishes its tail and lets out a small meow, encouraging me forward. Its green eyes glint at me in the dark and I am grateful for its kindness.

I climb upward into the clouds, the pale blue witch magic illuminating the stairs while the cats' green eyes burn like small fires as it guides me. At last, I reach an archway carved into the mountain and step onto what appears to be a cobblestone road that winds through ruins embedded along the peak. The air is much warmer here. Trees, grass and flowering bushes are nestled into the ruins and line the pathway. I follow the black cat past broken walls, collapsing arches, and shattered masonry. A stream burbles beneath an intact footbridge and winds through the ruins to a small pond.

Henrietta joins me on the rickety old bridge. A sorrowful sigh escapes her lips.

“What is all this?” I whisper.

“This is where we arrived from our world. These are bits and pieces we brought with us,” she answers.

“The magic in the air...”

“It is from our world. Embedded in the surroundings. Before we ventured out into the world, we stayed here. I sometimes wished we had never left. Then my parents would not have been killed.”

“Come now!” Ágota calls out, her voice echoing around me.

At the very top of the mountain stands the remains of a rotunda where Ágota lingers beneath the arched entrance. The black cat brushes against my ankles, its tail wrapping around my leg briefly, urging me onward. I follow the familiar with Henrietta close at my heels. The cats skitter past Ágota and disappear into the grand structure. It is mostly intact with only a few holes in the high-domed ceiling.

Inside, the air is warmer still. The magical illumination that has guided us here brightens considerably and takes on the yellowish tinge of the torchlight. Thirteen pillars form a circle in the center of the rotunda, rising high over my head. The tops of the marble columns are carved to form thick branches that hold up the ceiling. The walls are covered in murals that have faded over time, yet hold some vibrancy of color. While I stare at one image of the witches dancing in a glade, it begins to move, the witches spinning about while slowly floating upward.

Henrietta takes my arm, urging me toward the center of the rotunda where Balázs stands with Ágota. I tear my eyes away from the enrapturing painting and follow. The coven encircles the father and daughter in the shadows of the tall pillars. On the wall behind Balázs is his banner of the burning tree. Beneath my feet, the marble portrays a night sky, but two moons, not one, glow in the firmament.

“Since we arrived in this world, we have struggled to find our way,” Balázs begins. “We dwelled here for a time, tapping into what was left of the magic of our homeland. When it began to wane, we had to leave this sacred place to preserve what

remained of the magic, and learn how to wield the magic of this world.”

I sense Balázs is carefully constructing an argument to defend a revelation. The dip of his head, his gaze riveted to the floor, and his rounded shoulders speak of grief and guilt. I shift my gaze to my sister to see her watching me. I give her a questioning look and she responds with a gentle smile.

“What I have to confess is that the magic never truly waned here. It is embedded into the very fabric of these pieces of our world that were transported with us in the final exodus. Viorica and I made the decision to weave a spell that would block the coven from using the magic.”

The witches regard Balázs with surprise, a few visibly shaken by this revelation.

“Why?” Henrietta gasps. “Why would you do such a terrible thing?”

“The primary reason was to force us from this safe haven. Otherwise, we would have hidden here and never ventured into the world.”

“Where we met death at the hands of the mortals,” a male witch retorts.

“Viorica, Soffia, and I all agreed that we had to create real lives and not just hide away in our ruins. We did not realize how difficult it would be to access the magic of this world or how vulnerable we would be. Furthermore, we did not anticipate children would be a rare gift among our people.” Balázs finally lifts his head to gaze at his coven. “We locked away the magic as a safeguard for our future. Should we have failed in assimilating among the mortals, we planned to return to harness the power so we could begin again.”

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“Are we to live here now?” I ask with some distaste. Though I wish to live on a grand estate, this one appears beyond repair. “It is a ruin.”

“No, no, dearest Erjy. We came here because Viorica created a spell that only an Archwitch can use and left it here where it would be safe.” Balázs settles his gaze on Ágota. “Only Ágota can use the spell and that is why we have traveled here.”

“What sort of spell?” one of the male witches named Radu asks.

“One of the most powerful ever concocted. It was only used once before when the castle we were so rudely ousted from was created by Viorica.”

“That does not seem right,” one of the female witches says. “I remember the castle was gra

nted to you by a voivode for your loyalty long ago.”

The murmurs of agreement bring a sorrowful smile to Balázs’s face.

“You do not remember for erasure of your memory was a part of the spell. Viorica spelled the castle out of the very air, but everyone—including the coven—believed it had stood there for centuries. She wove the castle and its history into every aspect of this world so none would question its appearance.”

I am astonished by this announcement. I had seen my mother create our cottages out of earth and tree roots, but never imagined the full breadth of her power.

Balázs wisely allows the witches a moment to accept this truth. They whisper among themselves, stunned at the revelation.

“I am confused, for the witches were separated after we left. We did not live in the castle. My parents died. I was orphaned,” Henrietta says. “Why did you not create a safe haven immediately after departing here?”

“What you say is true.” Balázs nods, a sorrowful look upon his face. “At first, we thought it best if we spread out among the mortals so we could live normal lives. Unfortunately, some of our kind did not adapt well and were exposed. The mortals eventually learned how we could be killed. After a time, word reached Soffia and me that the witches were in danger. We called upon Viorica and she agreed to summon forth the castle. We came here and Viorica cast the spell. The castle was to be a safe haven for our people. And it was for a time.”

“And now you wish to summon forth another safe haven for us?” Henrietta asks. “Is that why we are here?”

“Yes, and the new one will reside alongside the Danube near Buda. It will be a great estate with one grand house, many cottages, and a vineyard.”

“A vineyard? Why make a vineyard? Why not replicate the castle and town again?” I ask.

Ágota answers this time. “I will not be creating the new haven out of thin air. Both the castle and estate originate in the Witch World. Spells were cast before the last exodus to preserve and hide them from our enemies, the destroyers. The Archwitches died before they could draw them through the Veil. My mother was able to pull the castle through with the help of Balázs and Soffia, but it left her bedridden for nearly a decade. If I am to bring forth the estate, I will need your assistance or I will endure a similar convalescence. I can do this without you, but I will fare better if you help

me.”

“There is more to this,” Radu mutters.

“Yes. To bring forth the estate, we will drain the last of the magic stored in these relics from our world,” Balázs replies.

Silence greets this proclamation.

“Will the new estate be imbued with magic like these ruins?” I sense the answer will not be to my liking.

“In the Witch World, all magic was drained from the estate so it would not be detected by our enemies,” Ágota explains. “We will lose the last of the Witch World magic.”

“Other than what is in your veins,” Henrietta adds gloomily.

Ágota bows her head solemnly. “Yes.”

Radu sweeps his silver hair back from his high brow and lifts his eyes skyward. “Here I feel strong. Like my true self. Not weakened and disconnected from magic.”

People bob their heads in agreement and utter similar sentiments.

“What if we rebuild the ruins? Make our lives here?” Henrietta asks.

Other witches chime in. The swelling raucous stirs up the cats, who yowl with disapproval.

Staring through the archway into the icy night, I think of Albrecht and my dreams of

being his wife that I will lose if I stay here. I understand why it would appeal to the witches to stay on top of this mountain, hidden from a world that has not been kind to them. But the world is not particularly kind to anyone. I have witnessed that truth with my own eyes.

“If we stay here, we doom ourselves,” I say loudly.

“How so?” Henrietta asks.

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“This place is not a safe haven. It is a tomb,” I answer. “It is a memory of what was and will never be again. Help my sister bring forth a true haven. A place in the mortal world where we can be safe and live true lives.”

“We will lose this magic.” Radu draws his hand through the air, sparks trailing from his fingertips.

“Maybe this old magic is what is holding you back from embracing the magic of this world,” I reply.

“She has a valid point. As long as this well of magic exists, our natural instinct will be to draw from it even though the distance makes it difficult to manifest. Remove it and perhaps we will finally learn to fully draw from the well of this world,” Balázs says, giving me an approving smile.

“If we rebuild the ruins and stay here, then we will be safe. My parents left and I lost them,” Henrietta says, her face flushing nearly as red as her hair. “We are safe here!”

“Until the coven drains the magic,” Ágota declares in a grim voice. “It will happen eventually. Maybe it will take centuries, but one day it will be gone and force us to reenter the world. When we do, we will be paupers and weak.”

“Will you do this against our wishes?” another witch asks.

Balázs hesitates, then shakes his head. “No. I will not. But I will leave with my daughters. Their future lies elsewhere. Speak among yourselves and choose. If we are to cast the spell, it should be done at dawn, when the sun brings a new day and new

beginnings.”

Visibly agitated by the complaints issued by the rising voices, Ágota walks out of the circle. The coven breaks apart, clustering in groups to discuss the options presented to them. Balázs is immediately besieged and he waves me away when he sees my concerned look, so I hurry after my sister.

Ágota slips through a narrow doorway into an overgrown garden frosted with snow and ice. I sense that the magic in the ruins is rousing to greet us as the air warms. My sister’s tall lean form strides to another broken building and steps through a shattered door into the dark interior. Water drips from the icy trees and the mist dissipates in the wake of her passage. Entering the building, I find her seated on a wood bench, staring at a fire she must have conjured in the fireplace.

“I knew you would follow,” she says, her face pinched with apprehension.

Taking a seat beside her, I nestle into her side and rest my head on her shoulder. “I will always follow you.”

With a wry smile, she drapes her arm across my shoulders and bends her head to mine. “Which may not always be wise.”

“I am smarter than the others. I see the truth of the matter.”

“Maybe our mother was wise to keep us far from the other witches. They are such spoiled children with narrow minds,” Ágota grouches.

“They hate how weak they became after the exodus.”

“Yes, but they can still wield magic when united as a coven. They are not like humans, short-lived and powerless in the face of men with weapons and titles. They

are not at the mercy of other supernatural creatures as long as they are united. Together, they can still do great magic.”

“But apart they are burned at the stake or drowned,” I remind her.

Ágota grunts. “Only if they are foolish and reveal themselves. Our mother was careful.”

“Our mother died.” The resentment in my voice draws a sharp look from Ágota. I would do anything to have my mother alive and with us. I often close my eyes and daydream of her at my side. If only she had lived and been reunited with Balázs, we would be a happy family now that Soffia is gone. “Maybe she should have returned with us to Balázs’s castle for protection against the devil.”

“Being with the coven would not have saved her. We both know that. Soffia would have waged war against her.”

“Mother could have obliterated her with a snap of her fingers. Our mother was so much more powerful than I ever dreamed!” I crane my head to gaze through the shattered roof. “Why did she not come here to be safe?”

Ágota bends over to pluck a chunk of masonry from the floor. At her touch, it glows with a pale pinkish light. “Perhaps because of this. Our mother successfully tamed the magic of this world. Being among the rubble of the Witch World, I can feel the lure of the old magic stored in the very walls of this place. It is potent and wild, longing to be used again. It almost feels alive.”

“You are scared.” I can see it in the tightness about her mouth and the set of her jaw.

“The magic I use is nothing like the magic trapped here. I can wield it, but it will be dangerous.” Ágota stares at the chunk of stone in her hand, then opens the bag slung

over her shoulder to store it inside.

“If it is so dangerous, why are you keeping a piece of it?”

Ágota grins. “I like danger. Besides, it will not hurt to save a bit of the Witch World magic. I may need it one day.”

“For what?”

My sister shrugs one shoulder before slumping down on the bench again.
“Something.”

“What are you not telling me?” I frown at my sister.

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Exhaling, Ágota says nothing for several long and tense moments. At last, she says, “If the coven agrees to this spell but do not assist me, I could be weaker than a mortal afterward. Mother was very ill after she summoned the castle, though it may have worked to her advantage in the end. I suspect it was the magic of this world that restored her and that is why she could wield it so effectively.”

“I suppose that makes sense. You need not worry. I will help you cast the spell. So will Father. Do you really need the rest of the coven? We three are so powerful.”

“Yes, I do. The more siphons, the better, for I might drain too much magic from those assisting me, and even kill them.”

I frown at this revelation. “That was not divulged during the earlier discussion.”

“No, but they are not fools even if they act like they are sometimes. They will understand the risks.”

“Maybe we should stay here.”

The witches have gone through so much. I dread the thought of them losing more, perhaps even their lives. Henrietta’s argument haunts me. She lost so much in the aftermath of the exodus.

“If they choose to stay here, I will not argue with them. It is their right. But your future is in the world out there. A noblewoman in a castle. Loved and adored. I have seen it.”

“And your future?”

Ágota’s scowl deepens. “I cannot see it.”

“Can Father?”

She s

hakes her head. “I asked. He cannot either. He says it may be because I am an Archwitch. There are too many possible outcomes to all I do to see a clear future.”

“Do you see all the possible outcomes for me?”

Ágota turns her head to regard me. The seriousness of her expression scares me a little. “I do.”

“And?”

“Most are lovely. Beautiful. Wonderful. All that you deserve.”

“But?”

“There are darker paths.”

“Assuredly, you will guide me from them.”

“I will try. But it is difficult to determine exactly why those paths take shape. What event sets them in motion?” She kisses my brow and wraps her arms about me.

“Sweet little Erjy, rest assured that I shall always fight to keep you from harm.”

“I am not so sweet,” I say with a teasing smile. “I am a battlewitch, remember?”

“Let me live with the illusion that you are innocent and sweet,” she mumbles.

I remain silent for her sake, closing my eyes and snuggling into her. I adore my older sister and all her complexities. In her embrace, I am loved and comforted.

Chapter 18

We are awakened by the familiars. They paw at our noses, rousing us from our deep slumber. The sky outside is lavender and gray, a new day preparing to be born. The black cat nips my fingers, and when I sit up, it rushes to the doorway. The other cats hurry after the black one, clearly expecting us to follow.

“The choice has been made,” Ágota says. “Shall we see what has been decided?”

I nod sleepily. “Let us hope they made the right decision.”

Ágota takes my hand and guides me to the rotunda. The cats dart about us, meowing for us to hurry. When we arrive, the coven is waiting for us in a circle beneath the tall pillars.

Balázs draws in a deep breath before saying, “They have agreed to cast the spell, Ágota.”

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Clasping her hands together, she nods. “Very well.”

The tension in the room escalates at the pronouncement. Ágota enters the circle and moves to the center. With the sun on the horizon, there is no time to waste. I observe the many strained and frightened faces of the witches as I take my place among them. The cats, for the first time in my memory, join the circle, standing between the witches.

The ritual begins.

“Join together,” Ágota orders.

Crossing my arms, I join hands with Balázs and Henrietta, who are standing beside me. I feel the cats on either side rest their paws on my ankles.

“Close the circle.”

The air ripples and a chill flows down my spine. Then the circle closes, protecting us from outside forces.

“Summon the power.”

I lift my arms above my head along with the other witches, my fingers spread wide. Beside me, the cats rise onto their haunches, raising their paws. I call out to the magic slumbering in the broken shell of the buildings from the Witch World. My surroundings dissolve into a miasma of dazzling lights that spin around us in a fierce whirlwind. The ground vibrates beneath my feet as the hum of the magic swells. A

gale of warm air scented with the fragrance of flowers, spice, sea water, and thunderstorms lifts us upward. I am flooded with effervescent power, which sings in my soul and shatters all my fears. Instinctively, I recognize this magic is my birthright and that it will bend to my will. I have never felt magic like this and laugh with delight.

As the magic flows through the coven, uniting us, Ágota's voice commands, "Funnel it to me!"

The temptation to defy the Archwitch ripples through me. Bound to the coven, I sense their reluctance to obey. To give up such potent power is loathsome to consider. Suspended in the air, surrounded by the visible manifestation of the magic of the long-lost Witch World, I am completely enraptured by the possibilities of what I can do with such power.

Ágota does not wait for us to come to our senses. She pulls the magic through us and into her. My first instinct is to fight against such a violation, but relent when I see my sister rising above us, arms outstretched. Eyes closed, she welcomes the torrent of magic flooding into her. Golden orbs of light whirl about her as she unlocks and releases the spell my mother cast so long ago.

Ágota brandishes magic like a rapier and slices through the fabric between the worlds, rending a fissure the size of a doorway in the air before her. Light pours through the tear, illuminating the ghastly terrain beyond. Beneath a purple sky stained black on the horizon, the ground is coarse red dirt barren of foliage or animals. This is the world my mother fled and tears well in my eyes. It is evident that the witches had no other choice than to flee. Their enemies drained the world of magic and left it a depleted husk.

A grand estate sits among a ruined, desolate land, complete with a grand house, many outbuildings, lush vineyards, trees, and green fields. A dark aura encapsulates it and

everything within the spell is frozen in time, unmoving so as not to be detected by the destroyers.

Bobbing in the air before the misshapen portal, Ágota's fingers twist at her sides as she murmurs beneath her breath. Tendrils of the magic she is controlling plunge into the other world and latch onto the shimmering darkness protecting the estate. Golden light flows over the dark circle, awakening the spell. The air trembles around us and the orbs of golden light spinning around my sister grow brighter. Any reluctance to obey Ágota has dissolved in the display of her prowess. Awe is stamped on the faces of the coven as they watch Ágota wrench the estate from the earth and pull it toward the portal. Roots dangle from beneath the wide expanse of ground like tendrils of a great beast.

"How can she bring it through?" I cry out. "The doorway is not large enough!"

"It merely needs to touch the portal," Balázs answers. "And it will be merged with this world."

The dark clouds rolling across the purple sky flash with red fire and a terrifying howl erupts from the other world.

"Hurry, Ágota, the destroyers are coming!" Balázs calls out. "They sense the magic!"

Terror ripples through the coven, disrupting the magic flowing to Ágota. The beings that destroyed the Witch World have sensed the awakened magic and are descending on the portal. My mother described them as twisted, fearsome creatures with faces so horrific witches were known to die from fright.

"Do not falter!" Balázs commands the coven. "Do not be afraid! We will close the portal if our enemies come near!"

Now I wholly fathom why Ágota was afraid to cast the spell. It is far more perilous than I had ever dreamed. Regret for my earlier argument that she should call forth the estate assails me and forces me to consider that I was foolhardy. The horrific wails accompanying the fiery bursts illuminating the sky of the dead world turns my blood to ice. Tall pillars of flame appear on the horizon, spitting balls of fire across the barren earth.

The estate continues toward the portal. Ágota's scowl and quivering fingers reveal the great strain the spell is taking on her, yet she persists. Sweat drips from her chin and her eyes bloom with blood. My desire to protect her is nearly overwhelming, but I cannot break the circle.

The unholy sounds issuing from the other world reverberate through my bones. The coven is bound together by the magic flowing through us into Ágota and it is impossible not to sense the fear pulsing through the witches. The orbs of fire assail the estate floating toward the portal, slamming into the protection spell and exploding into huge arcs of lava.

The destroyers of the Witch World consumed all the magic by devouring the ley lines, sucking dry every living creature, and consuming all the imbued relics. They must be starved in the aftermath of the witches' escape. The entire horizon is burning as the destroyers swarm toward the portal. Should they reach the estate, they will consume it. Should they reach the portal, they will attempt to come through and devour us.

Terror spikes in my soul, but it does not weaken me. I am a battlewitch. I was created for conflict. Instead of wavering, my resolve gives me strength. It is my magic

that strengthens those in battle and grants them the ability to wield their weapons with supernatural prowess.

It is time for me to act!

In one great, mighty wave, I wrench the magic from the ruins around me and thrust it into Ágota. I am instantly blinded by the dazzling luminescent manifestation of power. A second later, I tumble from the air. The sound of the witches impacting with the ground is accompanied by the startled meows of the familiars. I blink furiously, desperate to see what has happened. My vision clears, gradually leaving strange afterimages in my sight. All around me are the fallen bodies of the coven. The witches moan while sluggishly stirring. The cats sit among us, grooming themselves, seemingly unbothered by this turn of events.

“Where are we?” Henrietta calls out.

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Pushing myself upright, I sit on the flagstone courtyard where we have landed and survey my surroundings. Banners with the flaming tree flutter in the morning breeze over the battlements. The sky is grows steadily brighter, an assuring sign that we are not in the Witch World. We are safe for Ágota has brought the estate into reality.

The black cat appears on my lap and rubs its nose against mine. I detect its approval from the loud purr and kneading paws.

“We are home,” Balázs grunts, climbing to his feet.

The black cat leaps off my lap and joins the other familiars that rush to rub against Balázs’s legs.

“She did brought forth the estate,” someone whispers in awe.

As the witches rouse themselves, I seek out Ágota among them. I observe her sprawled face-down in the center of the broken protection circle. Worry for her wellbeing chokes me as I crawl toward her. Did I fail her? Has she been drained of her power? Will it take her a decade to recover like our mother after she brought the castle through?

“Ágota! Ágota!” I call out.

The familiars scamper past me and climb over her prone body, meowing loudly. With a grunt, she rolls onto her back and blinks, scattering the furry creatures.

“Ágota! Are you well?” I exclaim, reaching her.

With a grin, she stares at the castle towers. “I did it!”

“Is it truly done?”

“This place is woven into the fabric of this world. This is our home now,” she answers. Her eyes flick toward me. Veins in her eyes have broken, turning them red. I realize then how pale she appears and thinner still. She has paid a high price.

“And the portal?”

“Closed. On their hideous faces. They almost breached it,” Ágota answers, exhaustion in her gaze. “You gave me the strength to finish the task.”

Balázs descends on us, falls to his knees, and sweeps us into his embrace. “My beautiful daughters have brought us to a new home!”

The familiars rub against us, purring loudly with approval.

“Ágota did well,” I say with pride.

“I could not have done it without you,” my sister says, her fingers gently caressing my cheek. “You are the one who pulled the magic from the ruins and fed it to me just in time. Without you, I would have failed.”

Relieved, delighted, but weakened by our ritual, the witches slowly stand around us. The familiars scamper after Balázs as he hurries to check on each witch. I remain with Ágota, my arms around her as we watch the dawning of a new day. We shed our cloaks, for the air is warm. Ágota opens her bag to store them, but hesitates. Reaching inside, she draws the stone she took from the ruins to the edge of the bag so it will remain hidden from the others.

“Is it drained, too?” I ask in a whisper.

She shakes her head. “The bag protected it. This is the last bit of magic from our home.” Hastily, she shoves it inside before storing away the cloaks.

“What will you do with it?”

A small frown forms on her forehead as her gaze grows secretive.

“Ágota? Why do you look so pensive?”

“There are many paths before you. This bit of magic will make certain that I can find you,” she answers.

“Find me? Why would we be parted? I do not understand.”

“You do not have to as long as I am watching over you,” Ágota replies with a wink. She stands and pulls me to my feet. “Now, shall we explore our new home?”

Before I can answer, I open my eyes to darkness.

I have returned to the mausoleum.

The terrible and familiar pain of my captivity returns, and my hand grips the stake.

Witch magic.

Those were the words Lucifer spoke.

Hope fills me anew.

Perhaps Ágota saw this as one of my possible fates and has set in motion the spells that will free me. She may be lost to me, but her magic appears to live on. Perhaps I will be free again!

“Now that you are awake,” Lucifer whispers in my ear “we should talk.”

Chapter 19

Gritting my teeth against the pain ripping through my torso, I ball my hands into tight fists. I am so weakened by the loss of blood, my vampire sight cannot pierce the gloom. Since the torches are extinguished, there is absolute darkness.

Lucifer leans closer to me, his sulfurous breath hot on my cheek. “Come now, Erzsébet. Do not keep secrets from me. I am, after all, your only hope of salvation.”

I have no patience to deal with the monster who murdered my mother. I place my hand on his face and thrust him away. “Leave me!”

Raucous laughter reverberates through the small mausoleum. The devil is not so easily dissuaded, as I well know, and I sense him stalking about the bier. I ignore his presence, focusing instead on my latest vision. It lingers in my mind’s eye full of

hidden importance. I had long forgotten the stone imbued with Witch World magic that my sister had hidden from the coven and that she'd vowed to use it to my benefit. Lost to the mists of time, I wonder what significance that memory holds and if the relic still exists.

Lucifer's too-warm hands settle against the sides of my face, his fingers curving along my cheeks. His eyes burn like pale blue fires through the dark as he peers at me. "Speak to me, fairest Erzsébet. Tell me your secrets." Though his voice is gentle, a threat dwells in the deeper tones.

"Leave me to my torments and be gone. I have nothing to say to you, devil."

I am tired, emotionally spent, and do not wish to parry with his duplicitous tongue. I wish to be alone in my misery. My remembrances of a time long past are a heavy burden on my dark soul. Much has been forgotten over my supernaturally extended lifetime. I long for the spell to return so I can once more see beloved faces and unlock the mysteries of my past.

The devil's fingertips burn against my flesh and his eyes grow brighter in the absolute darkness. "But we must talk. What was that delicious witch magic I tasted earlier?"

"I do not know of which you speak."

"Where did your spirit abscond to? Your body was but an empty shell awaiting its return."

"I was asleep, you fool!"

Lucifer's arrogance knows no limits if he truly believes I will be drawn in by his machinations. Though he can be a charming and devious fellow, he cannot undo the truth that he murdered my mother and played a significant role in Ágota's fate.

“You were not asleep. Do not lie to me, Erzsébet. A spark of witch magic absconded with you and I will know who cast that spell. I have not felt such power since before your sister—”

“Do not speak of Ágota!” I attempt to wrench my head from his grip, but his hands are as rigid and unyielding as stone.

His fingers dig into my cheeks and he hisses, “We. Must. Talk.”

I scrabble at his hands, kick my feet, and thrash about, worsening my impalement wound. “I refuse. We are not friends. We are enemies. I shall never submit to your desires!”

The darkness of the mausoleum becomes absolute as his eyes vanish from my line of sight and he releases his hold on me. The raw fury of his anger fills the mausoleum with an eerie reddish hue as I tense in preparation for whatever horrors he will unleash on me.

I let out a startled cry when a hole opens beneath me. My body slips off the iron stake with a revolting suckling noise as I fall, my fingers scrabbling at the granite of the bier desperate to find purchase. The stone floor and the packed earth beneath it open to swallow me. I lash out at the dirt, stones, and roots around me, attempting to still my descent. My fingers wrap around a thick root stopping my plunge so I sway over a deep black pit. The only light comes from the red fires burning far below my dangling bare feet.

“I will not be fooled by your tricks, Lucifer!”

My voice echoes endlessly, which I am certain is yet another illusion. Yet, I cannot help but feel a twinge of fear. Do I truly know the full extent of Lucifer’s powers? Vlad, his most successful student of the dark arts, has great power. How many times

has he moved my mausoleum to hide me from the eyes of the world? Could Lucifer use the same magical ability to transport objects over some distance to suspend me above the fires of hell?

The rough texture of the root digs into my palm when I tighten my grip. Every sensation resembles reality, yet I have experienced vivid illusions in the past. If I were to release my hold, would I fall into flame and be consumed or break the illusion completely?

“Tell me what you know, Erzsébet,” Lucifer hisses out of the darkness.

“And what do I receive in exchange?” I dig the tips of my nails into the stem and attempt to pull myself upward. I am weakened from not feeding in many nights and my endeavor is doomed. I swing in the humid blackness listening to the creak of the root.

“I will set you free.”

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“Truly free? Or an illusion of freedom?” My tone is mocking, though fear tries to strangle the words before I can utter them.

“All freedom is an illusion.”

The fire raging belo

w is freedom. Witches and vampires both meet their final deaths in flames. If this is not a trick, I will burn and die. I will escape my prison and discover what lies beyond the Veil. I do not believe in a hell where the devil lives for I know he walks the earth. Perhaps there is nothing but peaceful sleep. Or maybe my mother and Ágota await me. I cannot be certain of what lies beyond death, but I am convinced of one simple thing.

This is not real.

I release the root and fall.

Lucifer’s sharp intake of breath is followed by me tumbling onto a marble floor in a heap of silken skirts. Though this is an illusion as well, it is a relief to my fatigued body to be on solid ground. While Lucifer watches from his perch on a gilded chair in the corner of a very luxurious parlor, I struggle to stand on weary, emaciated legs. The pain of the stake returns and I press my hand over the jagged wound while I regard Lucifer with contempt.

“Games and more games. Do you ever tire of this?”

“This is not a game. I prefer this environment to your disgusting mausoleum. If we must be cordial during our discussion, I would rather be comfortable.” Crossing his legs, he regards me with a smirk on his lips.

The small parlor is far too warm with a raging fire in a marble fireplace and heavy velvet curtains over the tall windows. The oil paintings and statues are all of Lucifer in garb from various centuries.

“None has vanity equal to you,” I remark.

“I am a very beautiful being. I have every right to my vanity, do you not agree?” Tapping the armrest of his chair, he points me to the matching one opposite of him. “Sit and talk to me.”

“There is nothing to say.”

“Amuse me. Sit.”

Blood seeps through the fingers pressed over my wounded torso. I stagger toward the chair, struggling to keep upright. He has not granted me the illusion of health for a purpose. It is his desire that I feel weak, afraid, and in awe in the revelation of his power. I sit at the edge of the chair so I may shift my frozen feet toward the warmth of the fire. Perhaps everything I am experiencing is a mirage, but the warmth on my skin is delicious.

“How did you know I was not truly dangling you over the pit of hell?”

“You cannot free me unless I ask,” I reply. “Though for a moment, I thought perhaps you could transport me. Then I reconsidered.”

“You have always been a rational creature.” He sniffs with either contempt or

admiration; I am not sure which. “It is easier to deceive those who allow emotions to rule over their lives. Fear and lust are powerful weapons against such people. But you are not like them. Only one emotion has betrayed you, yes?”

Only love has both empowered and crippled me. I am aware of that weakness in my constitution. I have never been able to break free of its power. “You wish to mock me for allowing love to bring about my fall,” I say boldly in an attempt to wrest away his argument against me. “Do so at your own peril for I am no ordinary woman and I will not respond in the way you desire.”

Lucifer’s eyes regard me in a cold, steely manner that reminds me of the sharpness of daggers. “Oh? You believe you are that clever?”

“I have killed those I love. I have betrayed those I love. And in my finer moments, I sacrificed myself for those I love.”

“And you believe this makes you immune to threats against your loved ones, do you?”

“You cannot frighten me or entice me by using the love I have for Cneajna and Vlad. I lost them long ago. They are not weapons to be used against me.” My voice is clear and strong as I speak this truth.

“What of Ágota?”

My weakness.

My sister will always be my weakness.

“She is gone.”

Leaning forward, he gives me a triumphant grin. “I think not! That magic reeked of her. You know it! You may try to hide that truth from me, but I see it. That small spark of hope that your sister is somehow reaching out to you from beyond the Veil. That she has found a way to defy God and death to rescue you from your woeful state.”

It takes every ounce of my strength to remain stoic.

“You cannot hide that truth from me, Erzsébet! You may be a vampire, one of the damned, but that little spark of your true witch nature remains vivid enough for me to see. It glitters with life whenever I speak of the spell that whisked your spirit away. I want to know where you travel to when it takes hold. Do you see your sister? Do you see where her well of power remains on this plane of existence?”

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“I was asleep, you imbecile,” I retort with a dismissive snort.

“You are lying!”

“Ágota is long gone due to your dealings!”

“Witches are very difficult to kill,” Lucifer reminds me.

To my dismay, this brings tears to my eyes. I glower at the devil with rage burning in my chest. I want to tear into him with my nails and shred him to pieces.

Mocking me with laughter, he settles comfortably into his chair. “You have seen Ágota. When I speak her name, I see that glow of hope in your soul. You cannot hide it from me.”

“I dream of her when I sleep. That is what you see within me. The joy of revisiting the fond memories of a sister and time long past.”

A half-truth.

“Do you really think you can deceive me? The Father of Lies?” Lucifer regards me incredulously. “That spell took you elsewhere. I want to know exactly where that was!”

I scoff at him. “I told you the truth. I revisit my fondest memories of my sister and find peace away from my imprisonment.”

Lucifer scrutinizes every aspect of my being, attempting to ascertain if I am lying or not. I can see I have confounded him by telling him a degree of the truth. I will not admit I suspect the visits to the past serve a purpose, or that the spell is one Ágota cast long ago.

“I do not believe you,” he says finally. “You want to be free of your captivity and you have a bargaining chip in this mysterious spell which has clearly captured my attention. Yet, you are not wielding this knowledge to your advantage. I have stated unequivocally that I want to know where your spirit is absconding to. Therefore, you are in a position to make demands. But you are not doing so. It is evident you wish to keep this knowledge hidden from me, even if it means you will remain a captive. Therefore, the spell must have to do with Ágota. You love her more than yourself.”

It is difficult to remain stoic as panic starts to build within my chest. If she cast the spell long ago in an effort to protect me, I will not betray her legacy.

“Does it pain you to always be so suspicious of everyone’s motives? Did you consider I am wise enough to ascertain that indulging you with falsehoods will only result in you adding to my torment when you discover my lies? I am in enough pain. I wish for no more.” I press my hand to the ugly wound and blood leaks through my fingers to make my point.

“You have always been clever,” Lucifer says grudgingly. “But there is witch magic interfering in your captivity. I have witnessed it.”

“If it is a spell, then it is the sweetest one of all, for it allows me moments of respite in fond memories,” I say.

The devil grunts, his blue eyes peering at me as though they can slice away my flesh and reveal the truth. “Maybe it is not Ágota. Maybe it is another witch, hidden out there attempting to find you. How many are left alive now?”

“I would not know,” I reply.

“Oh, that’s right. They shunned you.”

I stand sharply, the pain from my movement nearly rendering me unconscious. Perhaps this is not an illusion and I am temporarily free. No, no. It is an illusion and I must not give it power. “I am done here. If there is a spell, it is a weak one to influence my dreams. Dreams that I greatly prefer to my current company.”

Lucifer glides to his feet in one swift motion and seizes my shoulders. Staring into my eyes, he says, “Lies, lies, lies... It must be Ágota’s magic. You would not deign to play the fool otherwise. What did your sister do? What is this spell? I must know!”

The d

ark shape of a dragon’s shadow passes over the room and Lucifer snarls.

The illusion vanishes in an instant.

Vlad stands at the end of the bier, his hand resting upon my ankle. Lucifer releases his hold on my head with an angry growl and draws away. For once, Vlad’s appearance is a relief. His long dark auburn hair sweeps over his shoulders as he menacingly advances on the devil.

“This is unexpected,” Vlad says in his oh-so-deadly voice, stopping at the end of the bier to glower at the devil. His gaze is raw with wrath and barely contained violence.

“Is it? I am visiting my dear friend.”

“You are intruding on my personal matters.”

“Speaking of personal matters, you are supposed to be in Vienna.” Lucifer’s handsome face takes on a bored expression. “Begging your Mistress for freedom or some such nonsense?”

Vlad would never grovel before the vampire who created him. He despises her.

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“I bow to no one, as you well know. Why are you here, Lucifer?”

“As I said, visiting an old friend,” Lucifer answers with an indifferent shrug.

In a barely contained manner, Vlad says, “How did you find her?”

“Your magic comes from me, remember? When I realized you had moved her, I followed the trail of the ward to find her here. Did you really believe you could hide her away?”

“She will not go to the Scholomance! I forbid it!”

“It does not matter if you forbid it. She is not interested. Refused my offer outright. So unfortunate. Maybe she enjoys being here in this dreadful place, this monument of your great and terrible love.”

The devil’s words are mocking, yet a relief. He has not revealed the discovery of the spell cast by Ágota to Vlad. Though I know this is for his own nefarious reasons, I am glad he has decided to keep my secret.

“She is wise enough not to trust you. As I was once wise enough to outwit you.”

“Are you still carrying on about that minor victory?” Lucifer pulls on white gloves and straightens his hat on his golden head. “Really, Vlad. You are such a petty child at times.”

Vlad starts to lunge for the devil, but I lash out and grip his arm. Casting a

questioning look at me, Vlad hesitates. I have always been his weakness. I can often stave his anger against others when I desire to do so.

“I rebuffed him. Let him depart with his forked tail tucked between his legs,” I say.

Lucifer visibly rankles at my insult, but contains his anger. “Such an enchanting visit. We must do this more often.”

“You are not welcome here,” Vlad snaps with irritation.

“Yet, I can come here. Or wherever you try to hide her. You may be cunning, determined, and woefully over-confident, but you are also my former student. Do not think for a moment I taught you all my tricks. If you do, it will be your undoing.” Lucifer bows in my direction and vanishes.

“How dare he come here and—”

“He enjoys taunting you.” I release Vlad’s arm and rest my hand against my bosom. I am hungry, tired, and peeved at the night’s events. That I should have to deal with Vlad in the aftermath of my interaction with Lucifer is too exhausting to even consider. I wish the sun would rise so I could sleep.

“You refused his offer,” Vlad says in disbelief. “He would free you if you went to the Scholomance and you refused.”

“How can you be so surprised after the great lengths you went to, even as so far as to betray me, so that you could escape being the student chosen as payment for the other nine? And he would have chosen you as he would choose me.”

Perhaps sensing I am too tired to fight him, Vlad leans over to kiss my forehead. “It wounded me to betray you.”

“Yet you did. For power.”

“Yes.”

“And do not regret your choice.”

“Never.”

I sigh and close my eyes. “You always desired power above all else.”

“Did he not offer you what you desire most?”

I remain silent, contemplating this question. The answer, I realize, is no. Though I want to be free from the mausoleum, in truth, what I desire most is something altogether different.

“Did he not offer you freedom from here? From me?” Vlad’s tone is mocking, but also holds a hint of doubt.

I have heard this sound before in the voices of others who I loved and loved me. The realization that perhaps what they believed about me was not quite the truth. That perhaps my motivations and desires were not what they believed.

When the spell returns, I know my next destination. It is inevitable really. I will have to face the decisions I made that eventually stole Albrecht, my first great love, from my arms.

“Erzsébet, what secrets are you hiding?”

“Many,” I answer Vlad. “So very many.”

Chapter 20

The sun rose soon after the devil departed. To my surprise, Vlad remained at my side until dawn. The dark storms within his eyes spoke of his inner turmoil. I was thankful he spent his time fuming instead of attempting to engage me in conversation. When sleep tugged on my eyelids, I felt his kiss on my brow before the darkness of slumber claimed me.

I dreamed of Ágota dancing in the moonlight and the vision was a comfort.

I awake to discover the mausoleum awash with the fiery glow of torchlight. The cobwebs, dirt, and decaying corpses are cleared away. Even more delightful, two travelers are chained to my stake for me to feast upon. Their blood restores my vitality and heals all my pains except for the wound around the stake. The desiccated corpses slip free of their shackles and fall to the floor. In the past, I was not such a glutton, but my body’s constant attempt to heal itself despite the impediment of the silver-coated stake burns away all the benefits of my feeding.

Vlad appears soon after sunset when he is certain I will be awake. He immediately disposes of the corpses, another act of kindness among many others since last night. It is unsettling even though the root of his behavior is obvious. He is still perturbed at the discovery of Lucifer visiting my prison and worried about the possible implications.

Once again, he underestimates me, but it is advantageous. Vlad’s worries have

imbued me with a degree of leverage against him. It is amusing he fears I will appeal to Lucifer to liberate me from captivity. I am no fool and will never make a deal with the devil. Lucifer would consume me not only to feast on my power, but to also deliver a brutal blow to Vlad's heart and pride. I have long been a victim their plots against each other. I must carefully consider all possibilities if I am to use my newfound leverage against them.

Watching my husband stalk about the bier, his brow furrowed and his wide shoulders hunched, I sense his brewing anger. I am rather impressed with the length of time it took for his loving, calm façade to begin to crack.

“Why now?” Pivoting about, he regards me with an accusatory glare. “Why has he come to you at this time?”

With my most dismissive tone, I reply, “I thought it obvious. He is recruiting students for the Scholomance.”

“He never approached you before. Not when you were a witch and not after you became a vampire. He attempted to seduce your sister and mother, but not you. So why is he here now?”

The mention of my lost family members strikes deep into my dark, weary soul. I am glad I have drunk fully from the throats of the two travelers. It is easier to retain my semblance of calm when I am fully restored. I cannot falter and give any indication to my husband that Lucifer desires anything more than for me to be his pawn. Vlad cannot know of the witch magic Lucifer sensed. I must protect Ágota's legacy against the two creatures that conspired in her destruction.

“Perhaps he is struggling to fill his quota.”

“Doubtful,” Vlad says.

“Why else would he come here? Unless you have found a new way to offend him? Perhaps offering to release me if I agreed to be his student is how he plans to punish you. It was a surprise to discover your magic does not hinder him and that he can manipulate it at will.”

Vlad does not respond. Did he know before that Lucifer could undo his magic? Or is he surprised by this turn of events? It is hard for me to decipher his thoughts when he masks them with a stern expression.

“Are you afraid of him, Vlad?”

“Of him. No.”

“You are afraid of me because I am a weapon to be used against you.”

Vlad’s long, rough fingertips glide over my flushed cheek. “You either empower or weaken me. You have always had sway over me.”

A smile touches my lips for I cannot help but rile him. “Release me and free yourself from my influence. Liberate us both.”

Gripping my face, his nails dig into my soft skin. “Why must you always provoke me?”

“Why must you subjugate me?”

“To prevent you from foolishness such as cavorting with the devil!”

“I was far from cavorting! I am pinned to this bier, after all.”

“I saw the illusion he had wrapped about you. You appeared quite cozy together.”

“Yet he offered no comfort from my pain. How alike you two are.”

Vlad lashes out to grip the stake. “This pains me! That I should have to keep my wife captive to prevent her from fleeing to join my enemies is the ultimate insult!”

I am triumphant. Let his anger dwell on me so he will grow weary of our argument and depart.

“Kill me, Vlad, and be done with it. How many have you killed to uphold your strict edicts of what is right? Why am I deprived of the death you gave so many others?”

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“I impaled them as well. You are no different,” Vlad grunts.

“But they died eventually. When will I die?”

The question, though asked dispassionately, immediately escalates the tension between us. Vlad may want to punish me, but my death is not the desired outcome.

“You provoke me deliberately, but you will not win,” he growls with annoyance. “I will not kill you, beloved wife.”

“And you compound your cruelty by ensuring I cannot kill myself.”

The first night after my impalemen

t, I attempted to rip my body free of the stake. I despaired when I discovered that, though I can move my arms and legs, my torso is cemented by a spell to the bier. Otherwise, I would have already torn my body free—or, in my darker moments, killed myself by pulling my body toward the stake until the silver coating destroyed my heart.

“My dearest Erzsébet, I do not wish to see you dead. You know this,” he says in a chastising manner. “If you believe I enjoy seeing you lying in this filthy mausoleum impaled on a stake, starving, and alone, you wound me. This gives me no pleasure.”

“Yet, here I am.”

“By your own doing, Erzsébet.”

My laughter is bitter. “The lies you tell yourself.”

An angry growl erupts from his throat. Stalking about my resting place, he says, “Your impudence has compromised me! Made me vulnerable to his attacks! Lucifer knows that you are my weakness and he will use you as a pawn. Surely you must see that your defiance only weakens us.”

“Weakens you. Not me,” I retort.

“Yet here you lie,” he snaps.

“This is the result of your choices, not mine,” I remind him.

“And you never made a choice you did not regret?” Hesitating beside me, he leans over me, his auburn hair falling to form a veil that blocks out the torchlight. Within the depths of his green eyes are coals of fire. It was this fire I was drawn to from the moment I first gazed upon him. At times I yearn to lose myself again in the scorching heat of his passions even though it would be the end of me.

“I have made many mistakes,” I say each word so it forms a complete accusation against him, not me.

“You will recant those words.” Straightening, he smirks. “We are but a few years into this game we play.”

“And now a new player has made himself known. What will you do to thwart the devil?”

Fear shadows his features and I am satisfied. I will never make a deal with Lucifer, but I will let Vlad live in dread that I will.

“I shall move the mausoleum,” he mutters.

I laugh at his sullen expression. “He will only find it again. He is determined to sway me with his offers of freedom.”

“You would not dare!”

Despite his shout, I detect the distress underlying his anger.

“Death would be a release, one I would welcome,” I say blithely.

“Do not tempt me, Erzsébet.” Vlad clenches his fist and hisses with frustration.

At one point, I would have welcomed death, but no more. Lucifer has confirmed what I had dared not believed to be true. A remnant of Ágota’s magic remains in the world, and with it dwells the hope of true liberation.

Resting my hands above the garish wound in my chest, I watch him pacing about muttering. The promise of violence is in the arch of his back, his furious gaze, and clenched fists. I do not fear his ferocity and never did. Perhaps that is why I am impaled on this bier.

Again bending over me, he seethes with barely contained fury. “I will not allow you to make a foolish choice that will destroy you!”

“Then release me. It is that simple, Vlad.”

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“You would not dare be so short-sighted as to make a deal with the devil.”

“Yet, you did.”

“I outwitted him!”

“Did you? It seems he still has you in his snare.”

Again he grips my face, his fingertips digging into my cheeks. He stares at me with desperate longing. I am shocked to witness the struggle within his eyes. Is he so fearful that I will deal with Lucifer that he is desperate to release me?

With a terrifying howl, he sharply pivots away from me. His powerful form dissolves into a roiling green mist that seeps through the cracks around the door and vanishes.

Exhaling with relief, I press my palms to my face, feeling the tender spots where his fingers pressed. The bruises heal rapidly since I have drunk fully.

Lowering my hands to rest beneath my breasts, I wait in anticipation. If my suspicions are correct, I will soon see the face of my first great love.

A smile lifts the corners of my lips when I feel the tentative approach of the spell. As I suspected, it was waiting for Vlad to depart. This is yet another sign that this spell was cast by my sister. Ágota had regarded Vlad as the greatest threat to my life when she had been taken from me. She would have been wise enough to weave the spell so it would avoid Vlad’s detection.

Closing my eyes, I await the moment when I will see my loved ones once more. How swiftly I have become enamored with these forays into the past.

“It is a mistake to love anyone with such swirly handwriting,” Ágota says. “Albrecht is so pretentious.”

I open my eyes to see my sister leaning over my bed. In her hand is a letter with a familiar seal.

Sitting up, I glare at her. “Can you just once hand over a letter from Albrecht without forcing me to wrest it from you?”

Tapping her lips with the edge of the letter, she appears to consider my question, then says, “No.”

“Ugh!”

I scramble out of the bed to chase her across my bedroom. Balázs’s black cat, Valentini, swats at me in irritation for waking him. Ever since our journey into the Carpathian Mountains, he is often near my side. Valentini is an arrogant cat that often perches in spots where he is in my line of sight so he can purposely ignore me. This was his choice, not Balázs, I discovered. The Grandwitch was surprised to discover one of his familiars had taken a liking to me.

Ágota breaks the seal while scurrying up the wall to perch on the rafters over my head. I leap at her ankles, but miss when she deflects me with the wave of one hand.

“Dearest Erzsébet, the time has come for us to be joined in marriage. My father has sent instructions to your father...” Ágota falters. “What?”

Picking myself up off the floor, I gape at her. “You are lying.”

“No, I am not. I thought father said he had delayed your marriage until you were twenty.” Ágota drops from the rafters with a thump and hands me the letter with a disapproving scowl.

Concerned that our newly-reformed coven is weakened, Balázs decided that I should stay on the estate until he was certain that Fülöp is content to rule over our previous home and not strike against us.

“That is what he also told me.” I am torn between my desire to be with Albrecht and my idyllic life with Ágota, Balázs, and the coven. The last six months have been lovely on the estate.

Twisting her mouth into a scowl, Ágota paces around me in a circle. “I was so arrogant as to believe I could negotiate with the fey. There must be some hidden clause within the marriage agreement that father cannot defy.”

Wirich, Albrecht’s father, was certainly devious in his dealings. I am not bothered by it since I am more than willing to marry Albrecht, but it has vexed Ágota and Balázs. The White Woman of the Wood is one of the most powerful fey in the world, so they do not dare try to renegotiate the terms of the marriage agreement. The White Woman of the Wood is the protector of the mortal branch of her family and has a keen eye for vengeance if slighted in any way.

“Ágota, I am glad to marry Albrecht, but I will miss this place ever so much.”

I pluck Valentini from the bed covers and he meows in protest while I cover his face with kisses. Wandering over to the window, I gaze past the courtyard to the green hills in the distance while stroking the cat’s chin. The cities of Buda and Pesth rest along the shores of the Danube and one of my favorite adventures is to visit the markets with Ágota. On lazy days, we take long walks around the estate and eat ripe grapes off the vine.

“Erjy, it frustrates me to no end that I was so foolish. If not for my arrogance, you could spend more time with us before departing for your new life. You are too young to marry. Especially for a witch!”

“Some mortals marry at seventeen,” I remind her. “Are we not pretending to be mortal?”

I do not remind her that I am only half a witch. We are still hiding my parentage from Balázs. It is best

he does not know of my human ties to the world.

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“Nobility, perhaps,” Ágota grouses.

“Albrecht is a noble. I will soon be a countess.” I set Valentini on the windowsill and he licks a paw and starts to wash his face where I kissed him.

With a petulant look, Ágota says, “I know you are happy with the prospect, but I find it difficult to find any joy in the thought of you not being with me.”

“You can visit. Often.”

“My duty is here.” Ágota sighs and slumps against the bedpost. “If not for my disastrous decision, your place would be here, too. As our battlewitch. The coven is none-too-pleased that I negotiated our only battlewitch into marriage with a mortal.”

“He is part fey.”

“As if that matters. He is far away in the Kingdom of Germany and we are here in the heart of the Hungarian kingdom.”

“At least King Charles is no longer a threat and I very much doubt Fülöp will travel all this way to start a witch war.”

“Do not be so certain. He really does hate me. And you.”

“He is an insignificant worm,” I say with a cheery smile.

“And he married the love of my young life!”

“Yet that does not stop you from bedding all the pretty girls.”

“I am consoling myself,” Ágota answers, but a smirk slides over her lips.

“Well, console yourself with the thought that maybe he hates you because his beloved wife calls out your name in the throes of passion!” I tickle her sides and she laughs with delight.

“Actually,” she says with a conspiratorial gleam, “after she married him she still found ways to fall into my bed.”

“Ágota!”

“I have no scruples. None whatsoever!”

“No wonder he hates us so much! It is all your fault!”

Of course, we both know he truly hates us because we are more powerful than he will ever be. The death of Soffia definitely did not endear us to him either.

There is a rap on the door, and I rush to answer it. I expect Balázs, but instead, Henrietta greets me with a worried expression on her freckled face.

“Your father wants to speak to both of you as soon as possible in his study. He seems... distraught.”

“We will be there shortly,” I reply.

With a nod, she pivots about and hurries to deliver my response to Balázs.

“Brush your hair and let me tighten your lacings,” I say to Ágota. “You do not look at

all respectable.”

Running her long fingers through her wild mane, she avoids my reach. “Dress yourself and hurry. Father’s probably upset over the letter he received from the count demanding your hand in marriage. Ugh! This is entirely my fault.”

With those words, Ágota slips out of my room.

I bathe and dress as rapidly as I can while Valentini sunbathes in the window. My maids come to help me with my hair and lacing. Wearing my hair down, but with the sides braided and pinned into buns, I feel like a countess already. My favorite green cotton gown with long sleeves and a slight train whispers against the stone floor as I hurry from my room and through the castle to Balázs’s study.

I rap on the door and it immediately opens to reveal Ágota slumped in a chair and Balázs pacing.

“Erzsébet, I apologize for summoning you here before you have had a chance to eat, but we need to discuss the letter I received from Wirich. It was delivered this morning by a...” Balázs frowns and looks at Ágota for clarification.

“Kobold. He was very small and smiled far too wide. Had quite a lot of teeth,” Ágota answers.

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“So this was no ordinary correspondence,” I say.

“Not at all. I suspect The White Woman of the Wood is behind this development. The letter is written in Wirich’s hand, but the tone is more imperious than usual.” Balázs settles his big hands on my shoulders and peers down at me. “Erzsébet, he wishes for you to travel to Gratz immediately so you can marry into his family.”

“I see,” I reply.

Despite my attempt not to sound ecstatic, my joy leaks into my tone.

Ágota sniffs. “Impatient, the whole lot of them.”

“Honestly, I am surprised I was able to delay for as long as I have. Nobility is not known for patience.” Balázs sighs, dropping his hands from my shoulders before returning to pacing. “I had hoped to delay a few more years. The coven needs you here, Erzsebet.”

“Are you certain you need a battlewitch?” I ask. “The spell Ágota cast to bring forth this estate was very effective. As far as anyone remembers, we have always been here. We are accepted by our neighbors, the village, and merchants in Buda. You wear your real face once again, as do the rest of the coven. This is a good, safe place.”

“This world may never be a good, safe place for us, Erzsébet,” Balázs answers with a cynical expression.

“As far as the court of King Charles remembers, you are a loyal landowner. You are safe,” I insist.

“Except for the other, larger portion of the coven and Fülöp,” Ágota reminds me.

“Do you really believe they would leave the safe haven they stole from us and attack us? Especially when they absolutely comprehend your power?” I toss a doubtful and dismissive look at Ágota.

My sister widens her eyes at me, determined to win our argument. “Once they know the battlewitch is not here, they might risk coming against me. Fülöp is a bitter man and he knows I do not like to kill.”

“This world changed him,” Balázs mutters.

“Why are you telling me all of this when you know I have no choice other than to travel to Gratz?” I glower at them, irate at their gloominess over what I consider rather good news.

Ágota tilts her head to regard her father. “Father, you need to tell her.”

“Tell me what?”

“The coven cannot afford to have you so far away without any sort of contingency, Erzsébet. Therefore, I have asked Ágota to delve even deeper into the coven archives and prepare one of our more dangerous spells.”

I immediately bristle at the thought of my sister endangering herself. “If it is going to hurt her like the last one could have—”

“The risks are different, yet dire,” Ágota says, interrupting my next tirade. “Instead of

opening a portal between two worlds, I will be creating a bridge between two points in this one. I might get lost in between the two points if I do not perform the spell correctly.”

“I do not approve!”

“Erzsébet, we have no choice. We need to be able to summon you to us when needed. The coven needs you,” Balázs says gently.

Fury fills my chest. “My life is not the coven! We have all known this since before my magic manifested. I will soon be Countess Dolingen of Gratz. That is my destiny. It is also my choice!”

“I told you she would throw a tantrum,” Ágota says with a sigh.

Balázs stills in his pacing and turns to regard me with a look of frustration upon his handsome face. “Erzsébet, as a battlewitch, you are important to this coven.”

“The coven was fine before my ascension,” I retort.

Towering over me in an attempt to intimidate me, he says, “Our numbers are what gave us power. Now our coven is diminished. You know we struggle to harness the magic of this world, Erzsébet.”

“Ágota is the Archwitch that can wield the magic of this world. Fülöp would never come against her. Never! There is no reason to place Ágota in harm’s way to open a pathway between Gratz and here. Are we not supposed to pretend to be mortal? We should travel by horse and carriage and not risk Ágota.”

“I am sorry, Erzsébet, but Ágota will open the pathway to Gratz. I would think you would be happy to see your sister every New Moon for the High Rituals.”

“You cannot put my sister at risk—”

Balázs interrupts me. “That is what we do, Erzsébet! Those with power sometimes have to risk themselves to protect the weaker. The three witches in this room are the most powerful known to this world. Do not pretend you do not enjoy the magic you wield. That power is coupled with the sacred duty to protect the lesser witches. This is the way it has always been.”

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“Then why risk Ágota? She is needed! She is the Archwitch!”

Ágota lowers her eyes. “The pathway is important, Erjy. I have to open it. To not open it will mean your death.”

“You are lying,” I say, aghast at this proclamation.

“No, I am not. I am certain of it. I must perform the ritual and open the pathway, or I will lose you.” My sister says the words calmly, yet her eyes brim with tears. Lashing out, she grips my wrist with her long fingers. “Let Father prattle on about the protection of the coven, but we both know I will always protect you first.”

Ágota’s magic seeps through her fingertips into flesh and her voice forms in my mind to say, There is darkness on the horizon, Erjy. It is coming for you, and I must stop it.

Chapter 21

As the spell draws me ever closer to that fateful day when all was revealed, I am comforted by the memories of what came before. Those were precious moments, more precious than I realized at the time. I was loved, cared for, and safe in the arms of a family and coven. How I long for those days before my life was consumed in darkness!

Those lovely moments flutter past me, my mind grasping at them desperately. I wish to relive them all, but I am a slave to the spell.

One truth stands out starkly in these recollections. I doomed myself. I was

maddeningly innocent, recklessly in love, arrogant in my abilities, and too strong-willed to listen to those wiser than I.

Ah, I was so young and foolish!

I see it plainly in these lost memories.

I observe myself preparing for a life far from the coven while ignoring Ágota's declaration that darkness stalks me. I rebuff her worries and concentrate solely on my upcoming marriage. I had forgotten so many moments such as Ágota regarding all of the planning with a scowl and refusing to help. The spell draws me faster through the days, my glimpses of my past disappearing in a blink of an eye. I hear my voice demanding to know what secrets my sister is hiding from me and

her refusing to answer.

"Why, Ágota, why?" I call out

And then the spell ceases to spin me about in my own memories to leave me standing outside Ágota's bedroom door. As always, my mind is subsumed by the younger aspect of me. I listen to my internal thoughts, eavesdropping on my worries of another time.

I am reconsidering my actions. I do not want to fight with Ágota. I love her with all my heart, but I am also lost without her support. I crave her approval in every endeavor I embark upon—from learning how to ride a horse, to cooking Balázs's favorite pie. It is quite evident she is unhappy about my approaching marriage, but I crave her approval. I do not understand why she cannot be happy for me since I am finally becoming the noblewoman she saw in her portents.

I raise my hand to knock, hesitate, and ponder once again if this is the right course of

action.

The door is flung open and Ágota stands before me in a black chemise, her hair wild about her face, and a smirk on her lips. “Was she too loud?” Ágota inquires. “I told her to stop screaming.”

Peering beyond my sister, I observe Marianna, one of the youngest of the coven, hurriedly pulling on her dress. Blonde hair tumbling around her flushed face, my sister’s newest conquest casts a sheepish smile in my direction.

“Actually, I did not hear her. Perhaps she was not as loud as you believe,” I say, grinning impishly.

“Oh, no. She was loud. Were you not?” Ágota sets a hand on her cocked hip and gives the other woman a sultry look.

“Please do not tell anyone. This is the first time I ever dared do this,” Marianna says to me while hopping on one foot while pulling on a slipper.

“But not the last,” Ágota replies.

“We shall see,” Marianna mutters, sliding past my sister, but from the pleased expression on her face I am certain she will return to my sister’s bed.

Watching the witch disappear down the hallway, I cross my arms and wonder at my sister’s abilities. “Do you spell them?”

She waves me into the room. “With my seductive ways, yes. With magic, no. I am insulted you would believe such a thing of me.”

“Isn’t Marianna in love with that tall, daft landowner who lives a few miles from

here?”

Ágota shrugs. “Maybe. Why should I care? She is in my bed, not his.”

Whereas I am the hopeless romantic pining for a boy I haven’t seen in years, Ágota could care less about romance. When she finds a particular girl attractive and compelling, she lets it be known in her roguish, charming way that she desires her in her bed. I suspect she is rarely turned away.

“Are you intent on seducing all the women in the world?”

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Slamming her bedroom door shut, Ágota tilts her head in a thoughtful manner. “I am willing to try as long as they are not related by blood, do not have a despicable nature, or are hideously ugly.”

“So you do have standards,” I tease.

With a playful snarl, she sits in a chair set near her desk. “This from the girl who has loved only one boy and plans to marry him.”

“My fate was chosen for me when I was young. I am merely fulfilling my destiny.”

“So you do not love him after all.”

“Albrecht is my love. I will never love another,” I vow with the arrogance of youth.

“Yes, you will,” Ágota grumbles, flicking her long fingers at me so sparkles of magic fill the air. “I can see it.”

“No, I will not.” I bestow her with an arrogant smile. “You are wrong. Albrecht is my great love.”

Leaning toward me, Ágota fastens her glimmering green eyes on me in a way that makes me uneasy. Her magic swirls around me before dissipating. I sense she is withholding something from me. “Erjy, you might believe that to be true at this moment, but time will change so much. Which is why I am doing all of this. For you.” Waving her hand toward the top of the table, she slumps down in her chair. “I will always protect you, even if you resist.”

The surface is littered with parchment paper. Curious, I move closer to scrutinize what she has been doing all these days while locked away. The arcane symbols, illustrations, and mathematics confound me, but I piece together bits and pieces of what she is attempting.

My sister regards me with a stare that is a bit intimidating.

“Do you understand any of it, Erjy?”

“These are for the gateway you wish to create.”

With a nod, she leans one elbow on the desk and leans her head against her closed fist.

“I already told you and Balázs it is not necessary!” I glower at her, furious that they are so insistent on controlling my life.

With a grunt, she folds her arms across her bosom and returns my glare. “I do not wish to argue with you again, Erjy. You know why I must establish this doorway.”

“You once admitted that you see all different versions of my future dependent on the choices I make. I am about to be a noblewoman, which is one of the good futures you predicted.”

“That path has grown dark. If I do not open this portal, you may die!”

“Yet you cannot tell me the possible manner of my death,” I say, scoffing at her.

With a hiss, Ágota looks away from me. “No, though I have tried every spell possible to unveil all possibilities.”

Often she disappears for hours into her room clutching my mother's book of spells. Sometimes she vanishes for the entire day into the surrounding woods only to return disheveled and carrying my mother's bag. While I have been obsessed with preparing for my new life, she has been equally obsessed with saving mine.

"Did it ever occur to you that I will naturally die before you, Ágota? I am half-mortal. We may have hidden the truth from your father, but we cannot hide it from fate. One day I will die, probably long before you, and it will be in my home in Gratz. Maybe that is what you saw in your portent."

"You cannot say that with any certainty, Erjy! You are half-witch. And that half is truly powerful. You may have our long lifespan, which means your death could be by more nefarious means!"

"Yet, you cannot say for certain. These are your fears speaking because of what happened to—"

"Do not mention our mother!"

"Why else would you be so afraid? Do you see other futures for me other than the ones that end in death?"

"Yes, but..." Ágota crosses her arms over her breasts, frowning. "I cannot be certain which path you are traveling. Therefore, I must protect you."

"I refuse to be shackled to the coven," I retort. "I will come when I can by horse and carriage as any noblewoman would to visit her family. Henrietta is becoming more powerful and can help defend the coven should Fülöp ever be so unwise as to attack here."

"Why must you be so stubborn?"

“I will not have you risking yourself for a portent you have misread! You are terribly protective of me to your own detriment.”

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Slamming her fist on the table, she rises to loom over me. “I made a sacred vow to our mother to protect you and I will! You are my sister, Erzsébet. I love you and I will keep you from all harm. Your childish stubbornness cannot prevent me from my sisterly duty.”

“I am not childish! I am about to be a married woman!”

“You are a child!” Ágota snarls in my face. “A stubborn child who refuses to see the truth of this world.”

“I acknowledge that the world is a dangerous place. I have killed to protect you and the coven. I would willingly do so again! But our enemies are far from here and our lives are at peace at last. We are not shackled to the threats of our old lives. We have begun anew!”

“New threats could reveal themselves tomorrow!”

“I am a powerful battlewitch. I can defend myself.”

“And what of the coven? You know I refuse to kill.”

“I would never ask that of you.”

“But you are by refusing the usage of the portal.”

“You may lose yourself opening it!”

&n

bsp; “It is a risk I must take to protect this coven and you!”

“If you create it, I will never use it!” I shout at her, my rage nearly choking me. “So do not even attempt to make it! I will not have you risking your life!”

My emotions are complicated. A part of my argument is purely selfish. I desire to establish my own life with my beloved Albrecht far from here. I love Balázs and the coven, but I cannot always be the one to fight their battles. They survived before Ágota and I arrived on their doorstep, certainly, they can do so again. But beyond my own selfish motives is the root of fear that I will lose my sister if she attempts to create the gateway. Magic can be terrifying, and the thought of her performing a spell that could kill her just so that I may return home once a month frightens me. Even though I believe she sincerely fears for my life, I cannot allow her to risk her own when she cannot even determine the possible sources of my supposed demise.

Ágota flings up her long hands at me and stomps about the room in a rage. “Why must you be so stubborn? You are so very much like our mother! She never listened to my warnings. I told her we needed to leave our home, but she insisted we had more time before we had to move on. You are so like her!”

The memory of my mother’s screams as she burned haunts my dreams and sends an icy finger of dread down my spine. Ágota is not the only one who compares me to our mother. The coven does as well. There are times when I see Balázs gaze upon with me with great sadness, mourning what he has lost.

“So are you, Ágota! You always think you are right and disregard what everyone else says! You know the creation of the gateway will be dangerous and might kill you, yet you are determined to risk yourself. The coven needs you! I need you! So does father!”

“He agrees with me!”

“Because he is afraid and knows you will not kill to defend the coven.”

“Do not use my desire not to kill against me!”

“I am the killer, not you! Ágota, you are the best of us because you want to preserve life. You have so much power, but you do not use it to elevate yourself. You use it to help others. Which is why you must not risk yourself!”

“I love you, Erjy. Can you not see the lengths I would go to make sure you are safe? I remember when you were born and I held you in my arms. Shriveled, wet, and beautiful, you stared up at me and I named you. You are my sister. Nothing in this world will keep me from protecting you. Nothing!”

At that declaration, I understand my argument is lost. Ágota will never bow to my pleas. The fervency of her love washes over me and despite my stubborn nature, I surrender to her wishes. The doorway between Gratz and the vineyard will be created and I will use it every New Moon to join the coven in rituals. Though I fear for her, I also know she was the most powerful witch of us all.

What we do not account for in all our arguments is that there are forces greater than her waiting to strike.

Chapter 22

I am weak.

Untethered.

Lost and drifting again.

Though I am certain I am still a captive of the mausoleum, I am no longer aware of the dank tomb. There is only darkness occasionally pierced by the transcendence of memory.

Am I near death?

Has Vlad at last abandoned me?

Should I be afraid, or embrace the possibility of release from my immortal life?

Beyond the Veil I will find my sister and mother waiting to embrace me. I long to see their faces and hear their voices. Yet, hope still stirs in my soul for a life beyond captivity. For as long as I am tangled in the fine strands of this spell there is a sliver of a chance I may yet be freed by my sister's magic.

Ágota vowed to protect me and my sister never lied to me.

In that regard, we were much alike.

The world solidifies into the great hall.

A fire is stoked in the enormous hearth, casting an orange glow over the four witches tending to the cauldron. Ágota has chosen Henrietta and her two apprentices, Marianna and Cristina, to help in the preparation. They murmur in sing-song voices while dipping their hands into spell bags suspended from the mantle. In perfect harmony, they add ingredients to the concoction and take turns stirring the spell. The lip of the pot reaches their waists, making it an arduous task to stir the thick liquid within with a long ladle. Bits of magic spiral out of the concoction to sparkle over the heads of the witches and chase away the gloom to the corners of the great hall. The atmosphere is heavy with the building spell, the air trembling with power. Balázs's cats sit in a semi-circle behind the witches, their long tails sweeping the floor as their keen eyes watch the proceedings.

I linger in the doorway, observing the four women with longing. My desire to assist my sister in casting the spell is thwarted by my magic. There is too much chaos, death, and pain interwoven in the power of a battlewitch. It could upset the delicate balance of the spell. Wishing never to endanger my sister, I willingly stepped aside. Now I watch from a careful distance for I am still apprehensive. I fear that the spell is far too dangerous for Ágota to cast.

“Do not doubt her. She can perform the spell,” Balázs says as he joins me on the threshold.

“Perhaps, but I am not worthy of the sacrifice should she die,” I retort.

“Still angry I see.”

“How can I not be? Ágota is the greatest amongst us. We should not risk her life in this manner. We are safe here. Fülöp would never dare come against the coven. He may have numbers, but the most powerful witches stand with you.”

Balázs takes me by the shoulders and turns me toward him. The dour look on his face is deepened by the shadows. “You are young and convinced that you are right. I am old and have lived long enough to know that peace is to be cherished, for upheaval can come at any moment. I have heard your arguments, Erzsébet. I wish I had your certainty, but I do not. Should Fülöp come against us – or any other enemy – you will be needed. You are our battlewitch.”

“You survived before without me,” I grumble.

“And many died.”

The words strike like a dagger into my soul. I cannot deny the validity of his commentary for it identifies the weak point of my argument. I am rankled, but do not

respond even though it is not in my nature to shirk away from any sort of battle, physical or verbal. All my arguments rest on my tongue, but it is fruitless to engage once again. The decision to perform the spell has been made by both the Archwitch and the Grandwitch. The coven will follow their lead and my protestations are for naught.

I set my chin at a defiant angle and press my lips together to suppress a heated retort.

“Erzsébet, I love you and understand your desire to have the life you dream of with Albrecht. But I must do what is right for the coven.”

“Can she succeed at this task you have set before her? Can my sister truly create a gateway between here and Gratz? I need your reassurance for I am frightened for her.”

“Yes, she can,” Balázs says with certainty.

Scrutinizing his expression, I detect no sign of doubt. I wish I could be so confident. “I believe in Ágota’s abilities, but she is just one Archwitch. Many of these spells are for a trinity of Archwitches.”

“I hear your concerns, Erzsébet, but she is more powerful than you realize. Stay back and let her do what she must. Your doubts and anger might taint the spell or disrupt her connection to the nearby ley lines. Remain in your room and wait.”

The words sting fiercely, like hornets stirred from a nest. “If I am so destructive, why have me about at all!” I exclaim before gathering my skirts and hurrying away.

Balázs is wise and does not try to follow.

Once inside my bedchamber, I stalk about, muttering angrily. I feel childishly

petulant because my loved ones dismissed my arguments. Despite my protestations otherwise, Balázs and Ágota's assertions have whittled away at my confidence. I had thoroughly convinced myself that my absence would not be a danger to the coven, but if Balázs and Ágota are willing to risk her life to open a gateway, they must be truly worried. I had refused to consider that I was shirking my responsibilities, but I am now feeling the sharp sting of guilt.

I halt before one of the windows to gaze upon the vineyards spreading over the rolling hills. It is a beautiful sight with the sun dipping low and a pale mist drifting along the ground near the Danube River. If I had never met Albrecht, I would have been satisfied to stay with my family and fellow witches until I found love with someone else. But fate introduced me to Albrecht, and I have loved him from the very beginning. That love has only deepened as I have read his letters that are filled with plans and hopes for our future together. I may desire another life, but am I willing to risk the witches to ensure my happiness?

I abandon the view and lay on the bed. I wish Valentini would join me, but all the cats are gathered in the great hall to assist Ágota. Though I have yet to ascertain why he decided to befriend me, I do appreciate his company. Feeling his small, furry body against my back while I sleep is a gentle comfort. When he is an affectionate lump against my side, it is easy to forget that at one time I saw him grow larger than a bear and fight wolves.

Digging under my pillows, I pull free the letters Albrecht has sent me over the years. I set them beneath my heart and play with the ends of the red ribbon wrapped around the stack. The weight is a pleasant, palpable connection between my beloved and me. I am torn between my desire to be with him and my obligations to my family and coven. The absolute surety that I was right and my sister was wrong has abandoned my consciousness the closer the time comes for the spell to be cast.

Closing my eyes, I seek refuge in imaginings of the future. I attempt to envision

Albrecht lying beside me, his lips hovering over mine. I have never amorously kissed anyone and am obsessed with the notion. I once pestered Ágota, demanding details on how it felt to experience that sort of intimacy. She scowled while declaring I would have to feel it for myself, since her romantic involvements are only with women. Resting on my bed, I fantasize about my life with Albrecht far from here until I fall asleep.

My dreams are filled with romantic interludes that never come to fruition. Each one starts with the promise of romance when Albrecht appears and takes me by the hand to guide me to a beautiful garden or another lovely setting. He is handsome, kind, and attentive as we converse. Inevitably, his head dips closer to mine, and I wait for the precious moment our lips touch. Before our l

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ove is consummated with a kiss, a shadow falls over Albrecht, and he vanishes from my arms. I become more and more desperate, for in every dream he is drawn into darkness by unseen forces. Frustration tears at me as I rush after him over and over again, lost in shadows, and unable to find him.

The dreams grow more ominous until at last Albrecht does not appear at all.

“Erzsébet! I have lost you!” he cries out from the dark.

“Albrecht! I am here!”

I awaken in a damp bed, feeling feverish and flushed. The room has dimmed for the sun has vanished from the sky and the new moon is rising. A single candle casts a weak glow over my bed. I sit on the edge of my bed, afraid and confused by my nightmares, for that was what they were—nightmares most foul. I am crushed beneath the grief of losing Albrecht and it is difficult to separate my dreams from reality. Dread fills me completely, abolishing all other emotions. It is as though I am teetering on the edge of an abyss and unable to regain my balance.

The absolute terror that I am about to lose all I desire amplifies when I notice the spell has been cast. The magic is so potent, I can taste it on my tongue and smell it in the air. Overcome, I stagger from my bed to the nearest window. Beyond the panes of glass, the sky is an ominous sickly dark green. The ley line that slices through our vineyard brightens as Ágota connects with it to open the gateway. I shift my gaze to the witches gathered in the courtyard below. They have closed the circle around Ágota, Henrietta, Marianna, and Cristina.

Fog drifts off the Danube and threads through the rows of grapevines toward the ceremony, undulating like waves on the river. There is something unsettling about how it slithers across the ground toward the ceremony. It is not uncommon for fog to roll off the water, so I disregard my trepidation and return my focus to my sister.

Within the warded area, flashes of colorful light illuminate the four women. Ágota holds a silver chalice over her head, and the magic within glows with the colors and vibrancy of a rainbow. Enraptured, I watch as the spell pulses in time with Ágota's heartbeat to illumine her upturned face.

The mist reaches the coven and swirls up in a great wave to descend on the witches. The onslaught cannot penetrate the circle, and the fog thickens around the edges until it is difficult to see the ceremony. Sparks of magic glimmer deep within the haze, reminding me of lightning illuminating storm clouds.

As I watch with growing apprehension, wispy fingers of mist climb toward the sky as though seeking the apex of the ward to curl over the lip and reach down to grab my sister. Some aspect of the spell is awry, but none below seem to sense the danger. Perhaps it is my magic, stricken through with death, pain, and anger, that allows me to see the power rising to thwart my sister.

I press my hands to the window. The mist billows over the courtyard, obscuring my vision and hiding the witches. Panicked, I realize for certain Ágota and the coven are in danger. For the briefest of moments, I remember being a little girl helplessly watching her home be consumed in fire while hearing her mother scream, and that same sense of powerlessness washes over me.

Ágota is about to die.

Then I remember...

I am not a child.

I am not defenseless.

I am the Battlewitch.

I must act as one.

Drawing in a deep breath, I rest my hands against my heart.

“Guide me,” I intone.

I exhale my magic. A thick rope of inky darkness flows from my lips and slithers over the stone floor to wrap around my rose dagger resting on my bed. Immediately seizing the weapon, I follow the shadow as it takes on the form of a viper and glides across the floor.

The candles tucked into holders on the walls flicker wildly, yet the light they cast scarcely slashes the burgeoning gloom in every corridor and room. As I hurry down the spiral stairwell, my bare feet slip on the icy stone floor. When I arrive on the main level, the air is freezing and chills me to the bone. Frost forms on the high narrow windows of the great hall and, to my dismay, the hearth is cold.

Something is drawing the life from the castle.

Yet, somehow, I am unscathed.

The black vaporous serpent spirals through the air toward the doors that open to the courtyard. As it draws closer to the where tendrils of mist dare to venture beneath the heavy door, the spell does not diminish in strength, but grows in size. When I reach the serpent's side, it has the appearance of flesh, the black scales slick and

glimmering in the dying candlelight. I rest my hand against its back to find it solid and cool to the touch. Twisting its head about to gaze at me, I observe its golden gaze. Since it is the manifestation of my magic it has taken on aspects of me from its inky black scales that match my hair to its amber eyes.

As one, we direct our attention to the mist pressing under the door. Leaning down, the snake laps at the magical intrusion with its forked tongue, tasting it.

The mist immediately withdraws.

Understanding sweeps through me, and I compel my power to return.

The serpent collapses into black vapor as I open my mouth to draw it once more into my body with a long inhalation. When the last bit is within me, I open the doors to the outside.

Instantly, the fog separates before me, forming a path. I stretch my hand out toward the haze, and again it shirks away. The mist has a purpose here, but it cannot touch me. The only conclusion I come to is my magic is offensive to it.

“You are familiar to me,” I say in wonder. “Why?”

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I am unnerved by the sense that I have faced this foe before. I approach the spot where the circle of witches should be gathered as the mist continues to retreat before me. The bursts of magic have vanished, and the spell that Ágota had been forming has dissipated. The air is strangely stale and empty, reminding me of a grave. I reach out and summon forth a spark of flame to illuminate my path. The light only bathes my hands and wrists, leaving all else around me black as tar.

All this feels reminiscent of something I experienced once before, but cannot quite remember. Is this a foe my mother once vanquished?

I nearly stumble across Balázs in the dark and crouch to touch his face. I feel his breath on my palm, but he does not stir at my urging. All the witches are prone on the ground, their bodies still forming the circle. Though their powers are rapidly diminishing, the protection circle still holds. I press my hand against the ward. The protective shield resists at first before recognizing me as a member of the coven and allows me to enter.

Bending low to the ground, I hold out my palm, the tiny flame barely pressing back the ominous darkness. I find Henrietta first wrapped in a coil of mist. Gasping for breath, her eyes struggle to remain open against a force greater than her. My touch sends the mist spiraling upward.

Eyes fluttering, Henrietta whispers, "It has come to consume us."

"What is it, Henrietta? Tell me!"

"A destroyer," she answers.

“No!” I gasp.

Above me, a terrible creature issues a ragged howl of anguish. Rising, I observe what I could not before. A massive creature with many limbs and eyes—yet retaining the shape of a human—stands over me, clutching Ágota its claws.

A destroyer of the Witch World has come through the gateway.

Chapter 23

The destroyers of the Witch World consume all magic and life. They are creatures of destruction and death.

As am I.

In some ways, we are equal foes.

Perhaps that is why the destroyer does not attack straight away, but also why it does not cower. This strange turn of events confounds me. I detect my opponent’s magic scrutinizing me, evaluating me as a foe. The dark haze around it reaches toward me, then instantaneously retracts. It is an uneasy gesture which reveals that it fears me. Confidence swells in my chest, for it occurs to me that I must have an advantage the coven lacks for the destroyer to be so wary of my presence.

But what could that advantage possibly be?

Any dread I felt when I first observed

my sister in the clutches of the destroyer drains from my veins as rage flows through me, removing all doubts and fears. Although I am uncertain how I will defeat the destroyer, I shall. I am the Battlewitch. It is my nature to defend the coven, so I must

trust my instincts to guide me to victory.

I failed my sister by standing aside and not participating in the ritual. When she opened the ley line between the estate and Gratz, there must have been a remnant of the portal that we had opened to the Witch World when we had called forth the estate. A pinprick in the Veil would have been enough to allow the destroyer to tear through the fabric between the two worlds. If I had stood at my sister's side perhaps I would have been able to sense the impending danger and prevent her from completing the ritual. Though I am the Battlewitch, Ágota is the Archwitch and the strongest of us. If only I could awaken her so we could combine our power. Perhaps together we could defeat this destroyer. We are always stronger when unified.

“Ágota! Wake up and help me fight!”

My sister is unmoving, lost to the world, and I growl with frustration. I have defended my sister's life in the past, but this foe is greater than any I have faced before.

“Run, Erzsébet, before you are destroyed,” Henrietta whispers out of the dark in a pained and weakened voice.

“I cannot abandon my coven and my sister.”

The blackness of the night is all-consuming, obliterating all the stars and the moon. The air is frigid and hard to breathe. The destroyer's power taints the world around us, yet the fearsome monster does not approach me, nor does it retreat. We are at a stalemate. All the while, the destroyer is draining the magic from the coven, its spectral tentacles writhing as it feeds. The moans of the witches assail my ears, a distraction I do not need. I call upon the coldness within my soul that strengthens me for battle and allows me to kill without remorse. To defend the coven, I must be immune to their pleas for help.

The protective circle collapses in a bright flash of light. The destroyer howls, shirking away as though in pain. Its rapid, erratic retreat jangles my sister in its grasp. My beloved older sister looks small and pale in its inky tentacle. The loathsome monster towers over me, a creature of darkness and evil. I sense its desire to consume the world it has invaded and all within it. I will not allow Ágota to die.

Again, I am struck at the familiarity of the situation. Why do I feel as though I have faced this foe before?

And then I remember.

Long ago, during our journey to Hungary to be reunited with Ágota's father, we had been felled in a forest when the ley line upon which we were traveling abruptly disappeared. Ágota had been immediately subjugated by an ominous presence that dwelled in the woods, leaving me to defend us. Yet, it did not attack me. Instead, it had lingered in the darkness of the forest, watching as I struggled to waken my sister. It had fallen to me to rescue Ágota from the unknown presence that I was certain wished to do us harm. I recall vividly how dead and silent the world had seemed as I had stashed my sister in our mother's magical bag and carried her through the forest. I was watched, perhaps hunted, but not attacked. Though I had sensed its desire to harm us, the presence in the woods had never acted against me.

I understand now that the destroyer had been caught between the two worlds. Like a butterfly caught in a net, it'd strained to free itself but failed. The woods had felt so devoid of life because the destroyer had been desperately and gradually consuming the ley line, barely surviving. Of course, no animals would dare enter such a blighted area of the woods. How it must have wanted to consume Ágota and me, but just as the destroyer had not dared attack me that day long ago, it refrains once again.

"You fear me!" I step toward the gruesome being and it retreats before me. "Though you can devour all the other witches, you cannot touch me. I am different, but why?"

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I cannot take too long pondering the answer to my question. The destroyer is killing the coven and my family, and I alone can stop it. The question is: why does it fear me? My sister and I are different from all the other witches in the coven. We were born in this world, daughters of an Archwitch from the Witch World, and wielders of magicks of both worlds. So why am I immune while my sister is not?

In the darkness I hear Balázs's deep voice, feeble and trembling, calling out for Ágota.

The difference between us is revealed at that moment. I am half mortal, the daughter of a voivode from Transylvania, while Ágota is the daughter of Balázs, the Grandwitch. I may have inherited my magic from my mother, but I have the soul of a warrior like my father. My mortal heritage must have changed the very nature of my magic. The destroyer consumed the magic of the Witch World, but it cannot touch mine, for it is foreign and, I suspect, poisonous to its nature.

Emboldened, I defiantly step toward the destroyer to confront it. Though it is difficult to ignore the sagging body of my sister in its grasp, I cannot allow distractions. To falter now could mean her death.

My boldness is rewarded with the creature shirks from me. I am absolutely certain that it fears my power. I sense death approaching, as does the destroyer. It lifts its head and snarls, perhaps in an effort to intimidate me. I take another step forward and again it withdraws.

Though I am emboldened by its wariness, I am uncertain how to defeat the monster that killed my mother's world. All the spells, curses, hexes, and battle sigils created to

defeat the destroyers failed in the Witch World. Therefore, Balázs never taught me how to cast them. Perhaps it is fortuitous that my own curiosity compelled me to study all the grimoires he had attempted to hide from me. I am confronted by the question as to whether or not they will work in this world. The only way I shall have my answer is to try to cast one of the old forbidden spells.

Lifting my hands, I summon my magic, my fingers beginning the intricate dance of the deadliest curse. The destroyer immediately reacts, surging toward me with a great petrifying roar. Its many smoky tentacles release their grip on the coven and flow toward me in one great wave. Again, I sense death, but not my own, or those of the coven.

Panic fills me and I fear for my sister until I realize that the pall of death I am sensing comes from the destroyer. Its tendrils are almost upon me when I raise both my hands and utter the words of the ancient witch language, releasing the potent curse. Before the destroyer can seize me, the tips of the creature's many murderous filaments began to freeze and dissipate into an icy mist.

Again the destroyer thunders, hastily withdrawing from its attack. Its many limbs thrash about as the curse continues to consume them. The destroyer hurls my sister at me in an attempt to cease my assault upon it, but my desire to kill it outweighs my concern for my sister. I step aside, allowing Ágota to hurtle to the ground while I continue my onslaught. Its power retreats around me, pulling in upon itself, becoming a dark vortex. I feel the heat of hatred emanating from its red eyes as it scurries backward, withdrawing its stifling presence from my surroundings.

I advance on it with my fingers still tracing the spell over and over again while uttering the words that will send it to its grave. The power the destroyer wielded in the Witch World is weaker here. My magic tells me that the creature is corrupted by the very essence of this world. Just like the coven, it struggles to tap into the ley lines and magical wells. It was able to feed on the coven because they are from the same

world where it originated. I am convinced that this is the same creature that I encountered in the woods so long ago. It was trapped between worlds and unable to fully manifest. Even then it had been afraid of me, sensing that I was a danger to it. Ágota's portal must have freed it from its prison.

"You failed to kill my sister before because I stood between you and your prey. I now stand in defense of the coven, my family, and this world. I am your destroyer."

I pour all my power into the curse, willing every speck of my magic into the sigils my fingers trace in the air. I will kill this destroyer and save my loved ones. I was unable to save my mother so long ago, but I will not fail my sister or her father.

Rage fuels me as much as hatred. Those emotions have always been an intricate part of the power I wield as Battlewitch. Thoughts of these creatures destroying the Witch World, driving my mother through the portal into this one, and placing her at the mercy of people who would only use her for her power and beauty, only add to the great well of anger that always resides in my soul.

My power is liquid fire in my veins, and despite the agony it inflicts upon me, I cannot stop my bombardment. As the curse builds in ferocity, I stagger forward, resolved to force my opponent to the ground. Though the curse does not manifest visually, I can see the results of its swelling power as the tendrils of the destroyer are frozen, blackened, and sift to the ground like gray ash. The destroyer retreats from me, growing smaller in stature with every step. I sense death rapidly coming for my enemy and I cannot help but laugh with delight despite the immense discomfort the curse causes me. I can endure pain if it means the destruction of the destroyer.

My enemy begins to lose its gruesome visage, growing smaller, frailer, and increasingly human in appearance as its many tentacles disintegrate. The curse consumes all the darkness enshrouding the creature as it strips away all its power. Soon all that remains is a pale, dark-haired woman clad in a coarse black shift. I am

shocked by this manifestation and hesitate. She stands before me, quaking, obviously ill, and fighting to remain on her feet. There is a reflection of my own anger and defiance in her gaze. I am struck by the similarities between us. We could be sisters.

“You are just a girl,” I say in surprise.

“So are you,” she replies, spitting out the words with contempt.

Hands poised to continue my magical offensive, I regard the girl with unease. It is not only her appearance that has astonished me, but what I sense within her. “I was told the destroyers were sorcerers corrupted by the black magic they wielded. But you are not a sorcerer,

are you?”

“What I am is starving. I need to feed, and this place only poisons me. Only these witches nourish me and even they are fouled.”

The violent trembling of her body reveals her inner torment. Again, we are so much alike, for the pain that fills me is unlike any I have ever felt before. It is though I am being consumed by a fire burning at the core of my being.

“You followed us from the Witch World.”

Eyes narrowed with contempt, she nods. “And I was caught between for so long until I was freed tonight. Foolish witches. You always lose because you are too naïve to recognize our power.”

“You killed our world and you would kill this one.”

“And you would not? You and I are the same. Bringers of death and war. Destruction

is in our souls.”

“You are a Battlewitch,” I gasp, understanding at last why Balázs never taught me the spells to kill the destroyers. Now I understand why the coven has always been so fearful of me. It was not sorcerers from a distant land who consumed the Witch World. It was corrupted Battlewitches. Their need for war and destruction must have corrupted them.

The girl laughs, a bleak, empty sound. It is without mirth and hope. “You understand. I can see it in your eyes. Those old curses never worked against us because they had to be cast by us. What Battlewitch would bring about their own death to defeat their brethren? If you kill me, you will die, too.”

I was wrong. Death is not only coming for the destroyer, but also for me. The curse is death for all Battlewitches. The fire inside my soul is killing me. The curse is destroying me, too.

In the short time since I hesitated in my attack, I witness her growing stronger every second. Wisps of darkness began to unfurl from her shoulders to reform her tentacles. I do not fully comprehend her magic and her power, but I do understand her purpose. She intends to kill all of us even if we are poison to her. The need to feed is unquenchable. I can see it in her eyes.

“You understand, do not you? If you finish casting the curse and kill me, you die. We are the same. Join with me and this world will be ashes at our feet. Then we can find another.”

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But my enemy is wrong. We are not the same.

I raise my hands, trace the sigil in the air, and continue my attack.

Shock fills her eyes as she realizes my intention. “You will die, too!”

“I would rather perish than see my sister die in my place.”

The destroyer falls back, losing her balance, and collapses to the ground at my feet.

The purple circles under her eyes deepen as her cheeks start to hollow. Fingers clawing at the ground, she tries to rise to her feet, but is too weak.

Falling onto her side, she weakly lifts her head to gaze at me. “Please, do not kill me!”

As always when in battle, the aspect of me that craves to kill and destroy speaks louder than mercy. I will all my power into the curse, every last bit of it. I was not being duplicitous. I am willing to sacrifice all to save my sister, even my own life.

The girl who had helped destroy the Witch World writhes on the cold dirt, her limbs becoming emaciated as she wastes away. The life is drained from her, a fair recompense for her participation in the destruction of the Witch World. As she releases one last breath, the fire within me consumes my body. I gaze down at my hands to see flames crackling through fissures in my skin and know that this is the end of who I am, too. As I fall, I catch a glimpse of my sister rising to her knees and crying out in terror when she sees me. I only feel joy because I have saved her.

Then I, Erzsébet the Battlewitch, am no more.

I sprawl upon the ground and darkness takes me....

...before being roused by my sister calling my name.

When I open my eyes, Ágota is leaning over me. Her long fingers dig into my shoulder as she shakes me. “How could you, Erzsébet?”

“I had to save you, Ágota. I could not let you die.”

“You forfeited your magic for me! Erzsébet, you are mortal now!”

“I would do anything to save you, Ágota. I cannot let you die. Not when I can save you. I saw what I could become when I gazed upon the destroyer. I now know why you were so afraid of me being the Battlewitch. I wish you had told me the truth.”

Sobbing, my sister wipes away her tears. “Balázs and I thought it best that you did not know. We wanted to protect you.”

Around us, the coven is slowly recovering from the destroyer’s attack. They avoid gazing in our direction. Even Henrietta is unable to look upon me. Is it because of what I have done? Or because of what they have done to me?

“So the creation of the portal between here and Gratz was not about me returning for the preservation of the coven, but so that you would be able to observe me and protect me from myself.”

With a somber expression, Ágota helps me sit upright. “I never believed that you would become a destroyer, but if there was the slightest possibility I had to ensure that I could save you.”

“You should have trusted me, Ágota.”

She averts her gaze, which says volumes to me. “I wanted to, but killing came too easily to you, Erzsébet.”

“You underestimated me far too many times, my sister. I alone could save you and the coven, and I did. The destroyer and I were eerie reflections of each other—not just in appearance, but in our abilities. In her I saw what I could become, and I made a choice. She attempted to deceive me when she said I would die if I finished the curse. She sensed I was half mortal and knew I could sacrifice the witch half of myself and still live. The curse would take my magic, but not my life. Unfortunately for her, I realized that truth myself.”

Chastened, Ágota whispers, “You are very wise, Erzsébet.”

Though the pain of the curse has passed, my body still aches. The enormity of my loss weighs me on my soul, and I fight against the unexpected tears. How can I possibly reconcile what has happened with the knowledge that those dearest to me deceived me?

“I sacrificed my magic for you, Ágota, because I love you. But do not expect me to forgive you. I am leaving for Gratz and not returning. You conspired with your father and the coven to hide the truth from me. I am no longer witch and I no longer belong with the coven.”

My pride in tatters, my heart is broken and filled with an aching void where my magic once dwelled, I pull free from my sister, stand, and stride from the courtyard and into the night. Ágota and the others do not follow me. It is a wise move on their behalf.

It is not until I sit beneath a pear tree at the edge of the vineyard that I see that

Valentini has joined me. The black cat settles at my side and rests a paw against my knee. This simple, caring touch fills me with gratitude. In his solemn gaze, I observe that he understands the enormity of my loss. He is a powerful familiar, but I cannot resist and lift him into my arms so I may stroke his silky fur and kiss his little head. It is a sign of his compassion that he allows this indignity.

“My time here is done, Valentini,” I say with great sadness.

He meows and kneads his paws against my shoulder.

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We sit together until the sun rises over the green hills that surround the place I called home for a short, but very lovely time. It is beautiful and peaceful, and I am glad Ágota has such a lovely place to spend her life.

I will now demand that Balázs take me to Gratz so that I may marry Albrecht and embrace my destiny. Ágota feared that the path I had chosen would bring my death and it has. I am no longer Erzsébet the Battlewitch, Ward of Balázs. The loss of those titles wound me, but I cling to my true, secret name given to me by my mother.

I am Narcisa, daughter of the Archwitch Viorica.

I will fulfill my destiny and become Erzsébet, Countess Dolingen of Gratz.

Whether darkness or light falls on this path, I have chosen...

...and doomed myself.

Freed from the spell, laughter spills from my lips to echo in the putrid darkness of the mausoleum.

In Gratz, I will find love and sorrow before the fates conspire to kill me once again.