

BLOODMARKED

Also by Tracy Deonn

Legendborn

Oathbound

BLOODMARKED

BOOK TWO IN THE LEGENDBORN CYCLE

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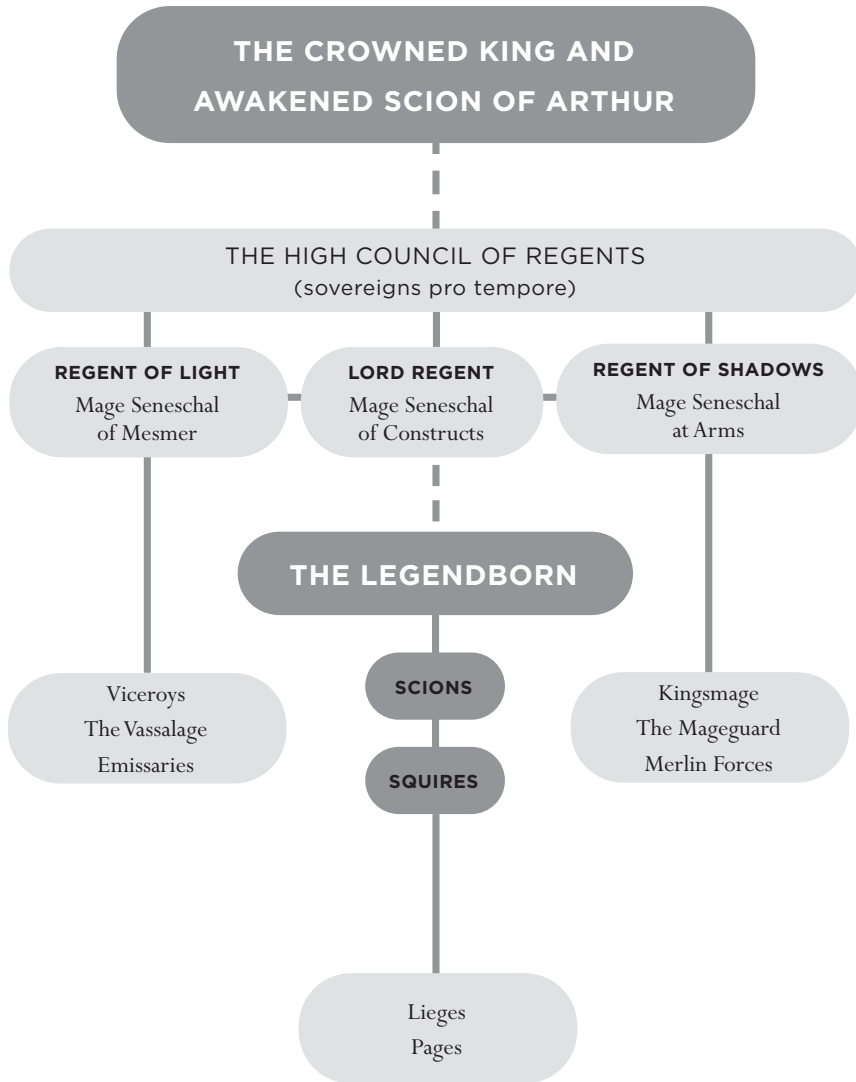
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For every Black girl who was “the first”



THE ORDER OF THE ROUND TABLE



PROLOGUE

MY VEINS BURN with the spirits of my ancestors.

Twenty-four hours ago, I pulled Excalibur from its stone. Now, I am paying the price.

The ancient blade shattered me. Who I was. Who I could be. Who I'd never be again.

I became shards of myself.

The Briana Matthews who held Excalibur had been broken apart—and forged into something new.

Something new. Something powerful. That's how William described me.

Last night, as I'd raised Excalibur high, two spirits were *pounding* inside me like dual drums: Vera, my ancestral foremother, and Arthur Pendragon himself. Even though they'd lived centuries apart, they'd each used magic to lock power to their bloodlines, and to me. Vera, with a plea to her ancestors. Arthur, with a spell for his knights. When the battle was done and I'd finally fallen into bed I thought they'd both faded. Gone wherever spirits go when they are done possessing their Medium descendants.

Arthur fell silent. Vera seemed to say goodbye: *'There is a cost to being a legend, daughter. But fear not, you will not bear it alone.'*

But her words were not a personal farewell; they were an ancestral welcome.

Now, in the wee hours, I lie in bed at the Lodge, the historic home of the Legendborn. But I am not resting. I am painfully awake. Covers shoved off the bed, skin and spirit stretched tight. My curls lay damp against my neck.

I twist to my side, gasping, and squeeze both eyes shut. Crawl to the ground. Feel and hear my nails scrape the floor, a desperate sound in the night.

When my eyes open, the room around me is gone, and I am no longer Bree. Instead . . .

I am Selah: Vera's daughter, now grown and pregnant with her own child.

It is night. Long ago. I am being ushered into a home by a Black woman with sharp brown eyes that dart over my head the way I have come. Her warm, strong fingers grip my shoulder. "Hurry, girl. Hurry!" she whispers. I do not know this woman, but "girl" is uttered with urgency and sisterhood both.

She leads me to a door set into the floor at the back of the house. Lifts it to reveal a hidden cubby of earth and rotting wood.

I will pause here for a moment, but tomorrow I will run again.

I blink—and the Lodge bedroom returns. Dark and familiar. Shiny, wide planks of oak stretch out beneath me.

Inhale. Exhale.

Close my eyes. Open them.

I am in a diner. My name is Jessie. I am twenty years old.

My hands hold a stack of menus. Fifties music plays from a jukebox.

"Hey, you! Girl!" A rough, rude voice yelling my way. "Girl" is uttered with such clear derision that it barely cloaks the word he really means. That slur is written all over his face. I find the white man in the booth near the entrance, wearing the smug grin of someone who knows he will not be stopped. "Service, please?" he sneers, voice sarcastic. A jeer and a lure. Daring me to talk back.

A flare of anger, the furnace of root in my chest lit and growing—but a smile on my face as I walk toward him through the restaurant.

I'd like to ignore him, or shout, but I can't.

Not here, not today. But somewhere, someday.

As I pass by another booth, a white woman in a black-and-silver dress whips around. Her hand shoots out, fingers gripping my elbow. Her deep amber eyes narrow, and sparks

of suspicion dance across my face. A tendril of spiced smoke hits my nose, like a match just lit, ready to grow.

All at once, I know who she is. She is one of them. The Order magicians my mother warned me about as a child. “Don’t let those Order Merlins catch you. Don’t let one get you alone. If you see their blue flames, run.”

Heart racing, I swallow the furnace. Douse it. Hide it away.

“Ma’am?” My voice is clear and steady.

The Merlin woman looks me over. Doubt flickers across her face. A beat passes. Can she hear my heart? My fear?

Finally, she says, “Never mind. My apologies.” Her fingers loosen, then drop, and she turns back to her meal. The scent of her magic fades—a weapon, sheathed.

I sigh with the escape. The close call.

It’s not just the man who deserves my rage. One day, I hope to face the Merlins, too.

Not here, not today. But somewhere, someday.

When I return to the room in the Lodge this time, Bree once more, my sweaty palms have stained the hardwood floors.

Inhale. Exhale.

Eyes close. Eyes open.

My name is Leanne. I am fifteen. I am walking past a park at sunset with a friend. We are giggling. Silly.

In the darkness, faint and yards away, a creature. A near-translucent glowing hound in the park—and a figure surrounding it casting weapons made of light. The figure moves faster than they should be able to. Ozone fills my nose. The smell of honey, burning.

I freeze. Draw a silent breath. Become as stone, just like my mother taught me.

My friend stops, her brown eyes confused and laughing. “Leanne, what—”

I don’t hear her speak. All I hear is the mantra I inherited from my mother. Her voice is hushed and furious in my ears: “Never let a Merlin find you. If you see one, run. You hear me? Run.”

I slip off my shoes, down to my stockings. Quieter that way. Mumble an excuse to my friend. And I run.

I am flung back and forward, writhing between time and space.

Selah. Mary. Regina. Corinne. Emmeline. Jessie. Leanne. I even see a glimpse of my mother, Faye.

Eight visions. Eight sets of memories that aren't mine. Eight bodies that I inhabit, sucked down into lives I've never lived. All running.

Every daughter of the Line of Vera in the last two hundred years has run from the Order. Every mother has passed on the warning. And here I am inside its home.

Eventually, I slide into a shadowed space with no walls. In front of me, a pair of naked brown feet surrounded by flames.

"Daughter of daughters."

I push to standing to see Vera. She is much as she'd been before: a woman in an empty, dark world. Blood and flame swirl around her deep brown arms, hair stretching up and wide like it is reaching for the universe.

"Where—?"

"This is the plane between life and death."

The plane between . . . I look around at the darkness and feel the *waiting* of it, and the completion, too. Like smoke, ready to become matter or dissipate. Sound, ready to be heard or silenced. This is an *almost* and *already* place.

"You . . . you brought me here before," I pant. "When I pulled the sword." She nods once.

I speak around the tears, through the memories that ache in my chest. "All of those lives . . . all of the *running*—"

"You had to see, because you need to understand who you are."

"Who I am' . . . ?"

"You are the point of our arrow." Her voice grows louder with every word. "The tip of our spear. The bow of our ship. The flare of our long-simmering heat. You are the living embodiment of our resistance. The revelation after centuries of hiding. The pain-welded blade. Wound turned weapon."

"I know . . .," I say. "I know . . ."

"No. You do not."

The flames on Vera's skin glow brighter. "From the first daughter to the last, our furnace has grown. Each life burns hotter than the life before. You are my

lineage, at its sharpest and strongest. With all that flows through you, you have the power to protect what evil would destroy. You can face what must be faced.”

Her words flow directly into my chest, searing me from every direction.

“We ran for many reasons. We ran to protect ourselves. We ran so we would not die, so that our daughters could *live*.” Vera steps forward, and her voice is slow, rich lava against my skin. “But one purpose, one dream reigns above all others. Do you know what that is, Bree?”

I shake my head, gasping. “No.”

The flames on her skin grow higher, her hair extending out and up so that I cannot see where it ends. I blink again . . . and I am a shivering, sweat-soaked teenage girl on the floor of a historic home. I am sucking air into burning lungs. I am shedding tears that are mine and not mine.

If Vera’s voice was once volcanic flow, it is now cool obsidian. Razor-sharp.

“We ran . . . so you would not have to.”

PART ONE

STRENGTH



THIS IS THE part where I hesitate.

Logically, I know I'll be fine. I've escaped half a dozen times, no problem. Wards are barrier magic, but the one outside my bedroom window was cast to keep intruders *out*, not to lock occupants in.

Still . . . it feels like a smart idea to test the silent, shimmering curtain of light that surrounds the Lodge before I fling my whole body through it. Just in case.

I raise a hand to the open window and *press* until my palm hits aether. The silver-blue ward flares at my touch, but doesn't put up a fight. Instead, it ripples in a sluggish wave over my knuckles and wrist. Prickly and warm, but harmless. My fingertips ease through the iridescent layer to meet crisp night air on the other side. When I withdraw my hand, the magic calms again.

Excellent.

The wind picks up, blowing a wave of harsh scents in my face: Bright, spicy cinnamon. Warm whiskey. Smoke from long-burning logs.

Sel usually recasts his wards in the early evening before Shadowborn activity rises, so his aether signature is still fresh. He can only place barriers around specific and immobile locations. Buildings, circles of land, a room. I was moved into the Lodge—against my wishes—precisely *because* it sits behind a fortress of protective wards. This one in particular wraps the brick and stone and is

stronger than the ones he used to cast, making it impossible for someone to enter the home without the assistance of a Legendborn or Merlin.

I've only been the Scion of Arthur for a month and already I know a little of what Nick must have felt his whole life. Stifled. Trapped. Powerful and powerless, all at the same time. *Restless.*

"Phew." Another gust hits my sensitive nose. I wince and turn. Glance at the bedside alarm clock. Ten thirty.

Almost time.

I fall back on the bed with a huff. Sel and the Legendborn are probably just now reaching the first stop on their patrol route, the small tract of woods down near the south end of campus. No matter how hard I try to relax, my entire body is a coiled spring. Even my jaw is clenched tight while I wait.

A biting breeze blows through the open window, this time tickling my cheeks with the chill of early fall. A reminder that winter is on the way, and that time is passing us by.

I shouldn't be here.

The same phrase runs through my mind every day. No matter where I am or what I'm doing, those words will bubble up from somewhere deep in my gut, flow up the back of my throat, and sort of . . . crash around in my brain.

I shouldn't be sitting in this English classroom, listening to a lecture. I shouldn't be eating a four-course meal in the Lodge dining room. I shouldn't be sleeping on a soft bed, safe behind the Lodge's walls.

I'm certain my friends have guessed what I'm feeling by now. How could they not? Greer sits beside me in that classroom, so they see my bouncing knee. They can probably tell that I'm ready to launch out of my chair at any moment. I sit down for the four-course meal, but Pete is right there at my elbow when I poke at the food on the plate and forget to eat it. When the Legendborn return at two a.m. from their late-night patrols, I am always awake, waiting at the door to greet them.

The Legendborn are in a holding pattern. *I* am in a holding pattern. We have been, ever since the events of the *ogof y ddraig*, the cave of the dragon. Ever since I—*we*—faced murder and betrayal and ever since bitter truths were revealed.

Ever since Nick was taken from my side as I slept, abducted by Isaac

Sorenson, the powerful Kingsmage bound to Nick's own father. No one has heard from or seen the three of them since.

Frustration lives in my stomach like a piece of coal these days—and just *thinking* about Nick's capture stokes it into a painful flame, bright and familiar.

A month ago, deep under Carolina's campus, the spirit of King Arthur Pendragon Awakened into the world—and within *me*, his true descendant. His Awakening signaled that Camlann, the ancient war between the Legendborn and Shadowborn forces, was coming once again. And the very next day the Regents, the current leadership of the Order of the Round Table, instructed us to do . . . nothing. We are to attend classes, take tests, even go to parties if we're invited. We can't afford to draw attention to the chapter—or to me—while the Regents' intelligence agents gather intel about our enemies and about Nick's capture by a well-known loyal servant. Until further notice, the Legendborn have been ordered to sit tight and stay here.

For us, *here is weeks* of holding our collective breath while on the brink of war. But for me, *here is sitting alone* inside my room in the Lodge while the Legendborn are out hunting our enemies.

My father already knew the Order as an old academic student group. Knew Nick had invited me to join. But after he found out about my sudden move to their off-campus housing, he'd demanded an explanation. It took the dean of students, my best friend Alice, *and* my former therapist, Patricia, to convince him the Lodge was legitimate and safe. I couldn't tell him the whole truth, but I told him there was nowhere more secure. That's not a lie, it's just that . . .

I shouldn't be here. I don't *want* to be here.

So recently . . . I have decided I *won't* be here.

At least for a few hours at a time.

Another glance at the clock. Ten forty-five now. That should do it.

As I climb up on the sill, I have to chuckle. Even with Arthur's strength, I *never* would have considered jumping out of a two-story window if I hadn't experienced Sel do it from three—with me on his back.

"Thank you for the inspiration, Kingsmage," I murmur with a grin as I balance on the narrow strip of wood.

The difference between a jump and a fall? A decisive, hard push off the Lodge's stone exterior.

"One." I inhale. "Two." I grit my teeth. "Three!" I jump.

When I land, I hear my trainer Gillian's voice telling me to take the impact *intentionally*, bending my knees rather than locking them. Back when Gill was first training me, before I inherited Arthur's preternatural strength, my legs couldn't have absorbed even a half-story of shock. A jump like this would have sent all that force from the ground straight up my ankles into my knees and hips.

Now, Arthur's strength keeps me from breaking something, but it does nothing for my balance. When I stand, I wobble a bit but manage to remain upright. Progress. I'm only one step away from the building before a voice stops me.

"He's going to catch you one of these nights, you know."

I twist back to see a figure emerge from the shadows. William, in a green denim jacket and blue jeans, wearing a wry smile.

"And do what?" I cross my arms. "Yell at me again?"

William's mouth twitches. "Yes. Loudly." He tilts his head up to my darkened window. "Not a bad jump. Or landing, for that matter. You're acclimating to Arthur's strength."

"Yeah, well"—I shake my head—"strength is not enough."

"It never is." William would know what strength is and what it's not. For two hours a day, he is the strongest of us all. Stronger than me. Stronger than Sel. Stronger even than Felicity, the Scion of Lamorak.

Silence. I bite my lip. "You here to stop me?" He could, if he wanted to. He probably *should*, but . . .

William sighs and slips his hands into his back pockets. "No. If I stop you, you'll just keep sneaking out. In increasingly creative ways, I imagine."

The first time William met me, I'd been injured by a hellhound. He healed me while I was barely conscious, without knowing my name or even asking for it. Not long after—when he knew enough to suspect that I wasn't being fully honest about why I was joining the Order—he healed my injuries again. William understands the value of secrets and doesn't judge others for keeping them. A blessing, really. Especially tonight.

In lieu of judging, he watches me with a mild expression, waiting for me to own up to my crimes. I sigh. “How long?”

“Have I known you’ve been sneaking out?” He nods toward my right arm. “Since Monday morning when I spotted the poorly wrapped burn on your wrist at breakfast.”

That was four days ago; the burn is mostly healed now. I tuck my arm behind me. “Thought I hid that under my sleeve.”

“You did. From everyone other than me.”

I am grateful for how much William just . . . *knows* . . . without saying anything. But I don’t want to discuss the burns I’m not yet skilled enough to prevent.

“Sel would have spotted it, too, if he’d seen you that day.”

“Well, he didn’t see me that day,” I mumble.

William doesn’t comment.

“I thought you’d be out patrolling with the others.” I gesture between us. “Or is this another one of y’all’s bodyguard shifts?”

“Bree.” William regards me for a long moment, letting the gentle admonishment settle like a soft weight around my shoulders. “You can’t blame us, can you?”

“No.” I look away, and repeat the lore no one will let me forget since that night in the cave. “‘If a fully Awakened Arthur is struck down by Shadowborn blood, the Legendborn Lines will be broken forever.’ I get it.”

I didn’t plan to sneak out, not at first. But then one day last week Greer confessed that Sel had ordered the Legendborn Scions and Squires to escort me from building to building on campus. *Quietly*, so I wouldn’t notice that the others were protecting me from potential attacks. *Secretly*, so I wouldn’t get offended by their hovering.

I got offended anyway.

Hot frustration wells up even now, and I clench my fist—until my nails break the skin. I hiss and unclench immediately. Arthur’s strength is more annoying than useful when I’m not allowed to use it. I release a sigh and turn back to find William eyeing my hand. God, he notices *everything*.

William raises a brow. "If you get it, then why are you angry?"

"I should be able to defend myself just fine. I should fight in this war just like everyone else."

"You will. Just not yet." He gazes past me, along my intended path into the woods. "Heading to the arena?"

No use in hiding it. I nod.

His expression turns doubtful. Sneaking out is one secret; going to the arena alone is another. "It's already late, and the memorial is in the morning. . . ."

"I know." I chew on my lip. I hadn't forgotten the memorial. How could I? The Order's formal ceremony for Russ, Whitty, Fitz, and Evan will be the first funeral I've attended since my mother's. "I won't be out long. Promise."

"Bree . . ."

I pout harder. "Please."

With a sigh and an amused eye roll, he relents. "Okay." Then, to my surprise, he steps to my side. "But if you're going, I'll join you."

I blink. "You will?"

He shrugs. "Lead the way."

We both know the path through the woods well enough that we can walk it even without my flashlight. If Sel were here, he could light the walk with a palm full of aether.

But if Sel were here, he'd be dragging me back into the house, even though his wards form a triple-layered perimeter around the Lodge now. The one at the window was just the first.

When we press through the second ward, William notices my reaction to it. My wrinkled nose and watering eyes. "That Bloodcraft ability of yours is fascinating."

"Smelling aether?" The only Bloodcraft power readily available to me all the time is the passive ability to sense magic: Sight that allows me to see aether, touch that allows me to feel it. A nose that tells me that someone has used it in a casting.

"Not just scenting aether. The Legendborn can tell when there's aether around and if it's been weaponized, but *you* can discern between individual casters, their moods. . . ." He shakes his head in wonder.

Vera's Bloodcraft spell was designed, first and foremost, to help her descendants sense nearby aether users who might hunt us—Merlins, in particular.

"I'm curious." He points back at the ward we passed. "What did you pick up just then?"

I take another breath. "It burns a bit, so Sel was angry when he cast it."

He chuckles. Pauses. Turns my response over in his analytical, medical mind. "You sound congested. Are you allergic?"

I consider it. "No. More like . . . when someone walks by with *really* strong cologne."

William ducks beneath a branch. "Sel *does* leave an impression."

I groan. "Even when he's not around! The wards, the Legendborn bodyguards, the demands. It's *suffocating*."

William laughs then, gray eyes sparkling.

"What?" I ask.

He smiles softly. "You sound like Nicholas."

For the second time tonight, pain strikes me from within. Worse now, because I'd shoved it away earlier. The deep ache of losing Nick is not the obliterative wave of grief I still feel when I think of my mother, but something sharper. This grief slips between my ribs like a scalpel. A thing I gasp against but can't prevent. The trees blur. My eyes sting. I stop walking.

Nick was *right* beside me when he was taken. He'd just lost his title and been betrayed by his father, and yet he chose to stay with me while I recovered in his bed. Sometimes, I think I remember the heat of his breath against my collarbone, the reassuring weight of his arm across my middle. Words, whispered into my shoulder: "*You and me, B.*"

"Bree." William steps in my line of sight. His voice is low, to soothe. "We don't have any reason to believe his father would harm him."

I blink away the prick of tears. "Harm will *find* him. At this rate, well before we do."

William chooses his words carefully. "It's been two hundred and forty-five years since a Scion of Arthur was last Called. No one alive has ever witnessed the moment in which we are living. Everything I know of the High Council of

Regents would support their being . . . measured. Careful in how they proceed when war is on the horizon and Onceborn lives are at stake—”

“Onceborn lives aren’t the only lives at stake,” I insist. “Nick was abducted by a murderer. His life is at stake too!”

William presses his lips into a patient line. “As is yours.”

I don’t usually argue with William, not really. But on this topic, we *have* gotten into a regular dance of point, counterpoint.

“Except that anyone who knows about the Order still believes that Nick is the Scion of Arthur.” I take a deep breath. “And his father and Isaac have him out there on the run with some unknown number of Shadowborn still hellbent on killing him. Which means his life is currently in far more danger than mine is.”

There is no arguing with this, and William doesn’t try to. Keeping my identity secret for my own safety was the very first order that the Regents handed down. Up until Arthur Called me in the *ogof y ddraig*, Nicholas Davis was the Scion of Arthur. To the Legendborn world, Nicholas Davis is *still* the Scion of Arthur. But in reality, he’s not. I am. Nick is not on a leave of absence from school to prepare to ascend the throne; he’s been kidnapped, and *I* am the one preparing. Right now, there are fewer than twenty people in the world who know that—and my life depends on that circle of trust remaining as small as possible.

As the Awakened Scion of Arthur and anchor of the Spell of Eternity, I am the living, breathing embodiment of Legendborn power. Like an engine, my blood and my life fuel the magic that binds the spirits and enhanced abilities of the original thirteen knights to their Scion descendants. If I die by the hand of a Shadowborn demon, the spell will die too, and fifteen centuries of Legendborn power will end. No Scion will ever be Called again, and humanity will fall to Shadowborn rule. Demons will be free to feed on human emotions, stoke chaos and conflict, and attack indiscriminately and without recourse. So, you know, no pressure or anything.

William sighs. “You will have more say—in everything—after the Rite.”

I roll my eyes. “The Rite where I pull the sword from the stone again. This time for an audience?”

William frowns. "Pulling the sword in battle was spontaneous and necessary—"

It also wasn't just me, I think. It was Vera, Arthur, me. All together. Not one hand, but three.

"You must formally *and intentionally* claim your title before the Regents to initiate the transfer of power, make it official. Especially in wartime."

I snort. "The only time that Arthur Calls his Scion *is* wartime, William."

"War against *known* enemies, perhaps. If that goruchel mimic, if Rha—" William's sentence ends abruptly. He inhales before trying again, as if he has to *force* his mouth around the name of the demon who murdered and mimicked Evan Cooper so perfectly that he fooled the entire chapter. "If *Rhaz* was telling the truth, there could be other impostors on this very campus. Even if Rhaz was lying, we still can't risk drawing undue attention to you or to Nick's absence. Not with Gates opening every night and Camlann on the horizon. Our forces are incomplete."

It's true. A completed Round Table is made up of twenty-six Legendborn members: thirteen Scion descendants, each with a bonded Squire to fight alongside them. The Table gained me when Arthur Called, but Rhaz murdered four: *Fitz. Evan. Russ. Whitty*. Their names are written in William's eyes. Lost Table members, lost warriors, lost friends.

When Fitz died, his younger brother was Called by Sir Bors to replace him immediately. But Evan, Russ, and Whitty were chosen Squires, and the Scions have been slow to select replacements. Not that they have many options. After word got out that Whitty was killed by a demon in battle mere *hours* after becoming William's Squire, most of the Pages who competed to become Squires in this year's tournament withdrew their names from consideration.

And then there's Nick and me. Nick may not be the Scion of Arthur any longer, but he is the Scion of Lancelot. As Scions, Order law dictates that we will need to choose our own Squires.

Merlin bespelled the original Round Table for twenty-six; our peak power *requires* twenty-six—and we are five members short.

War is coming, and we aren't ready.

“The Regents will hand you a kingdom in grave circumstances, Bree. But they will not deliver you an inner circle that you cannot trust. I, for one, am glad of this.” William’s brow pinches in a rare show of pain. “We have had too many losses to not proceed with caution and with Oathed allies at our side.”

My hand finds his forearm in the dark and squeezes it before we keep walking. I gnaw at my lip. “Speaking of Oaths . . . Sel . . . ?”

“Would have alerted us if his Oath indicated that Nick was in danger,” William says evenly. “Nick is a valuable chip. Lord Davis will want to make the right play.”

“Still can’t believe Merlin didn’t design that Oath with some sort of tracking spell or *something*. What’s the use of a bodyguard knowing their charge is in danger if they don’t know where they are?”

“In the old days, Kingsmages never left their charges’ sides.” William raises a brow. “Modern times have made that . . . challenging.”

The empty arena is near silent when we arrive; the night air too cold for wildlife and insects. Our footsteps echo as we descend the stairs carved into the cliffside. The cloying, sour-sweet smell of dying leaves and damp wood beckons from below.

The night of the first trial, I’d walked down these same steps with my eyes cloaked by Sel’s mesmer and Nick guiding me. As I walk down now, I can almost feel his hands, large and warm on my shoulders. Almost hear his voice—a low, amused laugh from a forgotten memory.

“Steady, B, steady. See, the problem is that if you fall, the code of chivalry says I have no choice but to dive after you.”

“You still wear his necklace?” William’s voice jolts me from the memory.

We’ve reached the bottom of the stairs and he’s behind me, peering down at where my thumb is rubbing the Pendragon coin hanging from the chain at my chest.

My ears heat. “Yeah.”

The coin may have been a gift from Nick, but it feels like something we share now. The sigil of the Line of Arthur, the dragon rampant, the mark of the king, on one side, and the Legendborn symbol—a four-pointed diamond overlaying a circle—on the other. I remember how indignant I’d felt when Nick first gave

it to me, that he'd claimed me as "his" in a way that wasn't right. Later, I let myself think that maybe I *could* be his in a way that *did* feel right. And then I was.

I shake my head to clear it and lead us onto the grassy arena floor. When we reach the center, William stops mid-step. "Sel's last ward—"

"Follows the tree line. I've checked." I jerk my chin to the other side of the open field. Sel's third and outermost ward starts a few feet from the ditch where I'd once hidden with Sydney, a Page, during the tournament. From there, it stretches in a wide curve to make a massive circle of Battle Park with the Lodge at the center.

William nods, satisfied. "All right. Show me what you've got, newbie."

I know what he's doing. Teasingly reminding me that even though I—not Arthur—succeeded in the combat trial using my own hard-earned skills, the other Scions are still *years* ahead of me when it comes to knowing how to fight with aether. They'd started preparing for the possibility of inheriting their knights' aether abilities when they were six years old. Began training with rubber and wooden practice versions of their knights' preferred weapons at seven. I'm sixteen—ten years behind everyone else and just getting started.

William is reminding me, I think, to be kind to myself. To remember that even as adept as he is, he is human, like me. And humans must learn to wield aether, one step at a time.

Mediums can't control the dead. Even if I could contact Arthur at will, I can't—and won't—rely on possession to wield his power. If I am to lead, I have to be able to access and control aether on my own, like the others do.

My own breath is loud and raspy in my ears. My heart kicks at my rib once, twice. I close my eyes. Try to slow it down. Take another breath. Open my palms to the sky.

"Aether is all around you." William's voice is soft in my ears. "Already at your fingertips."

Aether is all around me. It's already here.

"A whisper. That's all you need."

I grin. "Sel doesn't whisper for power, he *pulls*."

William snorts. "A model you don't have to follow, not here."

I breathe deep and reach without reaching until warm air—aether—begins to dance along my skin. Then, I open my eyes—and *call* for that aether. Invite it to transform from its invisible gaseous state to the energy I can see and manipulate—and blue fire ignites around my hands and arms.

“Good,” William murmurs, “Calling aether to mage flame is the first hurdle. Now, forge it. . . .”

The mage flame grows hotter. I hiss but hold steady and imagine the whirling wisps falling into the solid mass of Excalibur. I craft Arthur’s hilt in my mind and *push* the flames into my image. I visualize a swirling storm of aether collapsing into the length of Arthur’s blade, then layering over and over itself until thin sheets of magic become a sharp-edged weapon.

But my will isn’t enough to cool the mage flame into a solid. My images don’t work.

There is only burning.

Instead of concentrating into solid mass, my flames roar *higher*. The fine hair on my forearms sings; there’s a charred smell in my nose. “Come on . . .,” I mutter.

William steps forward. “Bree, stop. We’ll try again.”

“No.” I need to try again *now*. While the flames are here. *The blade is a . . . a longsword. Thick and silver, a blood groove down the middle . . .*

“Bree—”

“I can do it.” I grit my teeth. *Pommel is shaped like a circle. Red diamond at the center—*

My hiss grows until it’s a low cry. It’s no longer the aether scalding me; it’s my refusal to let it go.

“Bree, release it—”

“No! I just need—”

“Release it!”

The magic bites into my skin, the burns going deeper. I scream—and finally release it.

The explosion blasts out and down, blowing dirt and dead leaves up into my face before the aether shimmers and disappears.

“Damnit!” I slam a balled fist into the ground—and punch a hole into the earth.

William coughs, waving a hand through the dust in his face. “Now there’s dirt in your wounds.”

I groan. He’s right. *And* it’s in my hair. I’ll have to wash it again if I want it to look nice for tomorrow. “*Damnit!*” I repeat.

William kneels at my side, one silver-liquid-coated hand resting over my forearm. He’d called his own aether for a healing swyn so quickly I hadn’t seen it. The bright, citrus scent of his aether signature floods my nose. “It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not! I tried for Arthur’s sword this time. Before, I’d tried for his shield. God, even just a plain gauntlet, William. I can’t forge *any* of Arthur’s armor, much less make something solid enough to do damage.”

William takes my right arm in his gentle fingers and tuts. The burns sting like hell, even more so now with little bits of soil clinging to the raw and shiny red streaks. “Forging aether into solid matter was overwhelming to me, too, even after all that I’d studied—”

“I don’t have a decade to study!” I shout.

Used to Sel’s outbursts—far angrier and louder than mine—William doesn’t flinch or even look up, just continues. “Even after all that I’d studied, it took long hours to visualize and forge Gawain’s daggers. I visited the replicas in storage often to memorize their weights, feel their hilts in my hand. You must know the weapon to forge it. You need more time with Excalibur, I think. It is unique in our world, remember. An aether weapon made stronger by each Scion of Arthur who wields it, changing with each hand that holds it.”

William’s swyns are a literal balm. Calming, soothing.

“Your castings don’t burn at all. You cool aether down from that”—I gesture in the air with my left hand—“to this.” I point to my wrist, wrapped in shining silver-blue fluid.

“The aether I call is nowhere near as hot as yours to begin with. And I certainly don’t call it in the amounts you do.”

I frown. “What does that mean?”

“It means what we already know. That you are unusual. A new type of

power—or rather, a new combination of powers. The invisible energy we call aether is a mutable ambient element manipulated by will, but that manipulation is somewhat defined by the user. Scions and Squires are limited by their knights' inheritances. I can cast Gawain's swyns and I can forge armor—not the exact sixth-century variety, no plates back then—but it must be a variation that works for Gawain's gifts. The only weapon we can cast is our knight's chosen weapon. With their demon heritage, Merlins can cast anything they wish: a staff, a hound, a protective barrier. You yourself have wielded aether in its mage flame state to burn demons in battle—something the Legendborn cannot do." He pauses. "What about your Bloodcraft abilities? Can you call the aether—*root*—you create from within, then forge *it* into solid matter?"

I shake my head. "My Bloodcrafted root doesn't work like that. It's defensive, not offensive."

What the Legendborn have named "aether," Rootcrafters refer to as "root." Instead of forging weapons, typical Rootcrafters commune with ancestors to request access to ambient root—and there doesn't seem to be a limit with how they use it after that, from healing to memory walking.

But Vera's Bloodcraft spell takes it one step further. In the cave, red root flames ignited *within* me and flowed *from* my body, down my arms and hands. I breathed crimson fire that scorched isels and burned through their demon flesh—but only after they'd attacked me first.

William hums thoughtfully and switches his aether-drenched fingers to my left arm. The stinging burns on my right have already faded to a horrible itch. "What you did in the ogof . . . that was far more powerful than any Legendborn weapon casting could ever be. You didn't need a weapon; you *were* the weapon."

William's words remind me of Vera's. *You are my lineage, at its sharpest and strongest.* I breathe through the memory of her voice, every syllable its own type of cut. "All that power—Arthur's aether armor, Vera's Bloodcraft root—was out of my control. Just like now." I face him again, voice firmer. "And I need to get control before the Regents find out I don't have it."

"Why? You are the Awakened Crown Scion of Arthur. Control over his aether abilities, or lack thereof, doesn't change that. You can claim the title with

the Rite, even be coronated, without forging a single plate of aether armor. *You pulled the sword.* He flashes a grin. “You are his heir, burned forearms or not.”

“But if I’m going to lead the search for Nick, I need to earn the Regents’ and other Scions’ *respect*. I need to be as good at this as Nick would have been.”

“Well,” William says, sympathetic. “My diagnosis? It’s only a matter of time with Arthur’s abilities. And until then, at least you know how your Bloodcraft works.”

I scoff and kick at the ground. “Not as well as I’d like. I ran from my Bloodcraft at first, even if I didn’t fully realize that’s what it was, because I didn’t want to deal with my mother’s death. If I had just faced things head-on, I would have had access to root *months ago*.”

William watches me. “Is that what you’re doing now? Facing your challenges head-on?”

I think about it for a moment, and Vera’s last words return once more. Hot and sharp and direct. *We ran so you would not have to.* Then my mother’s, from the hidden memory she’d left behind. *When the time comes, if it comes, don’t be scared. Fight.* My mother hadn’t known half as much about our Bloodcraft powers as I do, and she used them to do what was right anyway. To save people.

“Yes,” I tell him. “No more running.”

“What the *hell* are you two doing?”

Selwyn’s voice cracks across the arena—a whip of sound that lashes us both. I groan and look up. William sighs and shakes his head.

Sel is a tall, dark shape at the top of the cliff. Too far to make out his facial expression, but I don’t need sight to sense his anger. Even from fifty feet away, his gaze scorches my cheek.

He steps over the edge. His coat lifts in the air behind him, a dark shadow fluttering against stone. As soon as he lands, he’s moving—and at my side in a furious blur.

This close, his eyes are a harsh bright gold. He looks like he’s just come back from hunting: flushed cheeks, wind-whipped raven-black hair, smudges of dirt on his dark duster, and his aether signature billowing in a cloud around him, fresh and burning. Whiskey, set ablaze.

“Explain yourselves!” Sel bellows, staring down at William.

William releases another, heavier sigh and continues his work. “Hello, Selwyn. Back from the hunt already?”

“The campus is clear,” Sel snaps. “Imagine my alarm when I arrived home and you were *both* missing. I will give you two minutes—no, *one* minute to explain yourselves before I drag Br—” Sel’s glare lands on my arm in William’s hands.

He must be beyond furious for his situational awareness to be so delayed. In the span of a breath, the Merlin takes in the healing aether wrapping my arm from elbow to wrist. His nostrils flare, scenting the lingering ozone in the air. “You have burned yourself.” He looks up, and his gaze hardens on mine. “Again.”

It’s the first time he’s looked me in the eye since he arrived. The first time we’ve seen each other in a week. The first words he’s said to me after *days* of silence.

And here we are having the same fight that drove us apart.

I bite my lip so I don’t scream at him. “I told you I can’t just sit in my room while you’re all out hunting and fighting. I should be—”

“You *should* be back in the Lodge!” he snarls. “Behind *three layers* of wards, Briana!” He points at my wounds. “Is this not evidence enough of that?”

Shame and embarrassment flood my cheeks. And on top of those, I feel the sting of Selwyn using my full name to chastise me. “Once I can control Arthur’s aether, I won’t *need* the wards. And you can’t give me orders forever, Kingsmage!”

He levels a stony glare at me. “I will give you orders right up until you take the Rite of Kings, and stop not a moment before.”

This time I do scream—a wordless, frustrated sound behind clenched teeth. “What about everyone else?”

Sel lifts a dark brow. “Be specific.”

“You—” I push to my feet, but William tugs me right back down. It’s not yet midnight; I could break his grip with Arthur’s strength, but it’s *William*. He may not get in the middle of our fight, but he is a healer through and through—he’ll

never let me walk away with fresh wounds. “You ordered the others to follow me on campus!”

Sel’s mouth thins. “I did.”

“I don’t need them to guard me—”

“Clearly you do.” He shakes his head. “Do you have *any* idea—”

A short, screaming howl cuts him off from beyond the arena trench. The sound shatters our argument. My heart rockets against my ribs so fast it hurts. I know that cry. . . . I *remember* it.

“Sel—”

His expression flips from surprise to deadly focus in an instant. “Flank her,” Sel orders, and speeds to my right with aether streaming toward both palms.

William is already on his feet, at my left in a blink. His aether armor builds itself in a rapid flow of clinking plates and chain mail. I stifle my envy.

The high-pitched screech comes again. It hits the cliff wall and bounces back against the trees, playing tricks on our ears. “How many?” I ask.

“Too many. Could be a pack.” Sel glances behind us and above the cliff, where the forest continues back toward the Lodge in the pitch black of night. I know what he wants to do, what he’s thinking. He wants to send me running back the way we came, to cross into safety behind his wards. “Go.”

“No.” I set my jaw. “I have Arthur’s strength!”

His eyes flash. “But not his wisdom.” Whatever calculus he’s doing, whatever scenarios he’s running in his mind, they don’t include me. “William, we need Gawain’s power. How much longer?”

William glances at the moon overhead. A quick check of the sky for the power in his blood. “Still a few minutes—”

Sel curses. “Too long.”

“Get Bree back to the Lodge,” William says. “I can handle this on my own.”

Sel’s eyes narrow into the darkness, seeing more than we can—and his face pales. “No, William, you can’t.”

“Selwyn!” Insult flashes across William’s face. “I said I can *handle* it! Stop being—”

“Oh no . . .” I finally see what has found us in the woods.

William follows my pointing finger and blanches. “Dear God.”

A dozen enormous, armored, fully corporeal hellfoxes emerge from the trees. These monsters may be lesser demon isels, but they are as tall as trucks. The line of them stretches thirty feet across in either direction. Green, smoky aether rises from their bodies, pluming upward into a dozen clouds with every swish of their scaled tails.

William rotates his wrists once—a sharp snap up—and two shining gauntlets appear on his forearms. “That’s not a pack. . . .”

“No.” Sel grits his teeth. “It’s a legion.” By now he’s gathered enough aether to create a swirling cloud around our ankles—cool to the touch and perfectly in his control—but I don’t know if it’s enough. Sel and I were barely able to fight three together, and they were half the size of these and partially corporeal.

I’ve never seen this many fully corporeal Shadowborn at one time. How much aether have they been able to consume to become dense enough that Onceborns could see them?

The foxes snap at Sel’s ward. Butt their heads against it. Testing it. Ripples of aether appear on impact, fanning out in abrupt, bright circles in the air.

“The ward will hold them, won’t it?” I ask.

As if in answer, the fox directly across from us steps back and crouches low. It opens its jaw wide in an ear-splitting call—and the aether of Sel’s ward begins to flow into its mouth in a stream of silver smoke.

“Oh, sh—” Sel is cut off by another scream and another, until all twelve foxes begin calling a section of his casting into their bodies . . . and his ward thins before our eyes.



SEL HAS FROZEN in place. Only his eyes dart up and down his diminishing ward, taking in the twelve whirlpools emptying into the foxes' mouths. I can't tell if he's thinking or freaking out. God, I hope it's not the latter. I don't want to see Sel freaking out.

This is the double-edged sword of using aether to fight powerful Shadowborn. It can be wielded as a weapon . . . or our enemies can consume it to grow stronger. Sometimes in the same battle.

William tenses beside me. A Gawain dagger now rests in each of his fists. "We could alert the others."

Sel blinks back into action, shaking his head. "No time."

I step forward, and the motion catches the attention of the largest fox. Its mouth snaps shut, and it lowers its head to level a dark green gaze directly at me. The foxes on either side of it turn too, fixing me with stares.

"They know who Bree is," Sel snarls. "They're here for her." He barks orders without taking his eyes off the legion. "Get her back up the cliff to the Lodge. If they get past me, head to the basement and open the Wall of Ages. Seal the wall behind you, escape through the tunnels." He sheds his duster to reveal the T-shirt below, freeing his arms and upper body for battle. "I'll hold them."

"How?" I shout. "They're eating the ward! They'll eat your weapon, too!"

His gaze darkens. "They'll have to catch it first."

Sel strides toward the foxes, growing his hurricane. The wind whistles and picks up speed then settles into the shape he wants: a single long, silver aether chain that keeps growing, link by link, on the ground. On one end, a heavy, round weight the size of a softball materializes; on the other, a handle attached to a wicked-looking arced blade.

I immediately recognize the weapon from training sessions in the arena, staged with Sel's own aether beasts: It's a chain scythe. A weapon to ensnare, pull close, and slice an enemy clean through.

Sel grasps the sickle in his left hand and, with a grunt, yanks the heavy-ball weight on the other end of the chain up into the air. The muscles in his back and arms flex as he pulls the airborne weight into a wide overhead spin. By the second rotation, the ball is moving so fast it's a silver, whistling blur against the darkness. The foxes' screeching grows louder.

Two warm palms pull my face away from the sight. I twist, gasping, to face William. His eyes bore into mine, now glowing the deep, pulsing green of Gawain. He yells over the noise. "If he has to protect you, he won't protect himself!"

"But—"

"We need to run, Bree!"

I gulp and nod. Okay.

We run.

But it's too late. We only make it a few strides toward the stone stairs on the cliffside before William shouts in alarm.

A large shadow streaks down the cliff, a black bullet in the shape of a man—and aims right toward me.

Without stopping or slowing, the shadow bends at the last second and upends me over their shoulder in a single, gut-swooping motion. The world twists upside down. Breath leaves me in a painful wheeze. They pivot in a blink, locking me in place with an arm across my thighs, and run back the way they came before William can react.

I'm already dizzy, but panic sends my mind spinning. My head bounces against my captor's back with each step, breaking my thoughts into jagged pieces.

A Shadowborn legion. Fully corporeal—powerful enough to take out the underpowered Legendborn. Sel on his own at the border, outmatched.

Captured. Someone took me from *inside* the ward—can't be a demon. Not a goruchel shapeshifter. A *human* figure attacked me, just as Sel turned away . . . timed perfectly with the demon attack, too perfectly—

Suddenly, the answer flashes through my mind.

"My mistress, Morgaine . . ." Rhaz had *warned* us, warned *me*—

Shadowborn and Morgaines working together. Allied against the Order.

My survival brain kicks in. Rage pumps clarity through my veins.

I won't be taken.

The Morgaine has us halfway up the stone staircase, with William giving chase in full armor. I pound at the figure's spine with a closed fist. Once. *Twice*.

"Oomph." The Morgaine grunts under Arthur's strength—*good*—and trips, nearly dropping me.

Before I can strike again, the Morgaine tightens their left arm against my legs—and springs up the rest of the cliff, landing us at the top in a single jump.

A heartbeat later, and they've leapt again. This time we land in the large lower limbs of the giant white oak tree that stands in the woods between the Lodge and the arena.

Still draped on their shoulders, my chest rises with theirs when they take a deep inhale—and jump again, and again, until we are six stories up in one of the tree's middle branches.

Abruptly, they bend, sliding me down to my feet until my back rests against the wide trunk. The branch below me is just broad enough that both of my feet can fit. The hard bark at my spine is somewhat reassuring, but we're terrifyingly far off the ground.

In a matter of seconds, the Morgaine has trapped me too high up to escape, even with Arthur's strength in my legs.

The fox legion echoes in the distance—shrieks and clicks, then angry howls. As my attacker darts along the tree limb, they are illuminated by quick flashes of green and blue aether. The person is my height, drenched in a belted black leather tunic and tactical pants. Fingerless gloves reveal pale fingers. The

Morgaine's face and hair are hidden by the heavy drape of a black leather cowl as they survey the ground below.

Doesn't matter. I don't need to see my enemy to fight them.

As soon as they are within striking distance, I step into a jab, throw my weight into it—only for my right fist to be caught tight in their own, shot up at the last second without a glance in my direction.

Their hand engulfs mine in a confident grip with plenty of strength behind it, strength that could turn crushing—

I twist. Find balance. Kick at their knee—force them to release me.

They shift back—I surge forward.

A right hook to their ribs. They pivot away before it lands—too fast—grasp my forearm, use my momentum, pull me off balance. I stumble into them, nearly slipping off the branch. They hold my wrist tight.

Then, the Morgaine chuckles.

Chuckles.

They're . . . *laughing?* At me?

An angry growl roars up from my gut to my chest—and my red root flares to life. Blooms bright at my elbow and rushes down my wrist until *both* our fists are engulfed in flames.

But only one of us gets burned.

My attacker yelps in pain, leaping back on the branch. They land deftly in a crouch, balanced on their heels, cradling one gloved hand against their chest and hissing lowly from the forest's shadows.

The light of my root pools around me. At my fists, it pulses in time with my heartbeat, words made rhythm. *I-won't-run. I-won't-run. I won't-run.* I know without seeing my reflection that my eyes have taken on the glowing crimson of my Bloodcraft.

Even my attacker's eyes shine with the flames of my ancestors.

I raise my chin. "Who's laughing now?"

Silence for one beat, two. Then, the low chuckle returns, followed by an amused, accented, *young* male voice. "Still me . . . my liege."

The root around my hands flickers. *My liege.* My eyes narrow. "Excuse me?"

“So it’s true.” The stranger’s *r* rolls lightly. Scottish, maybe? “What they say about yer aether.”

“What do you know about my aether?” I snap. Abruptly, he raises his head to look at me. Warmth hits my cheeks in a wave. My root flares again. “Who are you?”

He holds up a defensive hand. “I’m—”

Thwip! A bright blue aether whip cracks in the air, snaking around my attacker’s ankle from below. He tenses. “Ach, shite.”

The glowing whip tightens—and yanks him clean off the branch.

But my attacker is *fast*. While falling, he produces an aether blade in one hand and slices the whip through.

Selwyn is fast, too. He’s on the other boy before he even hits the ground. In a millisecond, the newcomer is flat on his back with Selwyn towering over him, whip now lengthened into a jagged blade pointed at his throat. Sel’s chest heaves; he’s winded, or furious, or both. Yellow-green dust and globs of ichor run in streaks down his face and cheek, onto his shoulders. Bits of dead demon drape around his shoulders like a mantle. There was a dozen in that legion . . . did he kill them all?

Selwyn may not like me right now, but he is here to protect me. Even if my mind doesn’t quite process that fact, my magic does. My root flames dampen, then fade. I sway a bit but hold steady. Small bursts of root don’t drain me like they used to, thank goodness.

“I should kill you for touching her.” I know Sel means me, but after our fight, the angry, possessive tone that reaches me up in the trees seems out of place. Like he’s talking about someone else. The Crown Scion, not Bree. “I should . . .,” he murmurs, “and I think I might.”

“Kane!” The newcomer tears his hood off, revealing tousled, dark auburn hair, long on the top and shorn on the sides—and a pair of glowing golden eyes. A young white man, not more than twenty.

Sel blinks. “Douglas?”

My captor is a *Merlin*. Not a Morgaine at all. A wave of confusion and embarrassment passes through me. Why would a Merlin try to . . . kidnap me?

“Long time no see.” Douglas’s soft Scottish brogue wraps its way around his speech.

“A very long time.” Sel’s stony expression sends a trickle of apprehension down my spine. I’m not the only one who notices that he doesn’t lower his blade.

“Drop your weapon, Kingsmage,” Douglas commands.

Sel’s lip curls upward. “When I feel like it.”

“Selwyn!” I hear William’s voice and running footsteps. He pushes through the bramble and appears beneath my tree. “Where’s Bree?”

“I’m here!” I call out. William’s head tilts back to find me overhead, and his glowing green eyes widen.

Sel glances up at me for the first time. “She’s safe.”

“Thanks to me.” Douglas takes the opportunity of Sel’s distraction to elbow Sel’s blade aside and jump to his feet.

“Why should I thank you for your services”—Sel smirks and points at Douglas’s right hand with his blade—“when it looks like Briana herself already did the honors?”

“Heh,” Douglas huffs, flipping his palm over. Even this high up, I can see the burned hole in the center of the leather glove. His head tips back until he meets my eyes. His grin is a flash of white teeth and long canines in the night. “That she did.”

Sel is no longer amused. “Douglas, you—”

“Noswaith dda, Selwyn.”

A new voice enters the clearing. Low and smooth like warm honey, it slips down my spine, leaving goosebumps in its wake. The new Merlin that emerges from the trees has warm olive skin and thick black hair slicked back into an undercut. As he steps out, he adjusts his long black overcoat. A silver Legendborn symbol is stitched on each wide lapel. Silver grommets at his shoulders wink in the shadows.

The man stares at Sel, expectant. In response, Sel widens his fingers to release the forged weapon. It dissipates into a sparkling cloud before it can hit the ground. To my surprise, Sel swallows audibly and straightens his shoulders before addressing the newcomer.

“Noswaith dda, Mage Seneschal.”

My stomach drops. If the man below me is a Mage Seneschal, then he is one of the highest-ranking Merlins in the Order. An advisor on the High Council of Regents.

As if on cue, four figures melt from the woods, two on either side of the Seneschal. Mage flame swirls around their palms and wrists, alive and ready to be cast. Their eyes—golden, shining, bright—pierce through the dissipating mist and show me exactly who they are. But it’s their attire that tells the full story. Tactical gear makes them deadly shadows at every turn: sleek boots; black pants; and heavy, hooded tunics, cowls raised high, casting their faces in darkness. Leather fingerless gloves striped with silver—*aether*-conducting thread. All of them, tall and broad-shouldered, radiate power and control. They have paused in unison behind the Seneschal like kinetic energy restrained.

Another realization strikes like a physical blow.

These Merlins are Mageguard, the elite military unit of the Order’s forces.

Which means this is not just any Seneschal of the Council. This is Erebus Varelian, the Seneschal of Shadows. The most powerful Merlin in the world.

I gasp. Abruptly, heat like I’ve never felt before scalds my skin and cheeks. Burns from multiple Merlin eyes raised to find me, so harsh I wince.

Erebus, however, slowly, deliberately turns not to me, but to inspect the remnants of the destroyed demons on Sel’s person. “It appears there are not wolves at your door, Kingsmage, but foxes.”

“I am certain the wolves are not far behind,” Selwyn says evenly.

Erebus eyes Sel for a long moment, as if deciding whether Sel is being impatient. Whether Sel’s comment was literal, about hellhounds, or metaphorical, about our new guests. Finally, he says, “They always are.”

“I destroyed the legion.” Sel looks beyond Erebus to the woods. “But we should search the area for an *uchel*.”

“We *have* searched the area,” one of the hooded Mageguard replies. “There is none.”

Sel shakes his head. “It is known that *isels* do not work together without an *uchel* leading them—”

“And for many years it was ‘known’ that goruchel shapeshifters were extinct,” Erebus counters. “Yet one infiltrated this chapter not six months ago.”

Sel and I both stiffen at the mention of Rhaz. Sel never thought goruchels were extinct. In fact, he alone suspected that a goruchel could be among us, studying us and waiting. His one mistake was thinking it was me.

Protest sparks on my lips, and Sel clears his throat unnecessarily loudly. A clear message to smother that spark before it becomes words. I grit my teeth. *Fine.*

Erebus continues. “If we limit our hunt to only what is known, the *unknown* will soon hunt *us*.” He tsks. “And as for your earlier declaration, are you quite sure you eliminated the full legion?”

Sel raises his chin. “I am.”

“I see.” The Seneschal’s glittering eyes slide to William. “Scion Sitterson of the Line of Gawain, I presume?”

“Yes.” William walks forward. “Good evening, Seneschal Varelian. Guards.” He nods to the silent Merlins, faces still hidden in shadow. “We were not expecting to meet a member of the Council tonight.”

“For security reasons, we do not broadcast our movements,” Erebus says. “I’m sure you understand.” He tilts his head, watching the bright emerald flicker of Gawain in William’s eyes. “I have long been fascinated by the dueling inheritances of the Line of Gawain. The power to crush an opponent’s bones in one hand and the power to heal in another. Poetic.”

William’s face is unreadable. “That is a word one could use.”

“Diplomacy and tact.” A smile spreads across Erebus’s full mouth. His canines are long—a sign of his age and power as a Merlin. Just like Isaac’s. “I have found that these are also inheritances of your Line.”

William dips his chin. “My father would agree with you.”

“If the area is secure and the niceties are concluded,” Sel says impatiently, “I will retrieve the Crown Scion from her . . . tree.”

When the Seneschal finally tilts his head upward to find me overhead, the full force of his gaze alone nearly knocks me off the branch. Erebus had already noticed me, of course. He *chose* to save my greeting for last.

A pause. The air crackles with anticipation. Silent to human ears, but at this point I'm certain every Merlin in this damn field can hear my heart racing. "No, you will not," Erebus says mildly.

Sel's head jerks up. "Excuse me?"

Erebus nods to Douglas. "Guard Douglas, could you please?"

Before Sel can protest further, Douglas takes two quick steps and leaps swiftly to a branch below me, then the next, until suddenly he's right back where he started. I step back—and my foot slips on crumbling bark. Douglas catches me at the elbow. "Steady there, m'liege."

Now that his hood is back, I can see that Guard Douglas has deep-set sun-gold eyes, brighter than Sel's. This close, they cast a warm glow on my face. Like Sel, this Merlin has tattoos, but his crawl like vines up the side of his neck, sprout wild from his collar, and trail down the pale knuckles exposed from his gloves.

Cognizant of the eyes below us—and indignant on Sel's behalf—I carefully extract myself from his grip. "Just get me down already."

His eyes twinkle. "Yes, m'liege." He steps forward slowly, forecasting his movements this time so that I can see his approach. When I nod, he dips down, slipping one arm behind my knees and the other behind my shoulders to lift me easily. Without losing balance, he turns, steps off of the branch with me in his arms, and lands so softly that I barely feel the impact when we meet the ground.

I do, however, hear the faint murmur of voices rise up from the earth the moment I get my own feet beneath me. Quiet protests from ancestors I don't recognize. That display of root was minimal, compared to what I did in the cave . . . but it was enough. Enough that the dead are complaining.

I swallow. I'll need to reach out to Mariah as soon as I can. Check to see if any living felt my root, too.

Douglas notices my discomfort. "Are you all right?"

I meet Sel's eyes, see the tension in his jaw. He's fuming for every other reason in the world right now, but there's recognition there too. He knows exactly what I'm worried about with the Rootcraft community, and he knows exactly why I can't say a word about it in front of the Mageguard.

"I'm fine." I slip out of Douglas's grip and come face to face with the waiting crowd of Merlins—and a Seneschal of the High Council of Regents.

Erebus's eyes are the darkest red I've ever seen. They are the color of thick heart-blood, on the razor's edge of black. His face is emotionless, but his attention—the very *act* of his consideration—scorches the tender skin of my cheeks. Before this moment, I'd have claimed Isaac Sorenson to be the most overwhelming Merlin I'd ever met, but Erebus Varelian's scrutiny would turn Isaac's regard into a hollow threat. My heart thunders in my ears. Fear splinters through my nerves—*When the time comes, if it comes, don't be scared.*

I am my mother's daughter.

I am also . . . covered in dirt.

I can only imagine what I look like to Erebus. The still-healing welts of my own making run in red stripes down my forearms. My once shiny curls have escaped their twists, the ends loose and fraying.

Suddenly, Erebus's gaze does not matter. His strength *does not* matter. What matters is how *I* respond right now, in this moment. I cannot cower before the first Council member I meet. *I will not.*

I lift my chin and stride forward to meet the fire of Erebus's attention head-on.

"Seneschal Varelian."

His crimson eyes widen. At this distance, his gaze is a silent, cutting thing . . . but interest and anticipation both flicker across his features at my approach. He is impressed.

"Crown Scion Matthews." His voice is loud and resonant for all to hear. "It is an honor to be in your presence."

Then, without warning, Erebus Varelian, the most powerful Merlin in the world, drops to one knee to bow before me.



THE MAGEGUARD FOLLOW suit, one at a time, until they have all kneeled to me. The ends of their robes lay over the dirt, covering the earth in black and shimmering silver.

To my left, William glances at the kneeling sorcerers, then back to me. Right. Now is the time to use the protocol I've studied. I clear my throat. "Rise, Mage Seneschal Varelian of the High Council and noble members of the Round Table Mageguard."

Erebus and the Merlins rise gracefully to their feet to stand at parade rest.

Erebus holds my gaze without blinking, and I realize he's waiting for me to direct the remainder of the conversation.

"I . . ." *Protocol, protocol, come on, Bree.* Start with formalities. "Welcome to the Southern Chapter, Seneschal of Shadows. Has your Regent accompanied you? I should like to meet her."

Erebus smiles, expression nearing something fond. "Regent Cestra, as commander of the military, is with the other members of the Guard. She will be in attendance at tomorrow's ceremony. As will the other two Regents and their Seneschals."

Panic hits the back of my throat. All three Regents and their Seneschals at the memorial. The full Council of six, nearly upon us. I am more grateful than ever that I warned the Rootcrafters on campus.

Sel is displeased, and does not hide it. “We expected additional Merlins to join prior to the ceremony. We did not expect the Council, or the Mageguard.”

Erebus raises his chin. “The Mageguard clear every location in advance of the Council’s arrival. Advance notice gives our enemies time to plan against us.”

Sudden irritation flares within me. “Are we your enemies, then? Is that why we were not given notice that you would be attending tomorrow’s memorial?” Sel’s eyes cut to mine, brows lifted.

Erebus blinks. “N-no, my liege. Of course not.” His mouth opens, but closes again, like he wishes to reconsider his next sentence before releasing it.

We have caught him off guard. *Good. Now he knows what it feels like.*

Finally, Erebus speaks—carefully, I notice. “A public appearance of Order leadership in one place has not occurred in several years, and, of course, Arthur has not Called a Scion in two and a half centuries.”

“Does this mean all of the Mageguard has been assigned to this weekend’s event?” Sel asks, eyes traveling over the silent figures behind Erebus.

“Yes, all twenty-four will be on-site,” Erebus replies. “With a secondary support unit to follow.”

“Quite a lot of firepower for a funeral,” I murmur.

“In these times of uncertainty, with Shadowborn who could be hidden in plain sight, it is impossible to be overly cautious, my liege. Any large gathering brings with it added risk, and you are, after all”—Erebus shakes his head with a frown—“without a bonded Kingsmage.”

It is a well-aimed barb. Lines of strain pull at the outer edges of Sel’s eyes, but he remains silent.

I try to change the topic. “If you like, we can take you to the ceremony site tomorrow morning, early.”

The small look of triumph on Erebus’s face tells me that my attempt to steer clear of tension has failed. Instead, my words provided him with some opening I cannot see. “No need, Crown Scion. The other team is there now. We will remain here, because it is a Merlin’s job to ensure that the level of security you receive is unassailable, day or night, wherever you may be. Within the chapter’s Lodge, on its surrounding grounds—even at its borders.”

A Merlin's job. He means Sel. Oh no.

"It is fortuitous that we arrived when we did"—anger simmers behind Erebus's eyes—"if what I have witnessed here tonight is the best that the Kingsmage of the Southern Chapter can do."

Sel stiffens. "I assure you, Seneschal Varelian—"

"You assure me not at all, Kingsmage Kane!" Erebus explodes. "Not when I arrive to see *a dozen* cedny uffern breaking down your ward." He gestures to me, my face and still-healing arms. "Not when I arrive to witness the Crown Scion of Arthur, covered in soil and dust, *wounded*, and running for her *life*."

When Sel doesn't refute Erebus's comment, I open my mouth to protest it myself, to say that my appearance and my wounds are not Sel's fault. But just as I do, William's hand is at my elbow. I don't know if he wants me to keep quiet for my sake or Sel's, but his grip is tight enough that I understand the warning. *Don't*. They've each stopped me once now. Do I trust them to know what's best, or do I challenge Erebus? There is some . . . procedure here, a flow of things in a certain order, a confrontation long expected, that I'm just on the outside of. So I hesitate.

Erebus's voice goes low and dangerous. "Bring forward the demon that Kingsmage Kane neglected to destroy."

Sel's head whips up, eyes wide, just as a sixth guard comes forward from the direction of the arena, dragging something glowing and green through the brush behind her.

The massive demon is alive—just barely. A spear I recognize as Sel's typical design bobs at the creature's throat as the fox growls at its captor. Thrown with Sel's usual force, but it seems to have missed its mark by a matter of inches. Sel scowls. "I believed it to be a killing blow, just like the others."

"Belief is not fact, Kingsmage Kane," Erebus murmurs.

A ruddy flush swims up Sel's throat to his cheeks. "Yes, Seneschal."

With a signal from Erebus, the Mageguard holding the dying fox releases the creature into the middle of the group of Merlins. Every Merlin—Sel included—steps inward as one to close the circle and prevent its escape. The demon collapses, eyeing its enemies.

“What’s your point?” I turn to Erebus, fuming. “He missed one, but clearly your team found it!”

“My point . . . ,” Erebus murmurs. As he trails off, the wind shifts, and the demon’s snout snaps up and around to single-mindedly follow a scent until it finds its sole prey—me. Without warning, it launches itself toward the opening between Sel and Erebus, trying to get to me. Erebus pivots and, in one smooth motion, grasps the demon mid-leap with one hand. His fingers dig into its armor so deeply that gaseous aether leaks from where they are embedded down to the knuckle. “My point is that all it takes is a single, well-aimed death blow from a Shadowborn demon to kill an Awakened Scion of Arthur and undo fifteen centuries of Order and Legendborn sacrifices and victories, making those same sacrifices worthless.”

The demon snarls. Then, Erebus’s fist blazes with blue flames so hot and bright that they incinerate the fox almost instantly. His aether signature surrounds me with scents I associate with ancient trees and holy places: myrrh and saps, incense burning.

Erebus wipes his hands, rubs the dust from his lapels, and turns to Selwyn. “I gave you this post with the expectation that you would protect the Scion of Arthur’s life with your own.”

Sel is so furious he can barely speak. “And I accepted the post under that condition,” he spits. “As a *child*.”

“As a *prodigy*,” Erebus corrects. “And yet you stand before me now, as a failure.”

Sel’s eyes spark with defiance. “Nicholas Davis was *not* the Scion of Arthur, so in *that* regard, I suppose we have *both* failed!”

In a blink, Erebus is a blur across the ground—then his hand is around Sel’s throat. He lifts Sel easily, like he’s nothing. Sel’s boots swipe at the grass, then at the air. He gurgles, his hands scrabbling at Erebus’s wrists—

“*Stop!*” I shout.

Erebus releases Sel at once, dropping him onto the ground in a heap—but he does not step away. “My apologies, Crown Scion.” Instead, he watches Sel cough and wheeze, bent low on all fours.

I step forward. “Sel—”

Sel shakes his head once, halting me. After another moment of gasping, he pushes upright to his knees with glistening, bloodshot eyes and flushed cheeks—and anger barely contained in closed fists, behind tight lips. Erebus’s hand had been around his neck for just a moment, but there are already deep purple bruises forming beneath his jaw. They’ll heal and be gone by morning, but I know they hurt in the meantime.

“Kingsmage Kane, do you have an explanation for what occurred here tonight? If you do, by all means, speak”—Erebus’s eyes narrow—“but do so with care.”

A pause. Sel swallows once, twice, before he speaks in a strained voice. “I have no explanation for failing to protect the Crown Scion.”

“I see.” Erebus nods. “What *do* you have?”

Sel looks at me for a long moment before he turns back at Erebus. “Only my own actions upon which to reflect.”

“In *this* regard,” Erebus echoes Sel’s earlier quip icily, “we are in agreement.”

The Mageguard surround us on the walk back to the Lodge. I don’t hear or see them, but if I so much as stumble on a branch, their eyes sting against my skin.

Erebus speaks in a low voice with William on my left. Sel is a silent shadow to my right. I try again to catch his gaze. To communicate my remorse, to let him know that I realize I messed up.

He won’t look at me. The tension in his neck and shoulders speaks loud enough. As we approach the lights in the Lodge backyard, I see the injuries I’d missed deeper in the forest: A cut along his collarbone caked with ichor and dried blood. Blood at his temple, half-smearred from sweat. Even the silver plugs in his gauged ears are half-covered in dirt. A pair of claws must have sliced down his left shoulder blade, ripping right through the black shirt. Guilt sours in my stomach.

Sel’s middle ward washes over my face. Two of the Mageguard materialize from the woods and turn to face the ward from the inside, raising their palms to the barrier.

Sel scowls at the Merlins tinkering with his work. "I just cast that ward."

Erebus answers. "And it will be reinforced."

Sel rolls his eyes, and we leave the two guards behind. When we reach the back lawn, more lights are on inside the Lodge than when I left. The rest of the Legendborn, returned from patrol. Eating late meals, rustling through the fridge and pantry, no doubt. William walks toward the side entry door. "Please excuse me. I always check in with the others when they return in case there are injuries."

"Scion Sitterson." Erebus's voice stops William in his tracks.

"Yes?" William turns. When he glances at me briefly, his eyes are a pale green in the bright floodlights of the Lodge exterior. Gawain's strength, still lit within him.

"Please"—Erebus gestures toward one of the Mageguard—"take Guard Olsen with you. I'll join you both in a moment to introduce myself to the other Legendborn."

The guard throws their hood back to reveal a tall woman with a short blond ponytail. Her hair is shaved above either ear. William nods, turning with her.

I frown as I watch them walk away. "William doesn't need an escort in his own home."

At the sound of my voice, the Mageguard turns on her heel, arms at rest behind her back. Her eyes flicker to me, then back to Erebus. I did not intend my comment to be an order, but this Merlin took it as one, and now she is waiting for clarity, from either me or Erebus.

"I apologize, my liege." Erebus blinks once, twice, appearing genuinely torn. "I sent Guard Olsen to *accompany* Scion Sitterson, not to escort him. She can offer a more casual introduction to the presence of the Mageguard than the formal exchange of titles and greetings. I thought that this would be easier on a Legendborn unit just returned from the hunt and no doubt eager for bed."

Erebus pauses, waiting for my response now, too.

Over Guard Olsen's shoulder, William shrugs.

"Fine," I say. "Thanks for explaining."

Erebus dips his head. "Of course." With a silent look, Olsen pivots back, and she and William walk together to the house.

“Kingsmage Kane,” Erebus says, gesturing to the rear face of the Lodge and the rows of windows marking the residential floors, “which of these is the Crown Scion’s room?”

Sel’s eyes flick up to my window—and darken. “Second floor, third over.”

Erebus’s eyes narrow. “The one with the open window?”

Sel stares at me while directing his answer to Erebus. “Yes.”

I flinch. “That’s my . . .”

Erebus turns curious eyes my way.

I hesitate. If I say that the open window is my fault and not Sel’s, then I’ll have to admit that I successfully escaped Sel’s efforts to keep me safe. And Erebus will add this shortcoming to Sel’s growing list of apparent failures to do his duty.

“There is a third layer of warding,” I finally stammer, avoiding an explanation entirely, “against the glass and brick, all the way around.”

Erebus makes a thoughtful sound while studying the building. “A ward against impact and intrusion?” he asks Sel.

“Yes,” replies Sel.

Another hum. A decision made. “Guards Zhao and Branson,” Erebus calls.

Two of the three remaining Mageguard appear at Erebus’s side in a silent whoosh and remove their hoods in unison. A tall East Asian man with a full mouth and bright golden eyes. A white man whose eyes are green-gold. Both wearing the signature undercut hairstyle of the Mageguard.

“Yes, Seneschal?” they ask.

“One of you at the driveway entrance, please,” Erebus orders. “The other remains here in the yard.” The Merlins nod, then split in two blurs going in opposite directions.

That leaves me, Sel, Erebus, and Douglas. Sel’s expression is one of carefully crafted boredom. I wonder if anyone here is even buying it, honestly. I wonder if his usual insolence will only further annoy Erebus. “Are we done here?” he drawls.

“No.” Erebus gestures to Guard Douglas, who steps forward on cue. “Formal introductions are in order, I think.” Erebus looks between me and the Merlin. “Crown Scion Briana Matthews, please meet Guard Larkin Douglas.”

I blink. “Larkin?”

“Call me Lark.” He dips his chin. “My liege.”

Erebus smiles. “Guard Douglas is the youngest member of the Mageguard, but trained by one of the best.”

“You?” Sel asks drolly.

“No,” Erebus replies simply. “His father, Calum Douglas.”

“How *is* your father, Douglas?” Sel asks, eyes dancing. “Still angry his son lost out to a Kane?”

Lark doesn’t rise to Sel’s bait. “He got over my not being selected for Kingsmage when I was tapped for the Guard,” he replies evenly. He turns to me, eyes twinkling. “Selwyn here might have the flashy title, but we get all the best field missions.”

“Yes,” Sel says with a sigh. “When not securing the safety of the Regents, the Mageguard operate in the darkest of shadows taking on the most dangerous Shadowborn legions, blah blah.”

“Until a sovereign is crowned, anyway.” Lark raises a shoulder.

“Yes, until a sovereign is crowned, then—” Sel stops himself short, eyes narrowing. His gaze darts between Lark and Erebus. “Then the Guard’s sole duty is to protect the king.”

The air thickens with some unnamed tension.

I clear my throat. “I’m missing something.”

“I believe I am too, Briana,” Sel murmurs.

Quiet regret pulls at Lark’s mouth. “Look, Kane . . .”

Erebus turns to me. “My liege, you are aware of the Order’s organizational framework? The body politic?”

“I am.” The very first night I joined the chapter, Lord Davis explained the Order as anatomy, working together. “The Legendborn are the Order’s beating heart.”

Erebus smiles. “Yes. And you will be the head and the crown. But in the absence of a king, and even when one is Called, the Regents are the spine. As the Regent of Shadows, Cestra oversees the Merlin military, the Mageguard, the Order’s intelligence network, and all of its security forces.”

“Security forces that include the Kingsmage.” Sel’s voice has gone curt. His earlier arrogance has been wiped from his features. “Except that my Oath supersedes any order you or Regent Cestra might give.”

“It did . . . ,” Erebus replies slowly, “before your Oath was proven to be misplaced.”

A muscle in Sel’s jaw tightens. Abruptly, he steps closer and, to my utter shock, touches me for the first time in weeks. His long fingers wrap around my wrist—but his grip is not gentle, and his palm is sweaty. “If that medieval politics lesson is over, then I think the Crown Scion is due for rest—”

“Selwyn, I think you realize that I did not introduce Larkin here without purpose. . . .” Erebus’s voice is not unkind, but it is firm. “Your services this past month have been appreciated, but—”

“Just say it,” Sel grits out.

“Guard Douglas will protect the Crown Scion now, and he will remain her escort until they are bound together by the Kingsmage Oath.”



EREBUS'S WORDS FALL like a lead blanket around us. My stomach plummets while Sel becomes perfectly, eerily, dangerously still.

Erebus looks puzzled. "Will this be a problem?"

"I don't . . . I don't need a—a Kingsmage," I stammer. "We need to find Scion Davis and bring him home safe."

Erebus ignores my protest about a Kingsmage entirely. "I have heard that you and Scion Davis are quite close? Is this true?" His eyes are curious, mouth lifted in a pleasant curl, but this question is not innocent.

The Regents do not permit Scions to be romantically involved if there is any chance a child could be produced from their union. Children who possess multiple bloodlines could challenge—or even break—the Order's ability to track and predict which descendant will become a Scion and which ancestral knight will Call them. Tracking the bloodlines with precision is the only way that the Table has remained organized this long. Of course, Nick and I are both living proof that there are gaps in the Order's oversight. No one in the Order knew our true lineages before Lancelot Called him and Arthur Called me.

So much for the superiority of their good intentions.

"We are close," I reply, voice neutral.

Sel drops my wrist and looks away. Clears his throat. "Prior to the revelations about their respective bloodlines, Scion Davis had named Crown Scion

Matthews his Page and chosen her as Squire at the selection gala. These intentions were publicly made.”

Erebus fixes Sel with a stare. “An intention for an Oath that would not have taken, yes. Given that they are both Scions and cannot be bound to each other in such a manner. An unfortunate side effect of this truth, I’m afraid, is that some relationships must fall to the wayside in favor of others.” The quiet note of warning in Erebus’s voice slips between us on the heels of a restrained smile. “Like the relationship between you and the Council, Crown Scion. Or one between you and your new Kingsmage. You must understand that *your* safety is our first priority.”

“And *my* first priority is saving those who may be in more immediate danger than I am,” I counter. “Not bonding myself to someone I do not know.”

Erebus sighs. “Please understand our position. Not only is it unprecedented for a Scion of Arthur of your age to be unbonded to a Kingsmage, but never before in our history has a Scion of Arthur been Awakened *and* become the Crown Scion without a Kingsmage at their side. Guard Douglas is the best candidate, but . . .” Erebus pulls out a tablet from his inside coat pocket. “If you do not wish to take Larkin as your bondmate, I have gathered six Merlin candidates for your consideration. Each within one year of your age, with a variety of genders, casting specialties, and personalities. Whomever you choose can be here within a day’s notice. Regent Cestra and I can discuss each potential Kingsmage with you directly after tomorrow’s Rite in the cave chamber.”

My eyes flutter, shocked at the sharp turn. “The Rite? Tomorrow?”

Erebus lifts a brow. “Are you not . . . prepared for the Rite of Kings to claim your title?”

“No. I mean, yes.” My heart knocks against my sternum. Everything is moving too fast. “I am prepared. I just didn’t realize it would happen so soon.”

“Should we delay?”

“No! But”—I add steel to my voice, feet on firmer ground now—“if there is time after the Rite, I’d like to hear about the search plan for Scion Davis. Again, he is my focus.”

“Very well. But as you saw tonight, your life is already in danger, which

means our Order is in danger. I have read the ogof y ddraig battle debrief, my liege. I am aware—and certainly, impressed—that you destroyed your would-be assassin, the goruchel Rhaz, on your own. But ideally, you would have a bonded Squire at your side to fight *with* you.” His eyes slide to Selwyn, assessing. “And a bonded Kingsmage to fight *for* you. You have neither.”

“That’s not fair,” I insist. I have been avoiding the thought of selecting either a Squire or a Kingsmage. What is the point when I am not allowed near danger? And I don’t need one or the other to find Nick. “We all fought in that battle together. As a chapter. Sel, tell him.”

Sel holds Erebus’s gaze in defiance for a beat, then looks away. “You need a Kingsmage, Briana. We have discussed this.”

We *have* discussed it. Once. When we stood on the balcony after Nick was taken, and when I was hovering between my old self and my new. A Brave Bree, shaken. A Before- and After-Bree, merged. A Medium and Scion, hollowed into a vessel for ancient powers I never predicted. I shake my head away from that day, that memory. “Isn’t that what the Mageguard are for?”

“The Mageguard do protect the King, yes, but their other assignments sometimes take them away from direct security. The Kingsmage, on the other hand, is a life-long personal guard. Eventually, when your, ah . . .” Erebus’s cheeks flush, but he clears his throat and continues, “When your heirs are born, the Mageguard will be reassigned to protect the children until they come of age, but the Kingsmage will remain at your side.”

Jesus H. . . Heat rushes up my neck, and suddenly the entire backyard feels far too small. I want to melt into the grass and down into the planet’s core, clean through to the other side. Let me fall off this planet, *please*. I feel Sel’s eyes on my face, Lark’s and Erebus’s too. “Can we not discuss heirs right now?”

Erebus flushes a deeper red. “Yes, of course. Too early in your young life, and much too late in the evening for that topic, I think.” He smiles apologetically. “I need to make a call to Cestra, and you need to rest. Guard Douglas?”

Lark holds a hand toward the Lodge. “Shall we?” To my surprise, Lark leans across me to look at Sel, too. “Would ye join us, Kingsmage Kane?”

Sel blinks, surprised, but recovers quickly. “Yes, of course.”



We circle the building in silence, a line of three weaving in and out of the shadows at the far end of the rectangular-shaped Lodge. Sel walks behind me, I'm in the middle, and Lark leads the way with his left hand extended to idly skim along the outside of Sel's innermost ward. The fingertips exposed by his leather gloves leave trails of silver through the shimmering barrier.

We slip into the front door braced for attention, but no one is here. Small favors.

Lark tilts his head toward the floor, listening. "Scion Sitterson and Olsen are downstairs, with . . . five? Other voices. The Legendborn, I assume." His eyes scan the foyer, the salon on the left, the grand staircases leading to the residential floor, the doors to the great room beneath the balcony. "Anyone else expected inside?"

"No." Sel is listening too. Both of them taking in far more information about the Lodge than my human ears can register. "I dismissed the Pages from their daily duties at the Lodge weeks ago and revoked their keycard entry. No one but Legendborn can enter the building. And Merlins, obviously."

Lark nods. "Good idea, Kane."

"I do know how to do my job, *Douglas*," Sel says.

Lark glances at us over his shoulder, pale eyes mischievous. "Call me Lark," he repeats.

"Fine," Sel snaps. "I do know how to do my job, *Lark*."

I groan silently. He honestly can't *not*, can he?

"Kane." Lark sighs and turns to face Sel directly. "Look, I don't think you, me, or the Crown Scion ever imagined we'd be standing here right now, under these circumstances."

I snort. "Got that right."

The corner of Lark's mouth turns down as he keeps talking. "But we *are* here, and these *are* the circumstances. For God's sake, I'm here to help. Ye should be thanking me!"

Sel gives Lark a leveling gaze. "Why exactly should I thank you?"

Lark's brows rise. "We were not friends at the academy, but we were not

enemies. Our parents trained us in the old ways, to go beyond the title, beyond the Oaths, in order to do what must be done.”

Something silent and resonant passes between the two Merlins and takes me aback. I hadn't considered this—that Sel has been isolated for months, maybe years, from people like him. He has always been alone at the chapter, in title and duty as well as origin. But in the blink of an eye, there are *seven* Merlins around him, in his space, connecting with him in ways that no one else can. People who truly understand what it is like to be a Merlin among humans, serving out Oaths that keep their demon nature under control.

Slowly, Sel nods. “This is true. Your point?”

“That we've known each other for a long time. I, more than any other Merlin, know how much is at stake for ye, personally.” Lark steps closer to Sel, voice low. “Because I know this has been killing ye, Kane. You're torn between protecting your Oathbound charge and your Crown Scion, all the while worrying that your blood may come for ye in the night, just as it did your mother.”

Sel flinches, and my heart lurches against my chest. The boy whose sharp tongue seems perpetually aimed at other people's tender spots . . . actually *flinching* when Lark hits one of his. I'm sure it doesn't help that Lark seems to know what Sel himself had only discovered a month ago: that his mother was not killed by a demon while on a mission, but arrested and locked away.

Anyone who knows about the former Kingsmage Natasia Kane likely thinks of her as a cautionary tale for “succumbing to the blood,” what the Merlins call it when they lose themselves to the demon nature always hiding just under the surface of all part-human, part-demon cambions. The original Merlin, Arthur's sorcerer, had bespelled his descendants with a safeguard so that as long as they fulfill their Oaths of service and protection to the Order, they can keep that demon part of their blood from taking control. Twenty-five years ago, Nick's father framed Sel's mother—his original Kingsmage—for opening demon Gates in order to murder Onceborn humans so that suspicion would not fall on him for his act of betrayal. Lord Davis told the Regents that Natasia had become too powerful for even the Oaths to stop her from succumbing to her blood, and they believed him. When the Regents quietly took her title and had her

imprisoned, it was assumed that the inability to fulfill her Oaths would erase anything that remained of her humanity.

But a restored memory of the night my mother died showed me that Natasia Kane had been there in the hospital, grieving my mother. Sel and I are the only people who know that not only had his mother escaped her false imprisonment but, somehow, she'd avoided succumbing to her blood while captured. We don't know how she did it, and we don't know where she is to ask. Whenever I have raised that memory of his mother with him, Sel dodges the topic.

Sel is not his mother. And with Nick gone, his Kingsmage Oath is unfulfilled. Right now I can see the pressing wound of *fear* in him—and so can Lark. A haunted, hollow look crosses Sel's face—and guilt pricks at my throat. Little daggers of *Why didn't I ask about this earlier?* and *What else have I missed?*

Another Merlin saw what I hadn't.

"Sel," I murmur, stepping closer, "are you . . . ?"

"I am fine," Sel mutters. Lark drops a hand on Sel's shoulder as he steps around him, continuing his casual stride toward the stairs. Sel moves to follow, leaving me to scramble behind him.

"But Nick . . . your blood—"

"He speaks the truth, Crown Scion. He *is* fine." Lark calls down to us from halfway up the stairs. "His Oath of Service to the chapter is helping him maintain. If it wasn't, and Kane here was anything other than in full control of himself, Erebus would have taken him down on sight. And *I* wouldn't be willing to leave ye alone with him."

Sel scoffs behind him. "You *haven't* left me alone with her."

"Getting there." Lark reaches the top before we do and turns on his heel, jerking his head down the hall. "Allow me to go ahead. I'll sweep the Crown Scion's room myself."

"You really do not need to do that," Sel says with a groan.

"Sure, I do. Besides"—Lark looks deliberately between us, smirking—"that will give you two a private moment."

Sel stiffens. "A private moment for what?"

Lark waves a hand at us. "To talk about whatever this quarrel is between youse."

My jaw drops slightly. Lark winks, then streaks to the left, out of sight.

“He’s . . .”

“Annoying.” Sel recovers before I do, taking the stairs in quick, quiet strides.

“Sel.” I hurry up the stairs to stand in his path. “Wait.”

He meets my eyes. “Yes?”

“I’m sorry,” I blurt.

“For what?” he asks blithely.

“For . . .” I flounder, hands waving. “For all of this.”

“Be specific when you apologize, Briana. It makes the act far more effective.”

He steps around me to the landing, turning left after Lark, hands stuffed deep in his pockets.

It is a near-physical effort to push past the continued sting of Sel wielding my full name like a weapon. To force us back to who we were when we first met—enemies, not friends.

“Okay . . .” I catch up to him again. “I’m sorry for sneaking out. For going to the arena with William.”

He keeps walking. “That is a strange way to say you apologize for endangering not only yourself but one of your knights as well.”

“Sel, come on. I didn’t know there’d be cedny uffern at the arena ward!”

He scoffs. “Do demons usually announce themselves to you?”

“Well, no . . . but—”

Sel twists around. “Even if there were no cedny uffern at the ward, your actions endangered yourself and others. Again.”

Our fight rises up behind my eyes, a script I could recite word for word even though it was weeks ago. “I told you what I wanted. I want to get better, stronger—”

“You could have done that in the Lodge training rooms. Inside. Behind my wards. Instead, you were reckless, repeating your same mistakes.”

“I said I was sorry about that!”

“‘Sorry’ didn’t cut it then, and it doesn’t cut it now.” He leans forward, snarling. “You convinced Greer and Pete to bring you on an unauthorized hunt and nearly got yourself killed in the process. And here you are tonight, doing the same with William.”