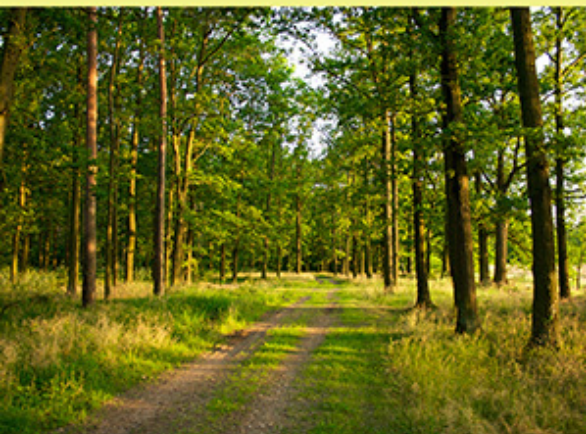


LOVE IS AN OPEN ROAD



Don't Read in the Closet 2015

OLIN'S SACRIFICE

Drako

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

OLIN'S SACRIFICE

By Drako

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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OLIN'S SACRIFICE

By Drako

Photo Description

A young man with dark black, curly hair, pale skin, pink lips, and blue eyes. He seems effeminate, beautiful, and otherworldly. There are rings on each of his fingers and a light aura around him.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I knew I was in trouble the moment I spotted the exotic young man in the bar where Santy told me I'd find my new partner. There was something magnetic about him. Even though I usually go for more masculine men, I couldn't take my eyes off him. When I saw his swift, graceful, and ever so dangerous moves, I was done for. Santy said we had to work together if we wanted to reach our goal, and she's rarely wrong about stuff like that. Problem is, we're nothing alike. I've been called a sly fox, mostly for my personality, but my auburn hair helps that image. There's nothing sly or secretive about him, though. He might be small—smaller than me, which was saying something—but he was dangerous. He was going to get us into so much trouble. He might even be the death of me.

I'm a genre fan. I'd love it if this could be fantasy/urban fantasy/SF. Mysteries are great, too. About the only things I'm not a fan of are mpreg, non-con and contemporaries.

Sincerely,

Jana Denardo

Story Info

Genre: paranormal, urban fantasy

Tags: adventure, fae/fey/fairies, family drama, self-sacrifice, witches

Word Count: 20,196

OLIN'S SACRIFICE

By Drako

Chapter One

Why do we need another bar? Merrick thought as he stepped out of the black Cadillac CTS he'd recently acquired.

His auburn hair was cut short. Green eyes flashed around the parking lot, instinctively searching for any signs of danger. He had dressed casually in blue jeans and a plain black T-shirt. There was no need to stand out. He wasn't here for pleasure. Then again, he never went into bars run by his kind for pleasure. It was rarely fun for him. This was a business venture. He needed help to achieve what Santy, the leader of his coven, had requested of him.

Merrick sighed and headed toward the bar. The Dragon's Head, it was called. How original. Still, he had to go in. It was here he'd find a partner to achieve his goal. Why he couldn't gain the help of someone within the coven was beyond him, but who was he to argue with the leader?

As he stepped over the threshold and into the bar, he felt the first hum of magic brush against him. It was common to have safeguards in a bar run by anyone of a magical persuasion, even in such a populated area as Laclede's Landing in downtown St. Louis, Missouri. The owners hadn't been able to resist the location. It was a good place to make money, but certainly a difficult place to keep the magical community under wraps. Only normal humans were carded before entering the bar. Everyone else was recognized by magic. The safeguards were to prevent those who meant harm from getting inside.

The inside was packed, much to Merrick's chagrin. He wasn't the biggest guy around, standing at about five foot nine. Last he checked he hadn't gotten over the 160 pound mark, which sometimes made navigating through crowds difficult. Then again, he had other ways to part a crowd if he truly had to. Better not to draw too much attention until he found who he was looking for. He made his way through the crowded dance floor. The music was loud, and he felt the beginnings of a headache. He elected to head for the bar at the end of the floor and grab a drink. He had no idea who he was looking for. Why did Santy have to be so cryptic?

Just as he was wondering if this was somehow a waste of time, he spotted movement in the center of the dance floor. What he saw was an absolute vision. On the floor, moving gracefully to the up-tempo music, was a beautiful man unlike any he'd ever seen before. This man was smaller than Merrick, both in height and build, but nonetheless captivating. He commanded attention. His

pale skin had a slight sheen to it, perhaps sweat or maybe something more. His black hair was so dark in places it actually looked blue. He was wearing black slacks and a black button-down shirt with the top button undone, both formfitting, and damned if the blood didn't shoot right to Merrick's groin. As he watched, this strange male's crystal blue eyes suddenly locked onto him, and those light pink lips gave him a smile.

Merrick felt the bottom of his stomach drop out, and if he hadn't been leaning on the bar, he was sure he would have swooned. As he watched, the other male approached him, leaving some very disappointed people on the dance floor. Merrick's heart leapt into his throat as the man came up to him. Upon closer inspection, he could see that the color of his eyes wasn't a trick of the light. His eyes were unnaturally bright. He had glimmering rings on each finger, all silver, and each with a different stone. He was even more breathtaking up close. He was a bit more feminine than Merrick liked his men to be, but based on the erection currently straining against his pants, he didn't care.

"You must be Merrick." He spoke softly yet Merrick heard him perfectly despite the volume of the music.

Somehow Merrick managed to nod.

"I'm Olin, and I'm pretty sure you're here for me. Let's go outside and talk."

With that he turned and headed for the door. Merrick couldn't help but watch the way his hips moved as he followed him out. There was something about this male that he found irresistible, and he'd only just learned his name. Outside of the bar Olin stopped and leaned against the wall.

"I understand you need my help with something," he said, a small smirk on his face.

That's a loaded statement, Merrick thought.

Olin's smirk widened. "Focus on the goal here."

"You read minds?" Merrick questioned.

"I'm a man of many talents, but I believe you came here for only one of them."

Merrick shook his head to focus. "Yes, Santy told me you would be able to help me locate and retrieve our coven's sacred athame. We're not sure how, but it was stolen."

“You want my help seeking a dagger for ritual? Why not just find a new one?” Olin asked calmly. “Witches are nothing if not practical.”

“That athame has been in our coven for generations. It was the athame of our founder, and has quite a bit of magic stored within it.”

Olin's eyes glinted with understanding. “Ah, so it has sentimental value as well as practical value. I question how it was stolen in the first place.”

“If I knew that, I wouldn't be here asking for your help.”

Olin's eyes flicked over him again. “I get the feeling you'd rather not be here. Does it bother you to ask an outsider for help?”

Merrick grunted. “Am I supposed to be pleased about it? The question is can you help me?”

Olin laughed, a light airy sound that made Merrick's stomach flip and drew his eyes to the other male's lips again. “Yes, I can help you, in more ways than one. But let's stick to business first, shall we?”

“How can you help?”

That laugh came again. “Oh my, you are going to be a treat to work with. I'm going to need some information and to see where the athame was stolen from. What would really have been the purpose of stealing this dagger? Can anyone else access its magic?”

“I've never used it so I have no idea. But I can take you where it was stored, so long as Santy agrees. She just charged me with finding it.”

Olin grunted. “This sounds like it's more ornamental than magical. But I will help you for a price.”

Merrick raised an eyebrow in question. “What's your price?”

Olin had a mischievous glint in his eyes. “Oh, I'll just need a favor at some point. Just be ready to return it. Now, lead the way.”

“Don't you have a car of your own?”

“I have no need of a car, normally. But since I have no idea where we're going, I'll have to ride along with you.”

Merrick wasn't sure it was the best idea to be in such close proximity with the petite beauty for so long, but he had a job to do.

Chapter Two

Merrick had never felt quite so nervous in the company of another male. Granted, feminine men weren't his type and his interactions with them were limited to friendly conversations, but something about Olin threw him off his game.

"Are you always this quiet, or is it just me?" Olin asked, breaking the several-minute-long silence.

"I'm not an overly chatty person," Merrick replied.

"Somehow, it feels like you're being less than truthful. I think I make you nervous." Olin crossed his legs and leaned his head on his hands, tapping his temple with his index finger. "Let me guess, I'm not your usual type, am I?"

"Not exactly," Merrick answered honestly.

"Yet I seem to have an effect on you. Tell me, what do you think of me?"

"Are we really doing this right now? I know nothing about you but your name."

"And yet you already want me. Don't feel bad, it's perfectly natural."

Merrick flicked a glance at him. "You're infuriating. What are you?"

Olin laughed. "You're very direct aren't you? Let's put it this way, I am everything your mother ever warned you to stay away from, but you won't."

Merrick made no reply. The answer was vague, but he knew Olin was something different, something far more magical than he was. He may have had an effeminate nature, but beneath that softer exterior was a core of power unlike anything Merrick had encountered. It lay beneath the surface, but there was no way to identify what Olin truly was. He was certainly something more than human, that much was clear.

"You won't figure it out on your own. I'm just another man who you happen to be attracted to. I wouldn't recommend stressing over it."

"You know, it's really disturbing how you keep invading my thoughts," Merrick muttered.

"Sorry, it's a habit. You should learn to shield them. You have some sort of mental ability. You should learn to use it."

"I'm telekinetic, not telepathic. Telepaths are rare among witches, so we don't really train to defend ourselves against them."

"If you have the mental prowess to move things with your mind, then you should be able to focus it to read minds."

Merrick's jaw ticked, giving away his irritation.

"Don't get sensitive now, it's just an observation."

Merrick kept his eyes on the road. "Not all of us are otherworldly in origin."

Olin's eyes glinted again with an unreadable emotion. "Otherworldly. That's an interesting description."

"It's fitting," Merrick replied.

"Perhaps," Olin said quietly.

"Anyway, we're here."

Merrick pulled in front of a large, two-story house. The outside was yellow with green shutters. It was a Victorian-style house, with a large wrap-around porch. Merrick led the way into the house, letting himself in.

"Has this house always belonged to your coven?" Olin asked.

"No, but it's been in the coven for about a hundred years now," Merrick answered.

He led the way through the large house and toward the basement. The halls were dark, and Merrick hadn't turned on any lights. A glance back showed Olin's eyes still bright and visible.

Definitely otherworldly, Merrick thought.

He opened the door to the basement, where the coven's altar was stored. It was a large stone circular structure with a pentacle carved into it. Nothing else was currently on it.

"Where do you store your tools?" Olin asked.

Merrick walked over to a corner of the room lined with shelves. At the top was a rack meant for a small knife. Olin followed him over.

"You must come down here frequently if you can find your way around with no light," Olin commented.

"I prefer to work my rituals at night," Merrick replied. "I find that the darkness helps."

“There’s nothing wrong with darkness. It is merely the opposite of light. Without one, the other cannot exist.” Olin turned his attention to the shelf again. “There was indeed great magic within that athame. It is magic that not just anyone could handle. The average witch would be overwhelmed with the power contained within.”

“I have never used it personally. Only the leader of the coven can do so and rarely does she handle it.” Merrick watched the smaller male from the corner of his eye, trying to discover just how being there would help.

Olin turned those dazzling blue orbs on him. “Have you never wanted to use it? If we are to succeed in finding it, you must handle it at least for a time.”

“I do not need to access its magic in order to retrieve it. I am merely doing what our leader asked me to do.”

Olin continued to stare at him curiously. “Have you no idea why she asked you particularly?”

Merrick shrugged. “I didn’t question the request.”

“Perhaps you should,” Olin told him before turning back to the shelf.

Merrick made no reply. He watched as the other male raised his hand and a strange, white light was emitted from it. The entire basement lit up and revealed strands of light surrounding them. Each strand looked like a different thread to be spun through a loom. It was the best description Merrick could use to describe what he saw. Some threads had similar colors but different shades.

“What you see are threads of the various magic users that practice here,” Olin explained. “Everyone has a particular thread or signature attached to their magic. They vary in color based on the color of our aura, but they differ further in distinct ways. Some threads are thinner, and these are normally weaker magic users. Some have complex patterns. The more complex, the stronger the user.”

Merrick looked around in wonder, his eyes blurring slightly in the face of the brilliant light.

“Not everyone can see these distinctive threads of magic on their own. That is why your leader sent you to ask for my help.” Olin’s long, slim fingers reached out and took hold of a light bluish-green thread, holding it for Merrick to see. “This is yours. It shines brightly, much brighter than the others. I must admire your dedication to your craft.” He looked up and took hold of a deep red thread. “Here we have the thread belonging to the last person to touch the athame. This is your thief.”

“Can you tell by touching it who it belongs to?” Merrick asked, watching his fingers closely as he twirled the thread around it.

“I do not know this person, so not exactly. However, I will know him if I see him.” Olin snapped his fingers and the light faded. “I can tell you that this person bears a great deal of resentment toward your coven. It’s a common occurrence among those with weaker magic.”

Merrick frowned. “Come, let us go upstairs and decide on our next move.”

Olin smiled that dazzling smile again, visible somehow even in the darkness of the basement. “Lead on.”

Merrick led the way upstairs again and outside to the front porch.

“So, I will help you. You won’t find the culprit without me.”

Merrick eyed him curiously. “What is your price?”

Olin smiled. “As I said, one day I will call in a favor. Just be prepared at that time.”

Merrick was hesitant, but in the end he had no choice. He needed Olin to accomplish his task. Sighing, he extended his hand. Olin took it, then stepped forward, invading his space.

“You have a wonderful smell to you. I look forward to our time working together.” Olin’s smile bore a trace of naughtiness in it. “I think you and I will get to know each other very well.”

“You’re awfully confident, aren’t you?” Merrick asked.

Olin lowered his hand, just grazing it over the erection that had yet to subside. “Oh no, darling, I just know my appeal. You want me and even if you don’t want to want me, your body won’t let you deny me.”

Merrick found himself at a loss for words for once in his life. Olin’s smile widened.

“I’ll be in touch shortly.” He vanished.

Merrick blinked and looked around. There was no sign of the magnetic, slender man.

“Yep, definitely otherworldly,” he muttered to himself.

Chapter Three

Olin was definitely otherworldly. He smirked as he returned to his own home and reflected on that description from Merrick. The human hit the nail on the head rather quickly. Though he was lounging in a loft-style apartment in the heart of downtown St. Louis, it was merely a place to rest his head at night, when he chose to. More often than not he was out enjoying the sights of the city and sampling its nightlife. He'd intended to do so on this night as well. Merrick had thrown a wrench in his plans.

It wasn't the fact that he had to help the man that had thrown him off. It was his own reaction to the man. He was a natural flirt. That didn't surprise him. The man's scent had indeed been alluring. It was quite distracting. Never had a mortal so easily enticed him. When he'd seen Merrick standing at the bar, something had pulled him toward the man. He hadn't even known this was the man he was to meet that night. Santy had only given him a name, though he suspected she had ulterior motives for pairing the two together. She was something of an oracle. She also hadn't warned Merrick. He was used to the reaction he provoked in all mortals. He was a fey, after all. The beauty of his race had been reduced to mere myths and legends, even among the witches they'd long since taught the ability to tap into their power. Not that Olin himself was old by fey standards; he was merely two hundred years old. Old enough to choose to live amongst the mortals but not old enough to influence the decisions among his own kind. Not that he cared. His life was his own to lead, and that's all he needed.

Well, that was mostly true. He had ties to the fey realm after all. But those were thoughts for another time. Tonight he would focus on finding this athame thief. He held out his hand and once again saw the thread of magic tied to the thief. He walked to the window and looked out over the city. Within a few moments, he was interrupted by his cell phone.

"Damn mortals and their lack of telepathy," he mumbled as he crossed the room to answer the call.

"Hello, Olin." Santy's voice was at least somewhat welcoming.

"You've been a naughty girl, haven't you?" Olin twirled a lock of his hair around his finger. "You didn't tell the poor guy what I am."

"Should it really matter?" Santy responded. "You're doing a job together."

“Come now, you and I both know you have something else up your sleeve. What did you see?”

“All you need to know is that you two have to work together to achieve your goals.”

Olin released his hair. “Goals? I thought there was only one goal here.”

“He has one goal, and you have another.” He could practically hear Santy’s smile through the phone. “There is no reason the two of you can’t aid each other.”

“It’s not wise for mortals to get involved in fey affairs.”

“It’s not wise for fey to get involved in mortal affairs, but you and I both know you can’t resist.”

“I feel as if you’re trying to pair us up, and no good comes of fey and mortal love affairs. Do they not teach you of the legends of King Arthur and Merlin in your schools anymore?”

Santy actually laughed. “I expect that logic from older fey, not you.”

“It’s solid logic,” Olin argued.

“Who are you trying to convince, me or you?”

Olin’s pretty faced turned up into a scowl. “Is there a particular reason you’ve called me? We already know how this situation will play out.”

“Just to ensure that you would indeed take on the job. Did you name your price?”

“When I need a favor, you’ll hear from me,” Olin told her.

“I’m sure I will.” Santy hung up.

Olin stared at the phone but couldn’t hide his own smile. “Oh, you are crafty, little witch. I wonder if you truly know the game you play.”

Merrick had elected to remain in the coven house for the night. He was tired and needed to burn off some of his excess energy. No one else was in the house so he picked a room with a bathroom connected to it to settle down for the night. He stripped down and walked into the bathroom, splashing water on his face before looking at his reflection in the mirror.

“God I need a tan,” he mumbled to himself.

He wasn't nearly as pale as Olin, but he was paler than usual. He hadn't been out in the daylight much lately, and it was starting to show. He glanced over at the shower and waved his hand, his power turning the knobs to start the water. He stepped out of his boxers and into the warm spray, taking the time just to soak. The water soaked his hair through and he pushed it back from his face. He couldn't get Olin out of his mind. Sure, the guy was gorgeous. He couldn't deny that much. He had an ethereal beauty about him. He was exotic and insanely powerful. Normally Merrick went for manlier men. His last boyfriend had been about six foot one and a jock type. Of course, it hadn't gone well. He was that muscular type that other guys and girls couldn't help but drool over. The problem was the guy couldn't keep his hands to himself. Or his mouth or dick for that matter. Olin was the complete opposite. So why couldn't he get him off his mind?

This line of thought wasn't helping matters. He groaned as he realized his erection had returned with a vengeance. Maybe the problem was he hadn't gotten laid in a while. He'd been single for six months, and the last guy he'd been with was his lying, cheating ex. Sex clearly wasn't happening tonight, so he finally began to lather himself up and rinsed off. When he shut the water off, he got the feeling that he wasn't alone anymore and wrapped a towel around his waist before returning to his room. He found Olin sitting on the bed, legs crossed and examining his nails. He stopped short and Olin's gaze rose to meet his.

"My, my, my, I was expecting to get a little work done but it looks as if you have other things in mind." Olin's eyes flashed with a familiar hunger.

"I just got out of the shower," Merrick told him. "I wasn't expecting you here tonight."

"Oh, I wanted to get a move on with our work. I figured it might be a quick job, but I'm easily distracted. Nothing like a man in a towel to keep my mind off of work." Olin held out a hand and with his fingers gestured in what was actually quite a seductive manner for him to come closer.

It didn't really occur to Merrick to resist. He advanced forward until he stood directly in front of Olin, who smiled as he saw the length of Merrick's dick sticking out under the towel. He looked down at Olin, unsure of what to expect, until Olin pulled the towel open and let it drop to the floor. Olin's eyes widened slightly in surprise at his size. Merrick's dick stuck out in front of him and had an upward curve. The mushroom tip had a drop of moisture leaking from it, and Olin finally reached out to take hold of it. The width was enough

that he could barely close his hand around it with his fingertips just touching. Olin licked his lips and moved his hand up and down the shaft, watching as more of the pearly white liquid began to leak.

Merrick's breath hitched as he held himself back. The last thing he wanted was to come this soon. But he almost lost it again when finally those pale pink lips surrounded his dick and took in about half of it at once. A moan escaped his lips, and he reached out to grab Olin's hair. It was even softer than it looked, and he curled his fingers in it as Olin began to suck expertly, each time going a little farther down. With his free hand, Olin cupped his balls, eventually giving them a slight tug. Merrick began to thrust into his mouth, feeling his climax coming and unable to resist the urge for release. The sight of his dick sliding in and out of Olin's mouth was just too hot. When Olin turned those bright blue eyes on him, Merrick came undone, surging forward one last time as he shot right down his throat.

Olin swallowed all of it without complaint and pulled back, smiling up at him. "Well, don't you feel better now?"

Merrick let out a breath. "Much better but don't you want the favor returned?"

Olin chuckled. "Oh my, no. You can do something for me later. Just another favor to add to the list."

"Great, and I've only known you for about three hours."

"Lighten up, darling, or you'll bring back all that tension I just helped you release. Now get dressed and let's go."

"Go where?" Merrick questioned.

"Less talking, more dressing. You'll see soon enough."

Chapter Four

Olin sat in the passenger's seat again, directing Merrick to the area of town where a number of gay bars were located.

"Tower Grove? Really?" Merrick questioned.

"I'm just tracking your thief," Olin told him. "This is where the trail leads."

Merrick grunted but said nothing else. Sure, he was familiar with the area, but he rarely ventured down there. He wasn't a closet case, but going into the areas where the more flamboyant types paraded tended to get on his nerves. If it had to be done, then he'd just have to deal with it, but no one said he had to like it.

Once he'd found a parking spot, he followed Olin's lead.

"Our thief likes to hang around the humans, I see," Olin remarked.

"Odd choice for a hangout," Merrick muttered.

"I doubt they counted on you finding someone like me to track them," Olin told him.

"I don't think anyone would count on there being someone like you."

Olin smiled. "How sweet."

Merrick's face reddened and he said nothing else. Olin led him into a bar called Attitudes. It was a Saturday night, so there was a drag show going on. Merrick sighed but it was drowned out by the music. Olin went to the bar by the door, as there were multiple bars inside, and ordered a drink before looking out over the crowd seated or standing in front of the stage.

"They're almost done with the show," he told Merrick. "I don't see the thief yet."

"I have no idea who we're looking for," Merrick replied.

"Don't worry, darling, I do." Olin took his drink from the bartender and paid the man. "But let's not cause a scene here."

"I can get the athame back without a scene if he has it on him. What happens after isn't my fault."

Olin chuckled. "This could be more fun than I thought."

Merrick ordered himself a Jack and Coke. If he was stuck there, he figured he might as well have a decent drink. He paid the bartender enough to have a tip and turned to Olin, who led the way closer to the stage and dance floor. They found a tall table off to the side where they could stand while watching the show. Olin's eyes occasionally flicked over the crowd, but Merrick wasn't sure if he'd found the thief yet.

"Do you dance?" Olin asked.

Merrick still found it alarming how easily he could hear the other man's voice over the noise. "Uh, yeah, sure." He eyed him suspiciously. "Why?"

"The dance floor will open shortly and we have to blend in. When I dance alone I tend to draw attention." Olin paused to think for a few moments. "Then again, it might give you the chance to take your dagger back if I'm distracting everyone."

"Athame," Merrick corrected.

"Same difference," Olin teased.

"You irk."

The male fey smirked. "I know."

Merrick turned his gaze back to the show but his eyes always returned to Olin. As the show wrapped up, the dance floor was opened and Olin looked at him expectantly.

"You seriously expect me to dance right now?" Merrick asked him.

"Well, if you want to be a wallflower, fine. I'd rather hoped you'd come out of your shell a bit, but we'll do this your way. I'll give you a signal when I find him." Olin headed to the center of the dance floor.

Merrick watched him the entire way. Olin was captivating and he wasn't the only one paying attention to it. As he moved to the music, men flocked to him as if under some sort of spell. If he didn't know better, he'd think they were. But there was no magic at work here, only that ethereal allure that came naturally to him. As he watched, he felt a pang of jealousy stab at him as he watched Olin dance with two other men. They were awfully close, hips seemingly fused together.

Merrick felt the tingle of his own magic flowing to his fingertips. He knew better than to let loose on humans. He couldn't look away either. He needed Olin's sign to point out the thief. Olin smiled and laughed as he danced,

genuinely enjoying himself. Merrick began to wonder if he was actually looking for the thief as he was supposed to be.

“You could always come join me.”

Merrick started, hearing Olin's voice as if he were next to him. “How do you do that?”

“I'm a man of many talents. Are you going to join me or not?”

“Just find the thief please.”

“He's standing at the edge of the dance floor. I'm surprised he's resisted this long.”

Merrick forced his eyes away from Olin to find the man in question. One man stood at the edge of the floor, and it was one he recognized. The tall, olive-skinned man currently frowning at Olin was Jeremiah, Merrick's ex-boyfriend and a witch from a different coven. His dark, chocolate-brown eyes hadn't left Olin. He wasn't really the type to hang out in this type of bar.

“Are you sure he's the thief?” Merrick asked, taking a sip of his drink.

“I'm positive, but I don't think he has the dagger on him,” Olin answered.

“Figures. You stay there and do what you're doing. I'll handle him.” Merrick headed toward Jeremiah.

The other, taller male's eyes finally turned to Merrick. His black hair was cut shorter now than it had been when they were together. His gaze was hard as he looked at Merrick.

“What are you doing here?” he demanded.

Merrick raised an eyebrow. “Let's step outside. We need to talk.”

“I don't think so.”

Merrick stepped in close. “Either you walk out of the door voluntarily or I throw you out. Either way, you're going outside.”

Jeremiah scowled. “Fine, but make it quick.”

“Everything with you always was,” Merrick muttered as he let him lead the way.

Once outside, they rounded the corner and Jeremiah turned to face him, folding his arms across his chest and looking down at Merrick impatiently.

“What is it?”

“I was trying to do this peacefully, but since you’re being your usual self, and by that I mean a dick, I’ll get straight to it. Where’s the athame?”

Jeremiah averted his eyes ever so slightly. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Merrick smirked. “Great, you’re going to be your usual oversized, lying, sack-of-shit self. You do know that makes this fun, right?”

“I don’t have it,” Jeremiah told him forcefully.

Merrick looked around, making sure no one was nearby before letting his magic flow into his fingers again. This time he let loose, sending Jeremiah flying until he hit the side of the building. Jeremiah grunted as he struck the wall and found himself pinned there.

“See, I couldn’t do stuff like this before because we were together. But now, you’re a thief. Where is our athame?”

“I told you I don’t have it.”

Merrick raised his hand and his power tightened around Jeremiah’s throat. “I’m aware that you don’t have it on you. Where did you leave it?”

“I didn’t leave it anywhere. I gave it away. Someone needed it and I had to get it for them.”

Merrick waved his hand and Jeremiah slammed against the wall of the bar. He swore under his breath as he hit again.

“I can do this all night, you know.”

“Fine, I’ll tell you for all the good it will do.”

“No need for that, I already know the answer.” Olin suddenly appeared next to Merrick. “You mortals really know nothing about guarding your thoughts.”

Merrick released his hold and Jeremiah dropped. “Well?”

“He gave it to an extremely powerful fey that normally I’d rather not face but I’m pretty sure you’ll insist on it.”

Merrick turned back to Jeremiah. “I hope you know I’ll be having a word with your coven leader. What possessed you to steal it?”

“Possessed is a good word for it,” Olin told him. “His magic is tainted. It’s not purely his own.”

Jeremiah stood up slowly, rubbing his shoulder. “This your new boyfriend?”

Merrick opened his mouth to respond but Olin beat him to it.

“And if I was, what business is it of yours?”

Jeremiah frowned. “You aren’t really his type.”

Olin laughed. “Oh poor human, I’m everyone’s type. I’m even yours. Admit it, you’re hard as a rock over there.”

Jeremiah scowled and raised his hand. Merrick flung his hand out and his power lashed out with more force than he intended. Jeremiah’s head hit the building hard, and he sank to the ground.

“Well, you’re certainly quick on the trigger.” Olin walked across the street and knelt next to Jeremiah. “He’s fine, just unconscious.”

“I suppose I should be happy about that.” Merrick walked across the street to join him. “I guess we’d better take him with us. I can deliver him to his coven house.”

“Don’t hold it against him. He’s not fully himself.”

Merrick grunted. “Either way he’s an asshole, and he was about to attack you.”

“I could have handled him, but it’s sweet that you felt the need to protect me.” Olin smiled at him. “Let’s get him to your car, and then we can talk about why he’s caused a larger problem than you bargained for.”

Chapter Five

Getting rid of Jeremiah was easy enough since he was still unconscious when they reached their destination. Merrick dumped him on the porch and drove off.

“So, are you going to tell me what we’re up against?” he asked.

“Yes, but first, what’s really so important about this dagger? What kind of magic is sealed away in it?”

Merrick shrugged. “I have no idea. I told you I’ve never handled it.”

“We really need more information. The magic influencing your friend back there was dark, old, and powerful. Not something to mess with lightly. Frankly, something you might not want to mess with at all.”

“I’m pretty sure Santy isn’t going to take you at your word and let it go, so just tell me what I’m up against.”

“Old-school fey royalty. She’s the type of fey that even other fey wish was only a myth. Few, if any, of us can stand up to her. Queen Ma’ab. Frankly, I’d rather avoid this confrontation. I don’t think I can take her.”

Merrick grunted. “You can bail out when the going gets tough. Just point me in her direction and I’ll handle it.”

Olin laughed. “That’s cute, but no. You don’t handle Queen Ma’ab. You pray that she overlooks your existence. Looks like that prayer went unanswered for me.”

Merrick said nothing. He wouldn’t be dissuaded, no matter how powerful Olin said she was. Olin sighed, resigned to continuing with this task.

“The things I do for an attractive man,” he mumbled.

Merrick narrowed his eyes. “I’m sure there’s more in this for you than just me.”

“That remains to be seen. I’m not even sure if you’re a reward I can actually attain.”

“Are you going to tell me where we’re going yet?” Merrick asked, clearly avoiding the subject.

“Nice try, but we’re coming back to that subject. For now, just head back to your place. There’s nothing more that we can do tonight.”

Again Merrick said nothing but kept driving back to the coven house. When he parked, Olin followed him inside.

“Should I be expecting you to stay the rest of the night?” he asked.

Olin shrugged. “Would you prefer I leave?”

“Why do you ask me questions you already know the answer to?”

“The same reason why you asked me.” Olin wore a smug look on his beautiful face that grated on Merrick’s nerves.

“Are all of your kind like you?” Merrick asked as he opened the door to his room.

“If you mean as far as the ability to read minds, some can and some can’t. If you mean in general, definitely not.” Olin walked over and sat on the bed. “So, what shall we do for the remainder of the night?”

“Ever think of going to sleep?” Merrick suggested.

“That’s boring. How about something a bit more exciting?” Olin leaned back to rest on his hands. “Sleep can come after, if you do it right.”

Merrick felt the blood pool in his groin. “Are you always so forward?”

“It’s the best way to be. Who needs all the pretense? So, are you up for it?” Olin looked at his groin and smiled seductively. “Doesn’t look like I need to ask.”

It briefly occurred to Merrick that this situation was moving unnaturally fast. He had quickly become enthralled with this man, and he’d known him for less than a day. There was no time to reflect on it seriously as he moved toward Olin. Olin fell back, pulling Merrick down with him. Merrick ended up on top of him and lost himself in his eyes. They drew him down until finally their lips met.

A spark shot through them both, and they parted in surprise. Olin recovered first and pulled him back down. They felt it again, but Olin wrapped his legs around his waist and continued the kiss this time. He recognized the jolt but chose not to examine it in depth, wanting only to continue. He writhed underneath Merrick, creating wonderful friction between them. Merrick broke the kiss to pull his shirt off, and Olin rushed to follow his lead. The pants were the next to go and then both were fully nude.

Olin was thin, no extra fat anywhere, but not really toned either. On the other hand, Merrick was toned all over. His skin was a light bronze to Olin’s

pale. Both were smooth all over, and Merrick's erection stuck out in front of him. Long and thick, it jumped slightly as Olin looked at it and licked his lips. He wrapped his hand around the massive length, leaned forward, and took it in his mouth.

Merrick let out a moan as he felt his dick hit the back of Olin's throat. He didn't gag either, going to work immediately. Clearly he liked doing this, as it was the second time tonight he'd done it. One hand worked his shaft while the other held his balls, and Olin's mouth took him to heaven. But this time Merrick wanted to reciprocate. He pushed Olin back and kneeled in front of him, taking his length into his mouth in one swallow.

Olin arched his back and moaned as Merrick slicked his own length using a bit of his magic while spreading Olin's legs wide. His finger circled Olin's entrance, not attempting to enter but teasing him. Merrick removed his mouth with a soft, popping sound then licked his way down the shaft, the balls, and to the entrance. He pushed Olin's legs back and stood up to get a better angle. Then he let his tongue circle around a bit before diving in.

Olin's back arched again and he buried his hands in Merrick's hair, obviously getting exactly what he wanted. Merrick withdrew and plunged in again, repeating the gesture over and over until the opening was slick. Olin pushed at him, letting him know he was ready. Merrick climbed onto the bed and positioned the head of his dick at the opening, locking eyes with him before beginning to push inside.

Olin clenched tighter for a moment. It was a reflex, and he quickly took a breath and pushed out to allow Merrick's entrance. The head slid in and Merrick paused, allowing Olin to get used to his size, before he continued in slowly, inch by agonizing inch, until he was completely buried in him. Olin wrapped his legs around his waist, and Merrick held his arms down over his head as he began to move his hips. Merrick leaned down and crushed his lips against Olin's as he picked up the pace of his thrusts, covering the moans that were getting louder. Not that it mattered. No one else was in the house and, frankly, the moans were hot. So was the way Olin moved his hips to meet Merrick's thrusts.

Merrick suddenly switched positions, lifting Olin up and standing up, forcing Olin to reflexively wrap his arms around him to hold on. Merrick had all the control here, and the fact that Olin didn't mind just spurred him on. He lifted Olin up and down his length, impaling him over and over as Olin's moans continued. He didn't move him too fast, watching his face and seeing only signs of ecstasy. It was all the more empowering for Merrick, who rarely had

the chance to power someone around like this. Keeping with that feeling, he lifted Olin up until he was drawn out of him completely and put him down on his own feet. He turned Olin around and bent him over the bed, then slid inside him again.

Olin moaned again and braced himself on the edge of the bed for what was sure to come. Merrick didn't waste any time before moving, his thrusts coming faster and faster until he was pounding into him. Olin buried his face into the mattress to muffle his cries. Merrick reached around and gripped his erection, jerking it in time with his own thrusts. He shifted the angle of his thrusts slightly, finally hitting the right spot. Olin cried out as he came over his hand, tightening around Merrick until he pulled an orgasm out of him as well. Merrick kept the sound down but shook as he came, the force of it surprising and staggering. He leaned forward, bracing himself on the bed as well to avoid putting all of his weight on Olin. After a few minutes, he withdrew from him and eased away, pulling Olin with him to the bathroom to clean up. He turned on the shower and let Olin step in first.

"That was definitely interesting," Olin commented.

"Define interesting," Merrick replied.

"I had you pegged as a one position kind of guy, the kind that only worries about getting himself off and doesn't concern himself overly much with his partner. Clearly I was mistaken."

"Don't you read minds?" Merrick asked. "I'd have thought you knew almost everything about me."

Olin chuckled. "Cute, but no. I can read your thoughts, but I would have to concentrate to go that far into your psyche. That takes time and energy that can be spent getting to know you the old-fashioned way. The thoughts I've caught from you so far were just really loud."

Merrick handed him a cloth and soap to wash off. "Loud?"

"That's the best way to describe it." Olin took the cloth and soap and lathered up, then started to wash himself. "You don't usually think this way because you don't have telepathy yet. But sometimes a thought just jumps out. Your usual thoughts don't really jump out at me. But those thoughts earlier were stronger, so they were more obvious to me. Therefore I don't have to try in order to hear them."

"What do you mean I don't have telepathy yet?"

Olin handed him back the soap so that he could wash himself. "It'll develop eventually the more you use your telekinetic powers. The ability is there, but you just don't know how to use it."

Merrick grunted but said nothing else as he started lather up. Frankly his mind was still processing what he'd just done.

"You don't do this very often, do you?" Olin asked him.

"Do what?" Merrick asked roughly.

"Hook up with a guy," Olin clarified. "You're more of a relationship guy, right? So now you're wondering what happens after this?"

Merrick looked into his eyes. "Mind reading again?"

Olin shook his head. "No, but the look on your face tells a lot."

Merrick sighed. "You're right, I suppose. I've never hooked up with someone the first night I met them. But then, I've never met someone like you either."

"That's cute. I'm one of a kind, even among my kind. You were doomed from the moment I set my eyes on you."

"Cocky, aren't you?"

"Cocky, arrogant, confident; all of these apply to me." Olin stepped under the water. "I wear those labels with pride."

"So I see. Share the water."

Olin dipped his head under the water with the rest of his body. His hair soaked through quickly and finally hung straight down. When he opened his eyes while standing under the spray, the effect was still dazzling. He was a truly magical man. He stepped forward a few moments later and let Merrick step under the water. Merrick kept his eyes closed, trying to keep his mind clear.

"So, are you going to tell me whatever is on your mind?" Olin asked.

"I'm not sure of the etiquette in this situation, so I'm not sure what's off-limits and I don't want to make things awkward after tonight."

Olin laughed at him. "We're both adults here. What do you want?"

"To go to sleep with you beside me." Merrick opened his eyes. "I didn't want to come on too strong."

"That's a reasonable request. I make no promises on being here when you wake up in the morning, but I'll at least be here until you're asleep."

Merrick grunted and closed his eyes again. He wasn't really sure how to respond to that either. He'd take what he could get. Finally he turned the water off and the two of them stepped out. He handed Olin a towel to dry off with and kept another for himself. They dried off quickly, and Merrick led the way back out to the bed.

Olin climbed in first and felt Merrick climb in after him and wrap an arm around him to pull him close. He wasn't sure why he'd agreed to this but it wouldn't hurt to let the guy fall asleep this way. Merrick had given him some great sex and might be fun to keep around for a while.

Chapter Six

Olin awoke a little after sunrise. He was surprised to find an arm around him. He had actually fallen asleep in Merrick's arms. That had never happened with anyone else before. They were spooning even as Merrick still slept, his lips close enough to Olin's neck that he felt each breath he took. How or when he'd fallen asleep was beyond him. He had always made it a habit not to fall asleep with his partners. The idea made him feel smothered, and he was a free spirit.

Behind him, Merrick was still sound asleep. He could leave before the other male woke up. Olin shook his head at his own thoughts. The idea didn't sit right with him. He'd just met the man and already didn't want to be apart from him. He was used to drawing men in, not being drawn in himself. He was convinced Santy had something to do with this.

Several minutes later, he felt Merrick move behind him, removing his arm to stretch as he woke up. Olin rolled over to face him.

"How long have you been awake?" Merrick asked.

"A while," Olin answered.

"You could have woken me up." Merrick yawned. "Any plans for today?"

Olin blinked, momentarily confused by the question. "Oh, I'll just be looking into ways to get your dagger back. I'm not confident that we will."

"Just find out where it is. I'll handle the rest." Merrick stared into his eyes, momentarily allowing himself to get lost in their beauty. "But that wasn't quite what I meant."

"Perhaps not, but it's what has to be done."

Merrick blinked and rolled over to sit up and get out of bed. "I suppose you're right. I need to see Santy anyway."

Olin's eyes dropped downward. Merrick had his back to him and, of course, was still naked. His ass was a thing of beauty in Olin's opinion. Nice and toned, round and firm. It was what you might call a bubble butt and was proving to be quite a distraction. Olin slid across the bed and was reaching for it when Merrick looked back at him.

"Don't start what you can't finish," he warned.

"I can finish anything I start." Olin gave one of his usual seductive smiles. "Besides, I was just going to touch it a little."

"I don't have time for you to just touch it. We've got an athame to track down and recover."

"That has nothing to do with what I want to do."

"But it has everything to do with what I want to do, and we don't have time for that."

Olin actually pouted. "I can make time for it."

Merrick laughed at him. "I'll bet you can, you little siren, but it'll have to wait until later."

"Presumptuous, aren't you?" Olin threw off the blanket that had covered them both through the night.

"I know what I want, and you're going to give it to me, just not right now." Merrick walked into the bathroom.

"Well, that's new," Olin muttered. "I'm not sure I like it."

"Come on and get dressed," Merrick called from the bathroom.

"My clothes are in here."

Merrick stuck his head out of the door. "Don't you want to wash your face and brush your teeth?"

Olin huffed. "I suppose one shouldn't go out into the world with dick breath."

Merrick laughed again and ducked back into the bathroom. Olin joined him and was handed a new toothbrush and cloth. Merrick had already started brushing his own teeth.

"This got domestic really quickly," Olin mumbled.

Merrick finished brushing and spat before responding. "It's only domestic if you do it regularly. Right now it's just practical."

"Cute logic," Olin replied sarcastically.

Merrick backed away to let him finish and went to get dressed. He gathered Olin's clothes and handed them to him. Olin got dressed in the bathroom and took a few extra moments to style his hair with his fingers before coming out.

“So, I’m off to find out why Queen Ma’ab, of all people, took your little dagger.” Olin gave a teasing smirk.

Merrick scowled back at him. “You enjoy getting under my skin.”

Olin laughed at him. “Darling, I enjoy getting under everyone’s skin. You just make it easy.” He vanished.

“What have I gotten myself into?” Merrick muttered to himself.

Chapter Seven

Merrick walked out of the coven house to find Jeremiah walking up the drive. He frowned, already irritated at the sight of him.

“What do you want, Jeremiah?” he demanded.

Jeremiah stopped at the steps leading to the porch. “Look, I’m sore enough after last night and just want to talk.”

“What precisely do we have to talk about?” Merrick folded his arms across his chest. “You stole a coven heirloom for reasons unknown to any of us, and you tried to attack my friend last night.”

“Yeah, I know. I haven’t exactly been myself lately.”

Merrick rolled his eyes. “Please don’t insult my intelligence. Queen Ma’ab only took control of you for the athame. I’m ninety-nine point ninety-nine percent sure she didn’t influence anything you did before that. Now I’ll ask again, what do you want?”

“So, you’ve got a new boyfriend, and now you think you can just talk to me any way you want?” Jeremiah scowled. “You went and got yourself a little fairy, and now you think you’re something special.”

“So either you’ve gotten really stupid, or this Queen Ma’ab is controlling you. Either way, I’m about to knock you on your ass.”

“So you are with him?” Jeremiah closed his eyes for a moment. “Never saw that coming.”

“Did you really come here to confirm something that is none of your business?” Merrick asked. “You and I are definitely done, and I have no urge to go down that road again. It’s that much easier to avoid when you steal from my coven and send me into a life-threatening situation with a queen that apparently holds an insane amount of power. Do you have any idea of what I’m going to have to go through to get that back?”

“Yeah, actually, I do, and I understand it much better than you do.” Jeremiah looked him in the eyes. “I never saw myself as weak before encountering her. I have no idea why she wanted it, but she’s not someone you can defeat. I wouldn’t even try bargaining with her. Your little friend should know her too.”

Merrick descended the stairs to stand directly in front of him. "You know your problem? You don't understand the basic principles of magic. I don't care who she is. My coven leader wants that athame back, and she's going to get it."

"Seriously, Merrick. No matter what happened between us, I care about you. Don't take on Queen Ma'ab. It's a fight you can't win. We're still mortal. We're human. She's not."

"I'm not aiming to kill the woman. I just want what belongs to us. I'd recommend you not come back around here." Merrick stepped around him to head to his car.

Jeremiah caught his arm to stop him. "Listen to reason, Merrick. Have you ever seen me taken down as easily as you did last night? Have you ever known me to be unable to defend myself? She distorted my magic. Even now, when she isn't exerting her will over me, my magic is off."

Merrick turned back to look at him. "Don't assume that just because you fell victim to her that I will too. Will guides our magic, and my will is a hell of a lot stronger than yours. It's nice of you to warn me, but I can take care of myself."

"With no help?" Jeremiah questioned. "Your friend can't stand against her either."

"If need be." Merrick pulled his arm free. "I only asked him to help me find it because Santy told me to ask him. He's not obligated to actually help me retrieve it."

"By helping you find it, he's already going to be in deep. Queen Ma'ab will be after him for helping a human. She is their queen."

"Funny how you know so much when I didn't even know what he was. Just how long have you been in bed with the fey queen?" Merrick questioned.

"Odd choice of words," Jeremiah muttered.

"You can't be serious." Merrick failed to hide the contempt in his voice.

"I'm not entirely sure. My interactions with her are distorted. I'm not sure why I have my mind to myself again right now."

"Well, that is disturbing but I have things to do. Go home and don't worry about me. I'll be fine." Merrick walked away, getting into his car and driving off.

Merrick walked into Santy's house without knocking, as he always did. The woman in question sauntered into her living room wearing her usual long, flowing skirt. Her bright-green eyes sparkled, and her long, dark-brown hair hung naturally. She was what some might call a hippie, based on the tie-dyed skirt and peace symbol on her shirt. She was a slender woman, shorter than Merrick, but for those who could sense it, she was quite powerful. She wasn't the head of their coven by some sort of birthright. She'd earned it.

"So, how goes the hunt for our athame?" she asked.

"We've hit a few snags, one of which might be a bit difficult to overcome."

"Well, have a seat and tell me about it."

Merrick did as he was told, leaving out the more personal parts between himself and Olin.

"So, what do you intend to do?" she asked after he was finished.

"I'm waiting to see what Olin tells me. We do need it back, don't we?"

Santy shrugged. "Yes, but if the costs are too high, we will continue without it."

"This sounded a lot more important before. Just what kind of magic is locked away in that athame?" Merrick asked.

"I've only ever used it in rituals for our more powerful workings, particularly larger protection spells and to banish some of the darker spirits to their own world. I have no idea why a fey queen would want it."

"Is it possible that it belonged to her before it was given to our coven founder?"

Santy thought before answering. "I suppose it is possible. I've never heard it before. It's never been clear, to be honest. But even if she gave it to our founder, why would she want it back now?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," Merrick sighed. "Why did you really tell me to get Olin's help?"

"I had a vision that he would be able to help you," Santy answered.

"You're being vague. I know you know more than that."

Santy smiled. "Then you should also know telling you more risks changing what I've seen, and that is rarely a good thing."

Merrick frowned. "I hate when you go cryptic on me. I like to have an idea of what I'm getting into."

Santy laughed at him. "Oh, honey, with Olin you never have any idea what you're truly getting into. You just have to enjoy the ride."

Chapter Eight

Olin finally collapsed on his own bed late that night. It was difficult to find any information that was actually helpful. He had confirmed that Queen Ma'ab had indeed risen again after being gone far longer than he had been alive. From what he'd gathered, her power had only increased but there was no way he could reach her. The queen spoke to those she had business with. Olin was beneath her, and no one could remember the last time she'd bothered to even acknowledge a mortal. This was an exercise in futility.

Olin sat up, wondering why he was bothering to keep trying. He didn't really owe anyone anything. He could return to his carefree, partying ways.

"Never have I seen one of my descendants so conflicted over a mortal."

Olin jumped and even though it was a clear night, he heard a clap of thunder as lightning flashed. Suddenly an ethereal beauty stood before him. Like him, her skin was pale and she had long, straight, jet-black hair. She was dressed in a long sleeved, dark-purple gown with a cloak over it. The only skin he saw was her face and hands, and though the gown was not extremely formfitting he could make out her slender frame; still bigger than his own but slender for her height. She towered over him and deep violet eyes gazed down at him. Her gaze wasn't cold, but it wasn't exactly friendly either. Then again, she was an ancient queen whose reign had never truly been tested. She'd merely vanished for centuries, leaving some to hope she had perished. Olin had always known better.

"My Lady." Olin stood up and kneeled before her.

"There is no need for such formality." Queen Ma'ab had a soft but powerful voice, soothing yet unnerving. "You are of my line, and for the first time you have sought me out. I anxiously await your reasoning."

Olin was usually quite confident but this was the woman from whom his own powers originated. Still, he mustered his courage and spoke.

"I am seeking a dagger that I have reason to believe you had taken from a coven of witches here."

Ma'ab sat back suddenly and a chair appeared beneath her. "I took what belongs to me. I could not locate it easily, so I found a susceptible mortal to get it for me."

“With all due respect, you had him steal it. If it does indeed belong to you, why did you not just ask the coven leader for it?” Olin asked.

“It is an artifact that contains great power. Do you think they would have just handed it to me?” Ma’ab’s eyes lit up with something resembling amusement. “They asked you to help track it, so I think it is safe to say that they would not.”

“Witches have a healthy respect for our kind. For one such as you, I would think they might have surrendered it. They would like it back solely because it was passed down from their founder.”

“I’m well aware of how they came upon it. It was my gift to their founder. But even you have no inkling of what its true power is.” Ma’ab’s eyes seemed to grow a bit brighter. “It was my gift to bestow and mine to take away.”

This wasn’t going well. As Olin had feared, the queen was not likely to budge on the issue.

“To me it is just a dagger. What makes it so special that you felt the need to regain it?” he asked.

Ma’ab smiled. “It is quite powerful. The witches use it without a full understanding of what it is. This athame is a key, one which opens the gates between the realms. Realms you currently traverse with ease.”

“I have always remained in either this one or my home. I venture nowhere else,” Olin told her.

“Not from lack of ability, of course. You simply have no desire to venture outside of the relative safety of the worlds you know. With this, the witches have banished demons for generations.”

Olin looked puzzled. “Is that a bad thing?”

“Not at all, but it was not the intended purpose. The founder was charged to guard the athame while I tended to business. Unfortunately, it appears he died before teaching others of the coven how to use it properly. They figured out how to use its energy to banish demons from the world, but it has the ability to open and close gates between realms. I need it to close the gates. They need to be monitored again.”

“Is there anything that could convince you to return the athame to that coven?”

Ma'ab took several moments to consider the question. "Perhaps, if one of the coven proves themselves as worthy as their founder. One of their coven must show me that they have the power, the will, the honor, and heart that their founder possessed."

Olin's confusion must have shown on his face as the queen chose to elaborate.

"I know you far better than you know me, Olin. I will consider letting them once again use what is mine if one of the witches can help you with your problem, the one you run from. You desire to truly be free of your family. The witches must free you."

Olin's eyes widened. "But that is impossible."

Ma'ab laughed. "No, my dear sweet child, it is not. You merely lack the offensive powers to do so yourself. I would do it myself, but I would only have to speak the words for it to be done. Tell me, would the male witch whose scent clings to you be able to stand against your patriarch? Would he fight for you? Because if he does so and musters the power to free you, I will deem him worthy of my athame. He will be one I can trust not to abuse the power. How you deliver the message is on you, but if he fails, the athame is mine and you and I will discuss your family situation at that point."

Olin sucked in his breath. His family was complicated and, more importantly, powerful. Though they were mere children to Queen Ma'ab, to Merrick it would be like fighting gods.

"You underestimate the power of mortals," Ma'ab told him, clearly reading his thoughts as easily as he had done to Merrick.

"He is a powerful witch. I have seen his power myself. But to send him against my family, especially my father, is suicide."

Ma'ab shook her finger at him. "There have been witches with power that dwarfs that of the strongest of our kind. I have seen witches that would bring your father to his knees and reduce him to a mere servant. We are partners to humans, not their superiors. It seems this youthful generation has forgotten that our role is to guide and to aid mortals. We do not give them power, we simply help them recognize the power they already have. What you cannot do for yourself, he can. Magic is all about will, my child, and that man's will is strong."

"Then I'll be indebted to him," Olin mumbled.

Ma'ab waved that off. "You are being petty. Realistically, you'd be even. You did tell him he would owe you for our help finding the athame and recovering it. You've found it and have a way for him to recover it. If he frees you from the binds of your wretched family, you will be even. If you are bound to him, it will not be a result of a perceived debt."

"I will do my best," Olin assured her.

"Of course you will, and I will be watching." Ma'ab vanished.

"Well, fuck my life," Olin mumbled under his breath.

Chapter Nine

Merrick returned to the coven house again. He hated to admit that he was waiting here solely because it was where he'd brought Olin the night before. His scent still lingered in the room. This was really a bit too fast for him. He'd never slept with someone the first night before Olin. Was this some sort of spell or a strange power of the fey? He had to admit that before Olin he'd never truly met one of his kind in person. It was common to use the fey for help in spell work but they rarely showed themselves. Maybe they all had this type of appeal and that's why they hid themselves away.

He flopped on the bed and sighed. When the hell did he start falling for beautiful strangers?

"Well, aren't you just in a great position right now?"

Olin had appeared again and elected to straddle him, giving him a bit of a scare.

"You really have to learn to knock," Merrick told him.

"It's much more fun my way. Now, I've got news." Olin remained where he was, seated in a way that was quite a tease. "Queen Ma'ab has agreed to entrust the athame to you, but first you'll have to come with me."

Merrick gave a skeptical look. "Where are you taking me?"

"To a land of dreams or nightmares, depending on your point of view."

"What's your point of view?" Merrick questioned.

"If you play this the way I ask, it'll be a land of dreams."

Merrick surprised himself with his answer. "All right, when do we leave?"

Olin blinked, equally as surprised at such a quick agreement. "Is it really that easy for you? Don't you want to know what I found out and what you really have to do?"

"I figured you'd elaborate eventually. I don't think you'd take me into danger blindly."

Olin shook his head in disbelief. "You really have a lot to learn. Darling, I am a danger."

“To the hearts of men, I’m sure.” Merrick had started rubbing his back unconsciously, unable to resist the urge to touch him while he was on top of him. “But I’m pretty sure I’ll be fine.”

Olin stared down at him, his eyes seeming to be searching for something. “You know, I thought this would be easier. I intended to just come in here and take you along for the ride blindly. Now I actually feel bad.”

“Why?” Merrick asked.

“Because you deserve better than to be strung along by a degenerate fairy running from his responsibilities. If I take you there, you’ll be in real danger. Danger follows me everywhere. That’s why I never actually settle anywhere.” Olin laughed bitterly. “Honestly, I probably wouldn’t be around here much longer anyway. I’ve managed to do what I always do. I walked into your life and messed it up.”

“As I recall, I walked into your life asking for help,” Merrick pointed out.

“Yeah, with no idea what I’d drag you into.” Olin rolled off of him. “Do you really need this athame?”

“Santy would like it back,” Merrick answered carefully.

Olin could read between the lines there. They had to go for it.

“Queen Ma’ab’s condition is for you to prove that you’re worthy of holding a key to other worlds.”

Merrick sat up with a frown. “I’m confused.”

Olin sighed. “It isn’t just a magical artifact. It’s a key to the portals of other worlds. It was her gift to your founder. He had proven himself, but the current generation has not.”

“So what does this have to do with you, exactly?”

Olin sighed and looked away. “The reason I run all the time, never settling in one place, is because of my father. He wants what I can’t give. He wants me to take over as the head of the family the way he has. He’s brutal, cold, and unfeeling. He views mortals as pawns. He does not understand me or who I really am. He refuses to release me from the family service. He hunts me and kills those close to me. Each time I run.”

Merrick cocked his head to the side, obviously puzzled not only by the new information, but the fact that he felt the need to run. “Why do you run from him

when you have so much power within you? I can feel it radiating from you even as I sit here.”

“What is great power to you is nothing to my father, and his power is nothing to Queen Ma’ab,” Olin told him quietly.

Merrick disagreed. “Magic is the same within all of us. It’s all based on will. The stronger your will, the stronger your magic. The only real differences between your race and mine are the facts that you are born recognizing magic and the length of your lifespan.”

“That’s not entirely true,” Olin corrected. “Many witches, mages, and druids live lives as long as ours. Their magic extends their lives.” He finally turned his dazzling blue eyes back on Merrick. “I do not wish to face my father. My will isn’t as strong as his.”

“Only because you don’t really believe in yourself,” Merrick commented.

Olin gave an undignified snort, completely uncharacteristic of him in the short time Merrick had known him. “I’m a bit old for that advice. I simply want to live my life free of burdens and responsibilities other than to myself.”

Merrick was silent for several moments after that. “I can understand that, I suppose. But you still haven’t told me what I have to do.”

Olin studied him, finding that for once he could not read his thoughts. “I need you to do for me what I can’t do for myself.”

“So you want me to free you from this strange monarch you call a father? A lot to ask from a guy you’ve only known a day.”

“I know that well enough. I don’t really expect you to do this for me. I expect you to do it for the athame.”

Merrick’s eyes were as unreadable as his thoughts in the long moments before his next response. “I told you that I would do it and I will. The good karma will come back around eventually. How should I dress for this?”

“What you have on is fine. We’re not going to a formal event. We’re going to a showdown that I pray doesn’t turn as violent as I think it will.”

“I’m ready when you are. Let’s get this over with.”

The words stung for some reason, but Olin agreed. “Yes, let’s get this over with.”

Chapter Ten

When Merrick's vision cleared, he was definitely not in the coven house anymore. In fact they were standing outside of a large, dark, stone castle. The land around him was bright and green everywhere else. It was an unnaturally bright green. The sky was clear, not a cloud in sight, no pollution. The land felt different to him.

"Where are we?" he asked Olin.

"We've crossed into my world. This castle is where I was born and raised." Olin looked up at the large wooden doors, his face carefully blank. "Are you sure you're ready for this?"

"I'm fine." Merrick looked over at him with something resembling concern. "Are you ready for this?"

"Since you're so determined to get this dagger back, I have no choice but to be ready." Olin reached out and pushed the door open. "Come darling, it's best not to keep the lord of the castle waiting."

Merrick grunted. "So he knows we're here?"

"Yeah, and don't expect him to be nice about it. Be on guard." Olin walked into the dark corridor first.

Merrick took a deep breath and followed him. The only light in the corridor came from Olin himself. His skin had an actual glow to it now. That hadn't been the case the night before.

"If you're wondering about the light you see, this is natural among my kind. In your world, I force it to dim down to appear closer to human." Olin didn't turn as he spoke, but had clearly once again been reading his mind.

"Good to know," Merrick replied.

"I figured you would need it here." Olin stopped at a set of double doors. "This is the dining hall. He's in here alone."

"So are we eating dinner or what?" Merrick asked irritably.

Olin fought back a smile. "I doubt it. It's just where he happens to be."

"Well, open the door."

Olin took a deep breath and pushed the heavy, oak doors open, revealing a brightly lit dining hall. Directly in front of them was a long table, empty except for the lone figure at the head. There sat a large man, much larger than Olin but with the same jet-black hair and similar blue eyes. His hair was long and straight, pushed back from his face. His eyes held none of Olin's easy and alluring warmth. They promised danger. His frame was broader and muscular, a man who had known combat extensively. The power that radiated from him felt sinister. He didn't have the same light that Olin had, or at least it didn't look the same. Merrick couldn't quite describe it, but what he understood clearly was that this man was ready to kill.

"You dare bring a mortal into my home?" This powerful male's deep baritone voice carried down the room to them clearly, even though he hadn't raised his voice.

"I would think you'd at least try to display the manners you claim mortals lack, Father," Olin replied evenly.

"Have you learned nothing in your time running away from your responsibilities?" Olin's father stood, dressed in all black from head to toe. "These dalliances with mortals are fleeting. They are mere toys. Their lives are so short they are but a footnote in the lives we live."

Olin sighed. "We've had this discussion and I'm tired of it. There's no need for me here. Did you plan on dying sometime soon and doing the world a favor?"

Merrick tensed as he felt the other male's power flare out. Nothing came at them directly. Clearly it was just a sign of his anger. The fey were very free with letting loose energy that mortal-born witches conserved.

"The odds of me dying are slim to none, but that does not release you from the path I've set for you."

"Who are you to set a path for anyone?" Merrick finally spoke.

Those cold, blue eyes turned to him. "I am a being far beyond your capabilities. I am lord of this castle."

Olin rolled his eyes. "You're always so dramatic. His name is Argon."

His father's glare got colder, if that was possible. "It's as if you want me to crush you both."

"Oh do feel free to try, Father dearest. It won't work."

“So, you finally feel you can stand against me?” Something like pride crossed Argon’s face for a moment.

Olin gave him a bland stare. “You know as well as I do that I received none of your offensive abilities. Beating me never brought them out of me, nor did your endless stream of insults and belittling.”

“So you wish for the mortal to die then? Very well.”

“You might want to rethink that,” Merrick warned. “If you fire that shot, it only ends one way for you. I was blessed with all of the offensive ability your son believes he lacks.”

Argon laughed coldly. “I barely sense any magic within you. You talk big but you have nothing to back it up with.”

Merrick folded his arms across his chest. “I don’t parade my power around the way you do. There’s no need. But by all means, feel free to try me. You’re the one about to hit the ground.”

Argon flicked his hand toward him and a ball of fire shot at him. Olin prepared to shove him aside only for Merrick to reach his hand out and seemingly catch it as if it were a baseball. Argon’s eyes widened as Merrick launched it back at him. Argon knocked it aside, letting it singe a wall.

“That’s different,” Merrick mumbled to himself.

“Just because I’m human doesn’t mean I’m weak. Magic isn’t exclusive to your kind.” Merrick folded his arms across his chest again. “Now, do you want to keep going down this road or can we wrap this up? You give Olin what he wants, I get what I want, and you don’t get embarrassed by a human.”

“Don’t get cocky,” Argon replied. “Deflecting a weak ball of fire is nothing.”

Merrick sighed. “Do you not understand the problem here? You have no idea how strong I really am. Do we really need to go through all this just for you to let Olin live his life the way he wants?”

“As if I’d be content with my son being such a dainty, little fairy, running around with humans and allowing them to defile him.” Argon scowled. “I’ll bet you’re just the latest he’s let inside him. At least here he has protection, even if he chooses to only lie with men.”

Merrick unfolded his arms and brushed a strand of hair back from his face. “Yep, I’m going to crush his windpipe.”

“Don’t underestimate him,” Olin warned.

Merrick glanced at him. “Going by what you can sense right now, who’s stronger, me or your father?”

Olin looked puzzled. “He is, by far.”

“So, you think I’m out classed, yet you’d let me fight him anyway? That’s reassuring.” Merrick focused on Argon again. “You have some of him in you after all.”

“What does that mean?” Olin asked incredulously.

“You’re arrogant and selfish. You brought me here to fight your battle for you, yet you assume just because other abilities haven’t developed that I’m weak.” Merrick took a deep breath, preparing himself for the fight to come. “You sense what I allow you to sense. So I’m going to prove you both wrong and get you what you want. You might want to stand back.”

“What? Why?”

Merrick sighed. “Suit yourself.”

A strong burst of power burst from within him, sending Olin, Argon, and everything else in the room flying away from him. Argon was the first to right himself, while Olin rose shortly after, leaning against the wall for support.

“Judging by the look on your father’s face and what you sense now, how fucked is he?” Merrick asked Olin.

“Thoroughly, if you play it smart,” Olin answered honestly, a hint of disbelief in his voice.

“Exactly.” Merrick didn’t move, instead sending his power out without a warning to lift Argon up and fling him off to the side.

Argon tucked and rolled, a warrior seasoned in battle with quick instincts. He came up launching another ball of fire. This time, Merrick ducked and flicked his hand, his power flinging the dining table at him. Argon dove to the left to avoid it, not paying attention as it struck the wall. He sent two more balls of fire at Merrick and Merrick flung his hands out, his power deflecting both. Argon suddenly vanished.

“Well, that’s different,” Merrick muttered to himself.

“On your right!” Olin called out.

This had the opposite effect, as Merrick looked at Olin first before turning to his right. That was long enough to be struck in the side of the head hard enough to knock him across the room. Argon stood where he'd been seconds before. Merrick held his jaw as he pushed himself up and glared at Olin.

"Don't help. I've got this."

"I was trying to protect your face," Olin argued.

Merrick was struck again just as suddenly, cutting off his reply. Again, Argon stood where he'd been moments before.

"You're doing a fantastic job," Argon told Olin sarcastically.

Olin scowled at him. "I hate you."

Argon grunted in reply. "You'll get over it."

Merrick's power caught him again, slamming him against the wall. Not done yet, Merrick slammed him to the floor, then across the room to another wall, and finally out into the hall. Seconds later a stream of fire shot through the room.

"Damn he's persistent," Merrick mumbled.

He held out his hands and the flames hit the barrier of his power but kept coming. Argon was attempting to overpower him so he held his position, focusing on holding the flames back. He was confident in his power and finally began to push back. The flames kept coming but his power pushed and kept them farther and farther away.

"I think I proved my point." Merrick smirked and exerted extra force, his power forcing the flames to rebound back on Argon at last.

Olin had remained against the wall in relative safety to watch the fight with wide eyes, fearful that he'd overestimated Merrick's magic. As his father dashed into the hall, Olin watched Merrick remain where he was, even as Argon reached him with a speed much faster than the human eye could see. Merrick's fist shot up and hit Argon right in the throat. He coughed, air blocked off from the force of the punch, and Merrick stepped back just enough to deliver a side kick to his throat that took him off his feet, leaving him gasping for air on the floor.

"Crushed windpipe as promised." Merrick looked down at the struggling warrior. "So, are we done or do I have to kill you? I'm told it's bad luck to kill a fairy."

Argon glared at him, wheezing for breath even as his body attempted to repair the damage. Olin finally walked over and knelt beside his father.

“So, are you willing to see reason now?” he asked softly.

“Please say no. This was actually the best therapy I can ask for after one hell of a week so far,” Merrick added with a grin.

A sudden flash of lightning and a clap of thunder startled the three men, just before Queen Ma’ab appeared.

“That was most entertaining.” Her beautiful, violet eyes settled on Argon. “How the mighty have fallen. You were bested by someone you claim to be superior to. Do you want to know why?”

Argon could only wheeze in response.

“You nobles have forgotten your place. We are here to help mankind. Our magic all comes from the same source. You think you are superior when in fact you are inferior. You are descended from me, yet I’d almost be willing to let you perish. Now concede and grant the boy his freedom.” Ma’ab moved her hand over Argon and he was able to breathe freely again. “Speak.”

“If I am to be left without an heir, something must be given in return.”

Ma’ab raised an eyebrow in question, seemingly amused by the request. “You mean other than being allowed to continue breathing?”

“And you have other potential heirs,” Olin added.

“All that is mine is set to go to you,” Argon replied. “It is magically bound to you.”

“Old magic is not so different from new. It can be reversed for a price.” Ma’ab turned to Merrick. “You have great power, like your founder. I will honor my word. The athame is yours, with one more stipulation.”

“I don’t have to fight anyone else do I?” Merrick asked warily.

“No, nothing like that. I will see you soon enough. For now, Olin will return you to your home. The athame will be returned to you in due time.”

Merrick opened his mouth to respond, but Olin shook his head, signaling him to refrain. Instead he nodded and the queen smiled.

“I predict great things from you, much greater perhaps than you see for yourself.”

Cryptic, he thought.

Olin stepped forward to lead him out. "I'm not sure what's really happening here but let's go."

Chapter Eleven

Merrick opened his eyes and found himself back in the coven house again. Olin stood beside him watching him warily.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Merrick asked.

“I’m not sure how you’ll react to me right now,” Olin answered honestly.

“How should I react?” Merrick moved away to sit down on the bed. “It looks like we both got what we wanted out of the deal. You’re free from your father. I get the athame back for my coven. I guess that makes us even.”

Olin frowned, confused by the reaction. “I didn’t use you.”

Merrick gave him a bland stare. “Do I look stupid to you? You don’t have to admit it, but at the end of the day, you’ve been looking for someone strong enough to stand up to your father for you because you couldn’t do it yourself. Isn’t that why you agreed to help Santy?”

“I hadn’t considered that a human would free me from my father. I helped her because she asked. It’s that simple.”

Merrick snorted in obvious disbelief. “You sent me into a fight you didn’t even think I could win. Yeah, you made a feeble attempt at talking me out of it, but clearly by now you knew I’d make the attempt to fulfill my promise to Santy. So either you had a feeling I’d really be able to free you or you’re just as arrogant and twisted as your father is. You know, since you didn’t think a human could free you.”

“Don’t twist my words in that way. I’m nothing like my father.”

Merrick laughed humorlessly. “Keep telling yourself that. From what I saw today, you’re a lot like him. The sad part is, you didn’t have to sleep with me to get what you want. I’d have done it if you’d asked anyway.”

Olin’s fists clenched in his anger. “I am nothing like my father. If I used you for anything, it was the sex, and I couldn’t even just use you for that. Let’s call this what it really is. You got what you want, and now you’re ready to move on to someone else because I’m not your type anyway. That jackass Jeremiah is your type, right? Big and masculine. Your definition of a man.”

Merrick stood up again and walked back over to stand in front of him. “It’s not your femininity that bothers me. Masculine and feminine don’t necessarily

mean male and female, man and woman. What bothers me is your willingness to live in your own delusion and your inability to stand up for yourself. You had the power to stop your father. You could have stepped in at any point during our fight. You chose not to. If I had been in over my head, what would you have done?"

"I tried to step in. You wouldn't let me," Olin shot back.

"Nice try, Olin. But I know better. Like I said earlier, you're arrogant and selfish."

"If I'm so arrogant and selfish, then why did I make a deal with the one being I'd rather face in a fight less than my father to get your dagger back?" Olin refused to back down.

"You have to give something to get something in this world," Merrick replied. "It's really that simple. You gave something you don't give a damn about in order to get what mattered most to you."

"You have no idea what matters most to me!" Olin shouted.

"You told me you just want to live free, without burdens and responsibilities, right?" Merrick kept his voice calm, his eyes locked on Olin's. "Now you can."

Olin finally averted his eyes. "Why am I arguing with you? You can't possibly understand me."

"No, I don't, but you didn't intend to give me the chance to understand you either. I'm just a glorified one night stand to you, aren't I?"

Olin made no response. He'd felt something when they were together, something stronger than it should be for someone he knew so little about. But he'd be damned if he'd admit it to him now, not when Merrick had so coldly assessed him.

"I guess I'll see you around, or not, if you choose to leave again." Merrick turned away and dropped down on the bed. "I need some rest after all that. I've never had to use my power for an extended period like that before."

Olin stared at him for several moments before leaving. Merrick sighed and rolled onto his side. With any luck, the distance would help him think straight and steel himself from making the same mistake again.

Chapter Twelve

The next few weeks were odd. Olin was left alone completely, no word from his father or Queen Ma'ab. He hadn't gone to see Merrick either, and Merrick was clearly not a club type of guy. Olin went out every night, but it was losing its allure. It was frustrating. He'd always been so carefree and uninhibited. Acquiring a new lover was the simplest thing in the world. But ever since he'd parted with Merrick he felt lost.

Now instead of going out and dancing, he was sitting in his apartment alone and arguing with himself. Why should he go back to him? Merrick called him arrogant and selfish. He'd compared him to his father. There was no greater insult to him.

A clap of thunder and flash of lightning caused him to jump, just before Queen Ma'ab appeared.

"You are sulking, my beautiful Olin, and that just will not do."

"Must you always make such a dramatic entrance?" Olin gave himself a moment to settle down. "And I'm not sulking."

"Then what do you call it? Night after night you have gone out and you've danced but with little feeling. You are a shell of your former self. Do the words of Merrick hurt you so?"

Olin looked away. Ma'ab's words cut right to the point.

"He has a valid point. Try as you might to deny it, you are like your father, in some ways." Queen Ma'ab's eyes stayed on him, though he felt no malice, only something like a mother's love. "You are not so brutal, perhaps because you are not capable of blatant brutality. But you have a great deal of arrogance. You are beautiful. Your every move mesmerizes men and women alike in all races, not just the humans. Your magic is great; you simply cannot use it in a harmful way. You intended to use the human. You thought helping him would be a good time. When you found out that I took the athame, you attempted to back out. When I offered you a chance at true freedom from your father, you jumped at it, even though you thought Merrick would be out of his league. But Santy's prediction for you is not wrong. It is merely up to you to make it happen."

"Her vision was not made clear to me," Olin told her.

Queen Ma'ab smiled. "Yes it was. You know exactly what it is. It is the reason why you have taken no other man to your bed since you were with Merrick. It is the reason you are so miserable here by yourself. You felt a connection with him, one you've never felt before."

"He clearly isn't having a hard time without me."

"How would you know?" Queen Ma'ab argued. "You haven't gone to see him. I have. He merely hides his struggle better. He's dedicated to his coven and his craft. So much magic still untapped within him that he works tirelessly to use. He works cleansing spells and banishing spells with his coven, you know."

"That's swell but what does that have to do with me?" Olin asked.

Ma'ab sighed. "The fact that so many of you have forgotten your role bothers me. You have the innate ability to guide and enhance the magic of others, especially humans. You could aid them greatly."

"He will not ask for my aid. He feels as if I used him."

"Did you?" Ma'ab asked.

"No, I had no intentions of having him fight my father. I hoped that the idea would scare him out of it. I have lifetimes to escape my father's rule." Olin sighed. "The sex was intentional. That was a result of my attraction to him, nothing more."

"So in truth, you were using him, if not for freeing you then for sex. Using is using, no matter the reason or the method." Ma'ab held out her hand, extending the athame to him. "This is the athame in question. I have yet to return it to him. It would make a good peace offering for you."

Olin took the athame and examined it. It was simple in design. The hilt was black and gold and the blade covered by a matching sheath. Nothing overly impressive about it to the naked eye. But Olin felt the magic within.

"Are you sure you want to entrust this to him?" he asked.

"I see great things in store for him, and for you, if you swallow your pride."

"You make it sound so simple," Olin said quietly.

"It is simple. You keep making it difficult. What is so wrong with the idea of settling down in one place with one man who makes you feel like no other?"

“It’s restricting. Merrick is powerful, like my father. He’s stronger than me. What stops him from trying to control my every move? I don’t want boundaries and limitations. I want freedom to do as I please. I want to travel to new places. I want to dance anytime I feel like it.”

“You’ve made a lot of assumptions there.” Ma’ab’s eyes sparkled. “False assumptions. You think great power turns men into someone like your father. That is quite foolish. I expected better. Go take him the athame. We shall see if your fears have any true basis. If I’m right, you will begin to see the error in your ways.”

Chapter Thirteen

Merrick and Santy were working together around the coven house. There was plenty of gardening to be done, as the backyard had a huge garden for growing the herbs and spices they used for potions and cooking.

“We have a visitor,” Santy told Merrick suddenly.

“Who is it?” he asked.

Olin appeared, standing over him as he knelt to tend to a rosebush. “What are you doing?”

Merrick rolled his eyes. “Working in the garden, clearly. What do you want?”

Santy hit him in the arm. “Stop being rude. He comes bearing a gift.”

“You know, it’s really uncanny how you do that,” Olin muttered.

“And annoying,” Merrick added.

“You should both be used to it. Now hand it over.” Santy held her hand out.

Olin handed her the athame. “I don’t think *you* should really be using it.”

Santy stood up and brushed herself off. “It’s not really mine to use, now is it? Queen Ma’ab released it to Merrick. I’m just going to put it away for now and work on finding something to protect it when he’s not using it.”

Santy headed into the house, leaving the two alone. Merrick finally stood up and locked eyes with Olin.

“I know that’s not all you’re here for.”

Olin sighed. “I’m not entirely sure why I’m here. Queen Ma’ab could have delivered that herself, but she sent it with me. It’s supposed to be a peace offering.”

“Do we need a peace offering?” Merrick asked quietly.

“You tell me,” Olin replied. “As I recall, you told me I was arrogant and selfish like my father. It sounded as if you were sending me away.”

“I stand by what I said,” Merrick told him honestly. “It’s not like you were really intending to back me up in that fight.”

“You didn’t let me,” Olin argued. “Whenever I tried to help, you told me not to. I may not have thought you could do it alone, but I didn’t take you there to die.”

“Then what did you take me there for?”

“Because you insisted on it. If you had let the athame go, I would never have taken you there.”

“But you would still be running from your father, right?” Merrick’s eyes were unreadable, but not hostile.

“Yes,” Olin answered honestly. “Until I found a way to free myself, I would have continued running. Better that than having another death on my conscience because my father insists that I return home to take his place.”

“Is that such a horrible thing?” Merrick asked out of genuine curiosity. “If you have to take his place, that means he wouldn’t actually be around, right?”

Olin shrugged. “That’s not a guarantee. Death isn’t the same for us as it is for you.”

“So now you’re free, and you’re still here. I thought you’d planned on leaving.”

Olin turned away. “I do plan on leaving. I don’t stay in one place for long.”

“So why have you stayed?” Merrick had a smile on his face, even though Olin wasn’t looking at him.

Olin looked back at him and scowled when he saw the smile. “Why is this amusing to you?”

“Because you have to say it.”

“It’s nice to know you find joy in my misery,” Olin said sarcastically.

“Out with it, already.”

“Fine, I’m still here because I felt something for you. I’m here because the idea of leaving bothers me. I’m here because, even though I want my freedom to do as I please, the idea of leaving here, leaving you, just doesn’t work for me. But I can’t stay here.”

Merrick raised an eyebrow in question. “Why not?”

“I told you, I want to be free. I like to stay on the move. If I stay here with you, how will I be free? It’s trading in one controlling man for another.”

“Do I seem controlling to you?” Merrick asked.

“All men with power are, in my experience,” Olin responded.

“No, we’re not. Controlling isn’t something I’ve ever been called before, and I don’t think I like being called that now.”

“So you’d be okay with me going out to dance and traveling around this world and others at a moment’s notice?” Olin questioned.

Merrick cocked his head to the side. “Am I to assume you would want something more than just the fling we had the other night? As in you want an actual relationship?”

“I’ve never done it before, but I was never really able to. I didn’t want to be tied down.”

Merrick chuckled. “You have a lot of misconceptions about how a relationship works. It’s not about control. I’m not your father. I don’t feel the need to change you. You are who you are. So long as you come back, I’m fine.”

Olin stared at him for several moments as if trying to see some hint of falsehood in his words. Merrick met his gaze head on.

“Are you really this trusting?” Olin asked finally.

“I see no reason to enter into a relationship, or remain in one, if there is no trust. If I wanted someone I can’t trust, I’d still be with Jeremiah.”

Olin finally flashed a smile. “So you and I are really going to make a go of this?”

“Why not?” Merrick took a step closer. “It’s a lot faster than I normally move, but you’re different than anyone else, and not just because of your race. Truth be told, these past few weeks haven’t been easy for me either.”

“So why didn’t you come to me?” Olin asked, also taking a step closer.

“I had to stand by my morals here. If I was right, you’d never have come back. You did, so clearly I wasn’t entirely right.”

“No, I think you were right. I never really thought about it, but I do tend to look down on humans. I was raised to think you’re weaker. I hope I’m not really as bad as my father is, but you have a point.”

“I said you were like him, not as bad as him,” Merrick pointed out. “Overall you’re not bad. A bit flighty and temperamental, surprisingly sensitive, and you have major daddy issues, but you’re not a bad guy.”

Olin raised an eyebrow. "Flighty? Daddy issues? It's as if you're already wanting to be sex deprived."

Merrick smirked. "Like you'd deprive yourself just to punish me."

"OK, valid point, but I'm sure I can find another fitting punishment."

"For telling the truth?"

"You're embellishing it," Olin argued.

"I definitely am not," Merrick responded. "Now, are we going to go inside or stand out here bickering?"

"What are you planning to do inside?"

Merrick shrugged. "I don't know if I'd say I have a plan. If you should happen to fall down on a flat surface and I fall on top of you, then so be it."

Olin laughed. "Cute, but won't Santy have an issue with that?"

"I'm sure she'll get over it." Merrick took his hand and led him toward the house. As Merrick reached for the door, Olin froze.

"Merrick, wait," he warned.

Merrick had already started to open the door when he stopped. He turned back only for the door to be flung open and a searing pain shot through his stomach. Even as Olin reached for him, a second pain blazed through his chest, and he fell backward with a knife protruding from his chest and blood flowing from the open wound. Olin turned his gaze on Merrick's attacker.

"Did you honestly think I was done?" Argon's cold gaze turned on his much smaller son. "I will not be bested by a human and allow him to live to tell the tale."

Olin's breathing quickened, his anger rising as he looked down at Merrick's body. He couldn't tell if he was breathing for sure, but he didn't appear to be. Olin's fists clenched. For the first time in his life, he truly felt the urge for violence. He wanted so desperately to assault his father. Consequences be damned.

"Do you mean to strike me?" Argon advanced toward Olin. "It'd be the first time you did something I want for a change. But I am done with this farce. This mortal's life is but a blip on the radar of yours. His lifetime is like a mere moment in the passage of time to us. He might have lived to be maybe fifty or sixty, and that's being generous for his line of work. You will live for thousands of years."

“I’d rather be with him the years he has than to spend this immortal life under your thumb!” Olin spat. “If he dies, so will you.”

Argon slapped him across the face. “I’ve had enough of this. My time is limited here. My heir must be ready.”

Olin’s head had snapped to the side from the slap, his hair falling into his eyes. His fists clenched again and he felt the strange, burning swirl of power inside him. He didn’t question where it came from, but instead released it. The power took the form of a bolt of lightning, striking Argon in the chest and sending the larger male flying away from the house. He landed hard in the garden and looked up to find Olin bathed in a bright, white light.

“Be careful what you wish for, Father.”

Another bolt of lightning shot from Olin, striking his father again. He advanced forward, paying no attention as the weather outside changed, clouds covering the sun and a strong wind picking up. He didn’t even notice as Santy came back out, kneeling next to Merrick and trying to stop the bleeding. He heard none of the franticness in her voice, her pleas for Merrick to stay with her, or the sobs as he faded. His focus was on his father and the collision of their magic proved to be explosive and blinding. Santy shielded her eyes as the battle between father and son raged on.

Chapter Fourteen

Merrick's world was nothing but darkness. He felt no pain. In fact it felt as if he were floating. It barely occurred to him to wonder where he was or why he was there. There was no pain here.

Off to his right, he could see flashes of light. When he tried to focus on them, pain flared in his stomach and chest. Try as he might, he couldn't actually turn his head and the pain was persistent. He was too weak to move. The realization brought back memories of what had happened, blurred though they were. This world he found himself in wasn't actually free of pain. His body had gone mostly numb. If this was death, he supposed there were worse ways to spend eternity.

"Are you truly ready to die?"

He recognized the voice as Queen Ma'ab, but he could not see her, nor anything else for that matter.

"You must hold on here in this purgatory. If you proceed to the afterlife, there is no chance for your revival, and your Olin will suffer."

That was easier said than done. Merrick was dead. This much had become obvious. It was only a matter of time before he'd have to move on. He was floating higher and higher. Another light was coming into view. Freedom from pain was mere moments away.

Olin leapt up and smashed his knee into his father's nose. The experienced warrior, though hurt, grabbed his leg and flung him across the yard.

"Have you learned nothing?" Argon asked as he walked toward him. "You don't have what it takes to defeat me, not yet. If you'd come home and work on this power you've found, you'd become so much stronger."

Olin glared at him. "You were told to free me. You agreed."

"I agreed to nothing," Argon growled. "I will have my way, and no one will stop me. Not you nor some mortal nor some queen whose time is long past."

Lightning flashed and thunder clapped, heralding the arrival of the queen in question.

“Oh, is that what you think, Argon?” Queen Ma’ab’s violet eyes promised violence as she gazed at the fey lord.

“You will not stop me. He is my heir,” Argon told her. “The magic is sealed.”

Ma’ab actually laughed at him in a truly patronizing manner. “Tell me, Argon, where do you get your knowledge from? If you’d studied properly you’d know there is one way out of that magic. All Olin has to do is sacrifice his immortality. Doing so would save the mortal’s life, and leave him far beyond your reach.”

“I will not stand by and watch my boy throw away his heritage for a worthless mortal!” Argon thundered.

Queen Ma’ab narrowed her eyes. “You still dare to challenge me?”

A deep purple ball of light suddenly struck Argon in the chest and sent him flying. He hit the ground and didn’t move. Ma’ab’s gaze softened as she turned to Olin.

“You don’t have much time. Another minute longer and Merrick will be lost to you forever.”

Olin finally turned back and raced to Merrick’s side. Tears streaked down Santy’s face.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“You’re the seer, didn’t you foresee this?” Olin pulled the knife from Merrick’s chest with a wince.

“I don’t always see things that clearly, and definitely not in order.” Santy watched as Olin placed his hands over each of the wounds. “So I have no clue what you’re doing”

“I’m doing the only thing that will save him.” Olin closed his eyes. “We brought him into this mess. I made it more complicated. I’ll be damned if I let him die because I was too weak to stand up to my father ages ago.”

Santy finally took a real look at him. “I’ve never seen this light around you.”

“And you won’t ever see it again if this works,” Olin told her, never opening his eyes.

Merrick was still floating upward. There was a bright light ahead. Who'd have thought that the road to the afterlife really went through darkness until you saw the light at the end of the tunnel? But another light appeared, one different from the pure light at the end of the tunnel. This one came in the shape of a pale-skinned, dark-haired man. He'd know that form anywhere.

"Take my hand, Merrick, it's not time for you to pass on into the next life. The Summerland cannot have you this day."

"There is nothing but pain behind me," Merrick finally spoke.

"I am waiting behind you, and the pain will pass." Olin extended his hand. "For you, I will sacrifice everything."

Merrick hesitated only a moment longer before he reached out for his hand. The light finally blinded him and he knew no more.

Santy watched the light around Olin disappear, pouring from him into Merrick. With wonder she observed as Merrick's chest finally rose and fell again, his heart pumping. Olin swayed but caught himself. Merrick's eyes finally opened again. He blinked several times before turning to Olin.

"What did you do?" he asked.

Olin exhaled deeply. "You were technically dead, almost ready to cross into Summerland, the afterlife. There was only one way to bring you back. I sacrificed my immortality. I'm as mortal as you are now."

Queen Ma'ab walked toward them. "Not only that, but because he is mortal, he cannot inherit anything from his father. Argon holds nothing over him now."

"But he won't let it go." Merrick slowly pushed himself to a seated position. "There's nothing like wounded pride to keep a guy like him coming after us."

"What do you propose?" Ma'ab asked.

"I need the athame." Merrick slowly pushed himself up, looking down at his blood stained shirt. "He's not going to bother Olin again."

Santy rose and went inside to retrieve the athame again. Merrick was standing when she returned with it. Merrick unsheathed it and walked over to where Argon lay sprawled on the lawn. He hadn't moved after Ma'ab blasted him. Merrick held the athame in front of him and pointed it at him. He felt the energy flowing from the artifact, energy that would normally be intimidating. Right now, he knew exactly how to direct it.

“I banish you, not only from this realm, but all others except your own. You are a prisoner—confined to the home you value so much—never again free to roam across the worlds to sicken them as you yourself are sick.” Merrick gazed coldly at him. “No amount of teleporting or flashing ability will negate this magic. This key to the realms binds you. Be glad I didn’t confine you to hell.”

A strange, blue light shot out from the athame and covered Argon. He howled in rage before he vanished. Ma’ab actually clapped.

“I knew you would do the right thing with that athame. Your first time using it and you automatically knew what to do with it. Just one of many great things I expect I’ll see from you.”

Merrick turned to face the queen. “He’s not done with us, is he?”

“That depends on how stupid he really is,” Ma’ab answered honestly. “But I know I will call on you again in the future. Your magic is great and your judgment is very level. You will be of great help to me in coming battles.”

Merrick cocked his head to the side. “Mighty bold to assume we’ll continue to have a working relationship, aren’t you?”

“I’m a queen, my dear.” Ma’ab smiled. “Boldness comes with the job title. I will see you soon.”

She vanished. Merrick turned back to the others.

“Well, I think we can afford to go inside and take a load off, don’t you?” he suggested.

“You two go ahead,” Santy told him. “I’ll make sure to clean up here.”

Merrick slowly made his way inside and Olin followed, helping him ease down onto the sofa in the front living room of the house.

“This place sure is different in daylight,” Olin commented.

“It’s outdated really.” Merrick grunted in discomfort. “The furniture is old but durable. If any of us lived here we’d probably consider redoing it.”

It was a valid point. The sofa he was on was an older, cream-colored one in a floral print. Olin sat next to him and Merrick wrapped an arm around him, pulling him close.

“So why did you do it?” Merrick asked.

“We’re only just getting started and losing you made something in me snap. I’ve never been much of a fighter.” Olin intertwined their fingers. “I told you

I'd give up everything for you. I meant that. This connection between us isn't by chance. It was fated. Immortality is everything to a fey, but what good is it to be immortal if you finally find someone to love and have to watch them die?"

Merrick smiled. "I promise the sacrifice won't be in vain."

Olin turned slightly to look up at him. "Even if for some reason we don't last, it would still be worth it. You gave me a reason to stand up to my father. You gave me the power to stand up to him."

"The power was always in you," Merrick argued.

"But if I'd never met you, I wouldn't have had the catalyst to release it. I have no idea where I learned any of those moves from. I've never been that good at physically fighting."

"Do you think you'll be happy living as a mortal?" Merrick asked.

"I'll be fine, especially if I'm with you." Olin placed a hand on his chest again. "You sacrificed something too."

"Well, I knew when I saw you that you'd lead me into trouble. Didn't think I'd literally die, but I'm here and you're here. Now we'll face the future together."

The End

Author Bio

Drako resides in his hometown of St. Louis, Missouri, which you may notice is part of the setting of this story. When he isn't writing, he's busy editing for other authors, reviewing books, working, going to college, and spending time with his friends and two nieces. He blogs often and is very active on Facebook while trying to readjust to activity on twitter. His subject matter varies as he likes to talk about more than just his writing. You can check out his posts at his website.

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