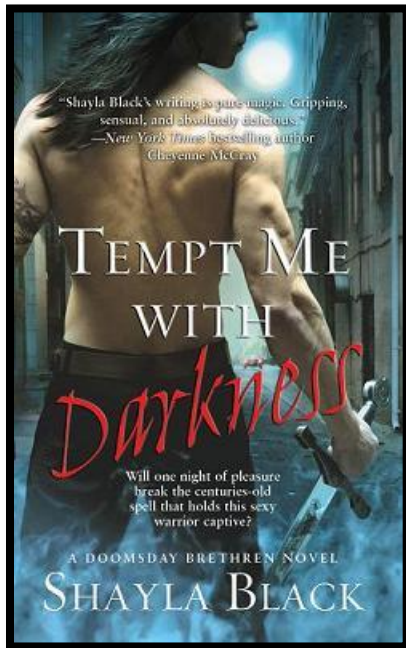
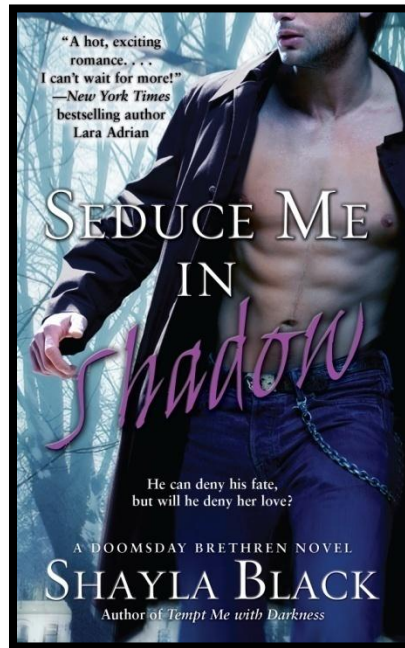


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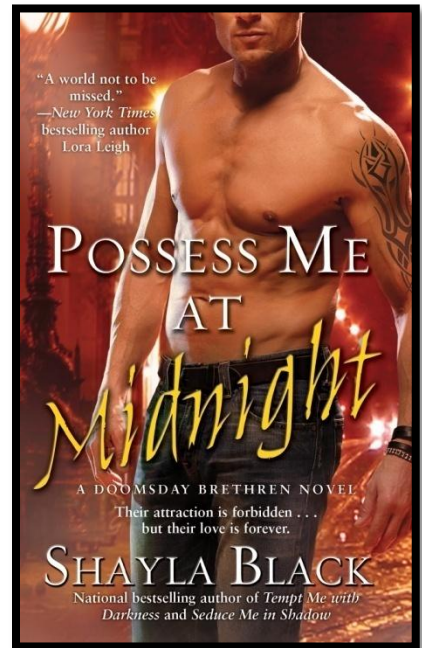
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CHAPTER ONE

There's a bloody unwelcome sight.

Ronan Wolvesey wandered into his usual haunt, The Witch's Brew, with his twin brother, Raiden, close behind. The rowdy London pub always drew a noisy, unusual crowd: athletic types, businessmen, goth girls...and many of magickind's unmated. A surprise, considering its owner was pure human.

It was that very human Ronan now watched, all swinging golden curls and enormous blue eyes, as Kari Keswick leaned over the bar, her brief blue t-shirt exposing a band of soft skin at her midriff. She spoke to another wizard, a big dark-haired one with gray eyes and the look of a predator. Tynan Someone-or-other, he'd been told.

Fighting a gust of wind, Ronan slammed the little pub's door. Kari didn't look his way. Instead, she gripped Tynan's shoulder as she looked into his eyes and smiled softly.

Bloody hell! He feared this wretched feeling poisoning his blood was the emotion humans called jealousy. He'd rather swallow battery acid.

"Your eyes will burn holes in her if you stare any harder," Raiden murmured.

"He's been here too often this past month, talking to Kari."

"Why do you care? It's not as if you'll spend tonight alone. In fact..." He looked away. "I see two splendid possibilities by the window. Come on."

Raiden saw such possibilities every place they went, and rarely was he wrong. Ronan knew he would not spend the night alone...but he fantasized about spending it with Kari. If he approached her now, she would likely refuse him—just as she had for the past two years. Until

now, he'd assumed Kari didn't want to cross that human-wizard line. Given her present company and their coziness, it appeared her refusal was more personal.

"In a moment." Ronan headed for the bar.

Raiden grabbed his arm. "She's not for you. Forget her."

Ronan refused to concede defeat. "Shove off."

"She's hardly the most beautiful female you've ever seen. Last week's blonde was more stunning by half. What was her name?"

He had no idea, and that was the problem. He grew weary of waking up in a different bed, beside a different body every morning. At just ninety, he was young by magickind's standards. He couldn't live this way for another ten minutes, much less eight or nine centuries.

"There's something about Kari," Ronan confessed. "I've nearly gone mad trying to discern it."

"The fact she said 'no,' a word you never hear?" Raiden shrugged. "Plenty of other lovelies. Pick one and move on."

As if all women were interchangeable. For Raiden—and the rest of the Wolvesey clan—they were.

"Chat up the girls by the window, then. I want to pop over to the bar, say hello."

Raiden rolled his eyes. "Be quick. Besides, she looks...busy."

At that, Ronan turned back to Kari to find her laying her soft pink lips against the big wizard's cheek. She looked so delicate and fair against his strong, sun-bronzed jaw. Then Tynan grabbed her hand and squeezed.

The sight ripped a hole in Ronan's chest. He clenched his jaw so hard, it was a wonder he didn't grind his teeth into powder.

Stalking across the bar, he yanked out a stool near Tynan's. It screeched across the old stone floor. Still, Kari did not look his way.

To his left, the heat from the brick hearth flamed to ward off the coming winter's chill. Heavy alternative rock played in the background as some wizards laughed at their attempts to play billiards without magic. Human females at the end of the bar toasted something with stout red wine. Ronan scarcely noticed any of it. As always, Kari drew him in utterly, her smile shining as brightly as her golden hair. Her otherworldly blue eyes seemed to take up half her sweet face. A glance at her bowled him over.

There was something...fresh about her. Almost pure. If he could figure it out exactly, maybe he could rid himself of this odd obsession.

"Kari?" he called.

She blinked several times, then tore her gaze from Tynan's. The other wizard released her, giving her permission to greet him. Was she bedding the wanker? In love with him? The thought screamed across his brain like a battle cry.

"Ronan." She sidled down to his end of the bar. "A scotch?"

"Double, no rocks." He glanced down at Tynan. "New...friend?"

"I see your brother has already made yours for the night." She looked just over his shoulder at his brother with a sarcastic twist of her pretty pink lips. "I hope you're in the mood for a brunette tonight. It appears she's yours by default. Raiden always takes the redheads." Then she looked at her watch and whistled. "Quick work. That's a record, even for him."

Ronan grimaced. He didn't like coming here to find women, but his twin insisted nowhere else was more expedient or target-rich.

"I don't care who Raiden's found. He can have them both. I came for you," he confessed.

Kari reached behind her for a glass on the shelf. “We’ve been over this. I won’t spend the night with you.”

“Why? It’s not because I’m a wizard.” He glanced at Tynan. “Clearly.”

“Don’t ask me again. Please.” She slammed the glass on the well-worn bar between them.

Ronan grabbed her hands. They were soft and fragile, and at a mere touch, desire burned him alive, eating at his composure. “You’re like a fever to me. I need to touch you.”

“That line work for you often?”

Kari thought the admission he’d had to choke out was a ploy? He scowled. “It’s not a bloody line.”

She shook her head, blonde curls brushing breasts he’d dreamed about touching, and extracted her hands. “Like any fever, you’ll recover from it.” Kari then withdrew a bottle of scotch, filled the glass, then shoved it his way. “Six pounds.”

With a sigh, Ronan shoved his money across the bar. “I simply want to talk to you.”

“No, you want to shag me. And then forget me as you have every woman you’ve ever met here and shagged for the past two years. The notches on your bedpost are long, as is the line. I have neither the time nor inclination.”

With that, she turned away and headed to the other end of the bar.

Bugger!

Raiden motioned him over, and Ronan went, pasting on a smile. He glanced at the brunette. Pretty enough. Nice mouth. Small hands. Maybe he could close his eyes and pretend she was Kari. It would hardly be the first time. But now that he knew wizards weren’t off limits, he vowed someday—soon—that he would have Kari for a night.

#

With the slam of the door, Ronan and his date for the night were gone. Kari bit her lip, steeling herself against the pain of the all-too familiar sight. Still, it hurt more each time he left with another stranger, knowing he'd be holding her while she tossed in bed alone, wanting what she would never have: his devotion forever.

"Who is he?"

Kari looked over to her newest regular, Tynan O'Shea. Polite, quiet—for now. A brewing storm, for certain. He was obviously haunted by the loss of the woman he'd loved. She didn't know much about magical politics or villains. In fact, as a human, she shouldn't know about magickind at all. Indiscreet wand waving after too much liquor had changed that a few months ago. But this Mathias D'Arc creep who had killed Tynan's lady love sounded right scary. And if Kari could do anything to help him find happiness again, even if it was merely listening to how much he missed his beloved Auropha, she would do it.

She shrugged, trying to appear unaffected. "A regular who thinks he can crook his finger and I'll shag him."

Tynan paused. "Has he ever kissed you?"

"No." Not that Ronan hadn't tried. Not that Kari hadn't thought about his full mouth on hers, demanding as her fingers gripping his long midnight hair. Or her palms skimming his five o'clock shadow while his green eyes devoured her...

"Hmm. Ever...been with a wizard?"

That question gave her pause. "Not that I know of."

"If you'd slept with one, you'd know."

"Really? You look like human men. Prettier perhaps, but I assumed the anatomy worked

the same.”

“Yes and no.”

“That’s it? That’s all you’re going to tell me?”

Tynan sighed. “Everything I’m about to tell you must remain secret. We cannot let word of our existence spread.”

Not that she’d reveal their existence anyway...or that anyone would believe her. They’d all think she was raving mad if she tried. “Of course.”

“Wizards are much like human males, except we have more...” He cleared his throat. “Stamina.”

Oh! The thought of shagging Ronan all night long made her flush everywhere. She hadn’t bothered with sex since discovering that her fiancé Edward had a revolving door to his bed. Despite Ronan having the same habit, something about him made Kari remember all the reasons celibacy sucked. And Tynan’s words were only making her flush with need. “I see.”

His voice dropped another octave. “We also have extra senses.”

Fascinating. “Such as?”

Tynan leaned closer. “Wizards sense their lifelong mates by taste. We know very quickly if a woman is ours.”

“Taste?”

“A deep sharing of mouths, kissing away a tear...sampling a woman’s arousal, any will tell us if she’s destined for us. Making love to her only cements the belief.”

He *was* joking, right? Capitalizing on the fact she knew little about wizards. “Are you suggesting that Ronan could kiss me and determine I was his...”

“Mate. Yes.”

“Like a wife?”

Tynan hesitated. “Deeper. More permanent.”

His smile had vanished, and the tight ache in Kari’s stomach told her he was quite serious. “What happens if a wizard mates with a woman?”

“Happens? Well, he Calls to her. That is to say, he speaks ritual words offering a vow to her. If she wishes to accept, she Binds to him by speaking ritual words in return. Once they’re mated, if she’s human, she assumes a magical lifespan equal to her mate’s, at most a thousand years.”

Kari gulped. A whole millennium? “Incredible... But what I meant was, if a wizard mates, does he...love her?”

“Always. Forever.” His answer was quick and absolute.

“Auropha was your—”

“Yes.” He looked down at his hands. “Or would have been once she’d grown up a bit. Another three or four years, and I would have Called to her.”

When his face tightened with grief, Kari felt instantly contrite. “How many years had you been waiting for her?”

He flashed her a sad smile full of memories and regrets. “Twenty.”

The poor man. He’d loved her deeply and long, and never had the opportunity to make her his. “I’ve said it before, but I really am so sorry. Is it possible for you to find another mate?”

Tynan hesitated. “Not *impossible*, but unlikely.”

If he had belonged to Auropha in his heart, did that mean...? “Can a mated wizard find another woman, then decide to mate with her instead?”

“In rare instances, usually when the mating was motivated by something other than

instinct and love, a wizard may meet another who is his true mate. But if he has that instinct when he enters into the mate bond, then he is hers forever.”

“He can’t...cheat?”

At that, Tynan’s face broke out in a smile, and Kari was amazed at the way it transformed him. His stark, handsome face turned downright dishy. Too bad for her that she had eyes only for Ronan.

“Impossible,” he assured.

Kari nearly signed with relief, then caught herself. Ronan had never kissed her, and given the hundreds—maybe thousands—of women he had, if he hadn’t yet found his mate, he was unlikely to press his lips to hers and suddenly decide she was “the one.”

“Lovely to know, but pointless. Ronan merely wants to make me one in his long list of conquests.”

“I wouldn’t be too certain of that.”

Her heart nearly stopped. “Why not?”

“I overheard him. Bits, mind you, but he favored you over another perfectly acceptable female.”

“Because I’ve said ‘no’ each time he’s tried to seduce me.”

“I might have agreed, except he said you were like a fever to him.”

“Lust.” She shrugged.

“Perhaps, but a wizard can sometimes sense his mate even before he tastes her. A fever is a good description.”

“That wasn’t a line of crap?” Kari’s heart beat double-time, and she gripped the bar to steady herself. Was there any chance Ronan might be interested in her beyond making her one of

his many lovers?

“Not at all. I remember my fever for Auropha well.” Depositing a few bills on the bar, Tynan stood. “Good night.”

CHAPTER TWO

Sunlight blasted Ronan's eyes like a two-ton bomb. Slinging his arm over his eyes, he licked his lips. Had his tongue grown fur overnight? He stretched, his hair pinned under his shoulders, and encountered another warm body.

Peering over with one eye open, he stared. Dark hair tangled across a woman's narrow shoulders. She possessed a smooth, bare back, small waist, great backside. Ronan didn't recall her name. In fact, he didn't recall much of last night beyond the half bottle of scotch he had consumed. And insisting the woman beside him dim the lights so he could close his eyes and pretend he held Kari in *his* bed.

This morning, he had no illusions. He'd never seen this bedroom, and the brunette was nothing like Kari. Nor had fantasizing that he made love to her assuaged his ache. Lately, he'd repeated this pattern nearly every night. Different woman, different bed. Still, his need grew.

There had to be more to life than aimless shagging with strangers. What was the point of living centuries if all they had in store were empty embraces and quiet misery?

Sitting up, Ronan scrubbed his hands across his face. He had to leave. Now. Where the hell were his clothes?

Ignoring the pounding in his head, he slid his legs off the edge of the bed and stood, the cold November morning nipping at his bare skin. He studied the floor and found yesterday's garments discarded among the woman's. Her bra tangled in his socks, her knickers atop his shirt. Bloody hell.

"Going somewhere?" asked a woman in a smoky voice.

Wincing, he cursed under his breath, then smoothed out his features and turned to her. She had lovely brown eyes with thick lashes, flushed cheeks, swollen lips. Abrasions from his stubble chafed her jaw, breasts and abdomen. He'd done that. While thinking of another woman. It wasn't fair to her. Or to him.

Ronan couldn't look at her anymore. He turned away.

Truthfully, he had nothing against whatever her name was. She'd provided a distraction last night, and in turn, he hoped he'd provided her pleasure. Now, he wanted only a drama-free farewell.

"I'm afraid I'm a bit busy this morning. Running late, in fact." He began grabbing his clothes and yanking them on. He'd love to use his magic...but Raiden had chosen two very human ladies last night. A wave of his hand, followed by a suddenly perfectly-dressed form might induce some screaming and require explanations.

As if sensing his withdrawal, the woman grabbed the sheet and covered everything below the neck. A relief, really. Not that she wasn't gorgeous, but Ronan couldn't deny his disinterest in the harsh light of day.

"Coffee?" she offered.

He'd love some, but... "No thanks. I'll pop home. Don't want to trouble you. Do you happen to know where my brother might be?"

“With Lily. Two doors down, corner unit.”

Splendid. With Raiden elsewhere, he could leave this lady’s flat and teleport home without any sort of speech from his twin. What he’d do then... No idea. A part of him wanted to drown his sorrows in more scotch, but drinking before eight in the morning seemed a bit much, even for a Wolvesey.

He finished donning his clothes and sent her an awkward wave. “Right. Good bye, then.”

“Before you go...”

Ronan winced again. Pray God she wasn’t going to ask him to fix some bit of plumbing for her, or worse, climb back into bed.

“Yes?”

“I don’t think we should see each other again.”

Hmm. He should probably care that she’d insulted his masculinity or his prowess or some such. But he felt only relief.

“Agreed.”

He left without another word, jogging down the hall, bypassing Lily’s flat, where his brother was presumably sleeping. Or busy. Raiden was a grown wizard who knew his way home. The sooner Ronan left this place, the better.

He all but jumped down the stairs. Once in the building’s empty lobby, he hid in a dark corner, picturing the manor he shared just outside London with all the wizards in his family. Then he dissipated from the spot, with an inconvenient trip to Nauseashire when his stomach revolted, before materializing back home.

A shower. And coffee. Damn and blast, impossible to have both at once.

Torn, he headed first for the kitchen. And unfortunately found his father.

“Early morning or late night?” his elder asked.

“Both.”

His father laughed, revealing a row of white teeth, short dark hair lightly peppered with gray, and laugh lines around his green eyes. At nearly seven hundred, Nathaniel Wolvesey looked barely forty in human terms.

“Me, too,” Nathaniel confided.

Looking at his sire was like looking into Ronan’s own future. Same build, same features, same eyes. Same life of excess, alcohol, and one-night stands.

“You’re frowning, son. Wake up beside an ugly one?”

No. Quite the opposite. But he hadn’t woken up beside Kari. Such a sentiment would incite a great deal of laughter in this house. But he wasn’t certain he could hold it in. His fever for Kari kept raging, and he needed answers. His father was, unfortunately, the best place to start.

“Are you quite certain our family is cursed?”

His father paused, set down his steaming mug, and stared. “You doubt it?”

“Has any of us ever truly tried to find a mate?”

Nathaniel recoiled. “Good Lord, why would you want to?”

“I don’t know that I do.” *Liar.*

“Without the instinct, we could taste a million women and never know if one was our mate. That curse is to blame. So why risk a life of abject unhappiness?”

Because he was already unhappy.

“If it’s children you want, be patient. You know from me, your uncles, and brothers, it’s possible. Conceiving them merely requires a great deal of diligent effort.” His father smiled him

and winked as if that fact pleased him greatly. Knowing the elder Wolvesey, it did.

“In fact,” his father continued, “Raiden informed me yesterday that a little witch he met last month is expecting. His first. Right proud, he was. So you see...”

His twin was having a youngling with a witch he barely knew and might never see again. And he was proud? The thought made Ronan queasy.

“Remind me how the curse began.” Maybe if he heard the story again, he might discern some way to escape it and learn to sense his mate.

Nathanial shrugged. “My great-grandfather married a Councilman’s daughter. Ugly thing, but powerful family. He had no instinct for her, but such are political matches among magickind, eh? Not long after, he met a beautiful human. He burned for her quite badly, but confessed to her that he was...what’s the human word, married? The human cried. He kissed away her tears and discovered she was destined to be his. When he tried to break his bond with his current mate, the witch wailed and screamed and cursed the family—she swore no Wolvesey mating would ever last. My great-grandfather paid her no heed, broke his bond with the witch, and mated the human. She delivered him a healthy son, but died shortly thereafter. As have all Wolvesey mates since. We’re not fit for one woman, son.”

So Ronan had heard before—over and over. “When was the last time a Wolvesey mated?”

His father stroked his chin with a frown. “It was your great-uncle Martin, I think. He mated this tall, exotic witch. I was a lad, but I recall her beauty. Shortly after their pairing, a freak accident separated her body from her head.”

His great-uncle Martin. Since Ronan had never met the wizard, he assumed that was hundreds of years ago. “But no one has tried since?”

“Of course not.” His father peered with concern and drifted closer. “Our mates all die, and the wizards are miserable for centuries. Are you daft enough to think of taking a mate?”

“That is exactly what I want to know.”

Ronan jumped at the challenging boom of a voice. Raiden had arrived. *Damn.*

Turning to his twin, Ronan couldn’t think of a single thing to say. He knew better than to ask his brother whether he was tired of shagging a different woman every night. Ronan would lay money that Raiden was living his dream.

Ronan and his twin were nearly identical, except Raiden had a golden mane of hair to his dark. But their ideas and attitudes diverged more each day.

“Just asking a few questions about the family curse.” He tried not to wince.

Raiden raised a golden brow. “For the same reason you screamed Kari’s name last night when you shagged Sophia.”

So that was the brunette’s name...*wait*. Screamed Kari’s name while having sex with Sophia? “Shit.”

“Oh, yes. Just after you dashed away, Sophia, all full of tears, visited her best friend Lily. You cheated me out of a very promising morning. I had to assure her that you were far too inebriated to remember your own name, much less hers. Both friends decided we’re womanizing prats, so there ends my association with Lily.”

Ronan refrained from pointing out that Raiden almost never spent the night with the same woman twice. His twin wouldn’t welcome the observation just now.

“Congratulations on the impending birth of your first youngling.” Ronan quickly changed the subject.

Unfortunately, Raiden wasn’t diverted. “You’ve changed. Since our transition into magic,

we've frequented pubs and sampled many ladies. We've never failed to secure a night with the lovelies we most wanted because we work well as a team...until recently. Last night, I had to work damn hard to talk both Lily and Sophia into coming with us because you were too busy mooning over Kari. It's making my evenings more difficult. It's crap, and it's going to stop."

Didn't his brother think he'd tried to stop the constant thoughts of a woman he couldn't have, who wanted little do with him? In truth, Raiden had probably never thought of this from any point of view but his own. Until the past few years, Raiden's perspective had *been* his own.

The more Ronan talked to Kari, the more that changed.

"Son," Nathaniel interjected. "I hope you know better than to mate. It's no state for a Wolvesey."

Especially if it meant Kari's death. In his head, Ronan knew that. He should walk away, refuse to return to The Witch's Brew, never set eyes on her again.

But Ronan couldn't do that, not until he knew for certain the curse wasn't crap. Kari was a fever in his blood that he simply couldn't cure—at least not until he had her. Perhaps if he took her to bed once, he could purge his need for her, as he had every other woman.

Ronan had no other option.

CHAPTER THREE

Sunday night at The Witch's Brew. Always quieter than any other day of the week, but the wintery snow on top of the slush of the last storm had made roads unbearable.

A few customers sat in dark corners of the pub. Tynan had come and gone for the evening, and she hoped he was all right. His Auropha had died a month ago today, and his grief was still so raw. The usual collection of rowdy wizards remained in the back with their billiard sticks and ales. A smattering of men and women collected around the room, some magical, some not. She didn't always know the difference.

And she watched the door. Nearly ten o'clock, minutes until closing. Kari sighed. Ronan wasn't coming. Likely, he already had a woman for the night and was pleasing her with those large hands, that sinful mouth... She shouldn't care. After Edward, she'd given up men, particularly gorgeous ones with one thing on their mind.

Too bad she couldn't seem to forget Ronan.

Suddenly, the bell chimed and the door swept open, bringing a dusting of snow on a pair of combat boots. Long legs in black trousers, a heavy charcoal duster, long hair the color of midnight, piercing green eyes that saw right to the heart of her desire.

Ronan. And he was alone.

He shut the door behind him, never looking away as he strode to the bar, shedding the duster in favor of a crisp white shirt beneath that revealed a sinuous roll of muscle with every move.

God, he was a beautiful man.

Kari swallowed. "Scotch?"

"Double, no rocks."

Quickly, she poured his drink, then set it in front of him. Before she could move away, he grabbed her wrist. "Kari, I came to talk to you."

And she knew exactly the subject he wanted to discuss. If she had sex with him, he would only find someone else to grace his bed tomorrow, and she would crumble.

Over the past two years, she'd come to know Ronan slowly. At first as a laughing flirt with a quick wit and an even quicker mind. He'd chatted, told jokes, and made her feel beautiful at a glance. She'd begun fantasizing about him. Discovering he was a wizard hadn't deterred her. But seeing him leave with other women, night after night, had taken its toll on her heart.

Her desire only deepened when he'd started taking time during each visit to talk to her. *About* her. She confessed that she'd bought the pub after her father's death because she hadn't known what else to do with her life. Ronan supported her. She admitted she'd missed growing up without the feminine influence of a mother. Ronan, in much the same situation, empathized. He'd even volunteered to clean the pub and close up when she'd sprained her ankle. He'd held her when her cat went missing and rejoiced with her when Misty had wandered home a week later. And she'd resigned herself to the fact that Ronan saw her merely as a friend.

Then he'd begun trying to seduce her. And she was *so* tempted. The more she said no, the

more persuasive he became. In her heart, however, Kari knew if she gave in, it could ruin their friendship. And that, she couldn't bear.

"Ronan, please..." She tried to pull her wrist free.

Reluctantly, he released her. He sighed and drank his scotch in three long swallows, then slammed his glass down. "Kari, you're burning me up. I don't know what to do... You're a fever I can't shake."

A fever? The kind Tynan had described? No. Stupid, wishful thinking. Certainly, if Ronan suspected she was his mate, he would have said so. This had to be simple unsated lust.

"Where's your brother tonight?"

"Elsewhere."

Kari's heart lifted with hope, even as she told herself it was stupid. "So, he's finding you someone to shag?"

"No. I told him to go out alone. I don't want anyone else. I need you."

For tonight. Tomorrow, when he'd had his fill, he'd be gone. She couldn't take that risk.

"I don't think you know enough about me to *need* me."

Ronan leaned across the bar, his eyes like a laser, green, hot, direct. "I know you drink only one sort of chardonnay and you must have lemon with your water. I know you hate for anyone to see you cry and that you're too stubborn for your own good. I know you can argue with a wall and win more often than not. And I know you're afraid of me." He grabbed her hands again and held them in his. "You're sweet and kind. You listen, you care, you help. And you're too wonderful to be alone."

Kari absorbed his words with a pounding heart. He'd been paying far more attention than she'd believed. How had he noticed so much about her?

“Ronan...” Her voice shook. Damn it all, nothing like showing weakness when she needed to be strong. “Don’t do this.”

He brought one hand to his mouth and pressed his lips to her palm. Fire arced through her body and became a deep ache, threatening her ability to breathe. “I only want to hold you.”

“Tonight, yes. Tomorrow, another woman will take my place.” She shook her head, refusing to repeat her Edward mistake with someone more likely to rip out her heart. “I can’t be one of many.”

“I’m not certain anyone could replace you. You do something to me no woman ever has. I can’t explain it...”

Again, her heart stopped. Yes, it could be a line. *It could also be his mating instinct*, a voice inside her head chimed.

Kari stepped back and yelled to everyone in the pub, “Closing time.”

The wizards at the back racked up the balls and stowed their pool cues, settled their tab, then left. The pub’s other patrons also paid, then disappeared into the cold night.

“That meant you too,” Kari said to Ronan.

He clenched his jaw. “Why are you so determined to say no?”

“I think I’ve made that very clear.”

“As clear as I’ve made the fact you’re not merely another woman to me?”

She shrugged, but her mind raced. “It’s just talk.”

Ronan looked around and found the pub empty. He flicked a wrist toward the door, and Kari heard the distinctive click of the lock. She stared at the door, blinked. While she’d known he could do magic, she had never seen it. *Wow*.

By the time she turned back to Ronan, he’d appeared on her side of the bar. Sitting on a

stool one minute, then he'd...dissipated and reformed, standing right beside her. And she didn't have the good sense to be frightened. Instead, all she noticed was his pine-in-winter smell—clean, crisp, bold.

Kari backed away before she did something foolish, like throw herself at him. He wrapped an arm around her waist and urged her against his body. He was tall, more than a head above her, and broad. The muscles of his chest and belly pressed against her, as bulging arms captured her around the waist.

“A kiss.” With a finger beneath her chin, he raised her gaze to his. “That’s all.”

Closing her eyes, Kari weighed her options. Loss of friendship versus gaining a pleasure unlike any she'd ever known.

What if you are his mate? That voice in her head asked. *How will he know if he doesn't taste you?*

“Just one,” she whispered breathlessly. And hoped she wouldn't regret it.

#

Ronan's hands shook as he tilted Kari's head into his palm and gripped her tighter. He leaned in, and her eyes began to flutter closed. *A woman like no other*, he thought. *Kind. Beautiful.* He brushed his lips over hers gently, testing his welcome. Her lips parted a fraction, and that's all the invitation Ronan needed.

With a gentle nudge, Kari opened further to him. Then he sank deep.

Delicious.

No other word to describe the rich flavor, silky texture, headiness of her—which went straight to his cock. He hardened, his body tense. The cycle repeated when she gasped into his mouth, then wrapped her arms around his neck. He tasted surrender on her lips.

God, she was like the finest wine, intoxicating him beyond all good sense with one sweet taste. Complicated, perfect, addicting, just like the woman herself. Never had he tasted anything so incredible.

Her hands slid into his hair and he groaned. Her fists wrapped around the strands, and she stood up on her tip-toes, straining toward him. Ronan could refuse Kari nothing, especially his touch.

He changed the angle of the kiss, taking it deeper, driving into the heart of her mouth. She drew in a ragged breath and clung tighter. *Ah, yes.* There was something so right, so perfect, about holding her like this. Still, it wasn't enough.

Ronan feared that no matter how much she let him kiss her, touch her, it never would be.

He'd never ached so badly for a woman, never held one who felt so perfect in his arms. Before he'd kissed her, he'd hoped that having a taste of her would cure his fever. Instead, it had morphed from a flame to a blow-torch inside him.

Hunger took over, and he seized her lips with savage need, sinking deeper than ever, fisting his hand in the flimsy shirt at her back. It had to come off now. He had to taste those pert breasts, shimmy her out of those tight jeans, know that it was Kari beneath him.

He reached for the buttons at the front of her blouse, still tasting her sweet mouth and drowning in need. The first two slid free of their moorings. When he reached the third, she wrapped her small hands around his thick wrists.

"You said one kiss." She was panting, her mouth swollen.

It took all of Ronan's concentration to formulate a response, rather than grab her and seduce her here, now. But that wouldn't satisfy him—and it would make Kari fighting mad.

"Stop me, then. I don't think I can stop myself."

To press his point, he grabbed her tighter, cupping her backside in his hands, bringing him flush against his erection. He'd never been so hard, so feverish...

She tossed her head back on a groan. Ronan took advantage of her exposed neck and the scrap of flesh exposed by the deep vee in her red shirt, laving the swell of her breast.

"I can't stop you." Her voice shook.

"Is that a yes?"

She swallowed, hesitated, then nodded. "For tonight."

It was a start. Ronan grabbed Kari tight and thought of home. If he was going for the fantasy, he would embrace it completely, have Kari in the one place he'd never taken another woman: his own bed.

When he opened his eyes again, it was to Kari blinking.

"Where am I?"

"My bedroom."

He hoped she understood the significance, though he could hardly expect it. She steadied herself against him—the aftereffects of her first teleportation—then looked around the room.

"Amazing," she breathed.

Ronan smiled at her wonder at what seemed everyday to him. "All right?"

She nodded solemnly.

Without pause, she resumed unfastening her buttons. Ronan watched, sucking in a breath, his heartbeat spinning out of control, the sensation totally foreign.

Finally, she parted the thin fabric to expose a lacy ivory bra that was bloody near transparent. Ronan nearly died with the need to swallow her on the spot.

As much as he loved the notion of her undressing for him, his restraint wouldn't survive.

With a flick of his wrist, he divested her of every stitch. She gasped. Kari had a butterfly tattoo on one of her gorgeous, lush hips and a perfectly wet welcome waiting for him.

With another swipe of his hand, his own clothing melted away. “I need you so badly.”

He eased her down to his bed, and she propped herself on her elbows, her legs falling apart fractionally.

Ronan had to have more.

Kneeling in front of her, he cradled a thigh in each hand, then pulled them wide. And he inhaled. Uniquely Kari, sweet, clean, enthralling. And best of all, free from another wizard’s touch. If Tynan or any other wizard had bedded her recently, he would scent the other male on her.

He leaned in to kiss her abdomen. Her stomach trembled under his lips. But a need to taste her completely compelled him. He wasn’t about to deny it.

Ronan put his mouth to her wet core, laving his tongue over her silken folds. She cried out, hands fisting in his hair. Like Kari’s kiss, her flesh was intoxicating. Her gasps and moans merely urged him on, tasting, exploring, lingering until she tensed and trembled, screaming his name.

Now. Right now. It was a chant in his head.

Scrambling to cover her body with his own, he tried to work his way inside her. Damn, she was tight. But he persisted, easing in little by little. The mindbending friction nearly made his head explode. Kari’s nails dug into his back as she screamed his name again. His only thought, when he completely sheathed himself inside her and felt her waning orgasm ramp up once more into a tight vice of pleasure, was *mine*.

Kari writhed against him, nearly sending him careening out of control.

“Ronan!” she panted as he thrust deep.

Kari. Finally, he had her under him, crying out for him. No pretending anymore. Her embrace, her flushed cheeks and angelic beauty, her dedication, loyalty, and big heart were all his for the taking. She was *real*.

His blood surged, churning. Sweat covered him as he thrust again. Hot and snug, she surrounded him, made him dizzy.

More. He needed more of her. Now.

Forever.

Ronan withdrew, then surged deep again. “I want to give you everything.”

“Yes...” She wrapped her fists in his hair and tilted up so he slid in deeper.

He gripped her tighter as her lips burned a fiery trail up his neck. She tightened around him, close now. He gritted his teeth, fighting to hold on.

Cradling her face in his hand, he pressed her head into his pillow. Her lips were swollen, red. Her lush lashes drifted open to reveal dilated blue eyes—and a willing desire he’d craved on her face for over two empty years.

His heart leapt as he surged into her again, sliding against her most sensitive spot. Kari gasped. Her body tensed. Impending bliss exploded across her face.

In this moment, she was totally his, and he vowed to show her exactly how good he could be to her. For her.

Ronan set a hard, steady rhythm. She tensed, gasped, clawing his back until she tightened around him and screamed. Her sex fluttered, squeezing him until he couldn’t breathe or think—just feel ecstasy as he followed her into pleasure—and saw deep into her soul.

CHAPTER FOUR

Kari woke at once, the feel of a hard, hair-roughened body draped across her back quite foreign. As she inhaled a clean pine scent, she knew the man—the wizard—was Ronan.

She peeked over her shoulder at his closed eyes, relaxed face. His breathing remained deep and even. Truth told, she hadn't known for certain that magickind actually slept. They ate, drank, breathed... just like humans. The additional similarity should have soothed her. But nothing about Ronan set her at ease.

Especially when memories of the previous night flooded in.

She shifted, then winced. Tynan hadn't been joking when he said wizards possessed more stamina than the average human. Ronan had been more than eager; he'd been relentless. After their first encounter, Ronan had awakened her four times, passion seething in his kiss as he clutched her and drove deep, his gruff whisper in her ear praising her beauty and kindness, even as he cursed the fever in his blood.

But despite kissing and tasting her repeatedly, he'd never uttered anything that sounded like ritualistic mating words. Dejection weighed upon her, a drag on her limbs, a ball of pain in her abdomen. If Ronan thought for a moment that she was his mate, he would have said

something. Or given her some indication that she was more than the usual shag, right?

Then again, perhaps he always shagged women with such...enthusiasm. *Bloody cheerful thought.*

Without question, their friendship was forever altered. The casual rapport she'd always worked to maintain was gone. He'd seared himself into her psyche forever. Damn, why had she impulsively leapt into bed with him on the flimsy hope he would realize she was his mate?

What next? Would Ronan return to The Witch's Brew and, business as usual, bed a different woman every night? The dozens of times she'd seen him leave the pub with another woman paraded through her head. She sat up, grabbing her midsection as her stomach lurched.

She couldn't see that again. Ever. Being with Ronan this way last night, so intimately, him behaving as if she truly mattered, she'd fallen a bit in love with him. Head over heels for him, if she was honest.

It seemed unlikely he shared her deep, abiding feelings.

So...if she wasn't his mate—and dear God, how foolish had she been for that hope—when he awakened, would he treat her as he did every other shag?

Still holding her turning stomach, Kari vaulted off the bed. She had to get out of here. She couldn't watch those mysterious green eyes open and stare at her with indifference.

Frantically grabbing her clothes, she shoved them on. The sun was barely making a gray dent in the black sky, so it must be pitifully early. She had no idea where she was. Had no auto, no money for a taxi. Bloody disaster!

Once dressed, she opened the bedroom door and stepped into a darkened hall. Long, narrow. Immediately, she had the sense that the stately house was old. A bit of weak gray light drew her, and she stepped into the room beside Ronan's. Maybe a glimpse out the window would

tell her something about her location.

She encountered a bedroom with every modern convenience, flat screen telly, gaming console, laptop. The room was clearly male, all dark colors and bold lines.

A glance out the window made Kari's eyes pop from her skull. This wasn't a house, but a bloody estate. The expansive grounds with their statues and gazebo alone proved that. The barmaid who'd grown up on the docks and never attended uni did not belong here.

Ronan had realized what her foolish heart hadn't: they weren't a match. Dreadful to realize that *after* falling helplessly in love.

She turned to leave the room, determined to find her way out back to her cramped London flat somehow. Instead, she bumped into a hard chest. Based on the dark, musky scent, not Ronan.

With a gasp, she glanced up at the male face in the semi-dark room. Same shape, same intent gaze...golden hair. Raiden.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, his voice sharp like the crack of a whip.

"Is this your bedroom? I'm sorry. It...was a mistake."

"What are you doing in this house?" He raised a brow.

"Leaving, actually."

She edged around him to go. He grabbed her arm.

"Did Ronan bring you here?"

Raiden already knew the answer, and clearly, he wasn't pleased.

"Isn't this where he brings every stupid girl he shags?"

A moment passed. Raiden's expression gave nothing away. "Yes."

Kari had feared it, and still, the truth hurt. "I'm presuming all the others made their way

out of this old maze and back home. Care to tell me the secret?”

Another hesitation. Then he sighed and put his arm around her.

“Don’t touch me! I may have been empty-headed enough to bed down with one of you, but that hardly makes me eager to shag you both.”

Raiden pressed his lips together. “Keep your voice down. I can’t whisk you to your flat with my magic if I don’t touch you. I must have a firm grip or you could disintegrate into a million pieces, never to reform. Painless way to die, but what would become of the Brew?”

Kari had no idea if he was lying. But she did recall Ronan holding her very tightly before transporting her here.

Though she didn’t completely trust him, she didn’t see any other options. “All right.”

Raiden settled an arm around her again. “Ready?”

No, but she must leave. Waking to find that she meant no more to Ronan than any other woman would shatter her fragile heart. She still might have to face that ugly reality, but better on her turf, after she’d had time to process her reckless rush into passion.

Still, some hopeful part of her didn’t want to give up on Ronan. When he touched her...it felt special. *She* felt special. But he’d never said a word to make her believe that.

“Wait! Is it true that wizards know their mate from a taste and use ritual words to attach a woman to them?”

“That is customary.”

“Does that usually happen...right away?”

Raiden frowned down at her and crossed his arms over his chest. “If you are hoping that Ronan will speak the Call to you, you hope in vain. My brother will never take a mate.”

#

Someone was waiting at the pub's door the moment she opened for business that evening. Tall, large boots, a hulking shadow through the window. Her stomach danced nervously. Had Ronan come for her after all?

Kari flung open the door, a hopeful smile on her face. It fell when she caught sight of Tynan.

She recovered quickly and pasted the smile back on. "Come in."

"I'm sorry you're not more pleased to see me."

Kari wished she could be. Tynan was capable of devoting his whole heart and soul to a woman. Someday, she hoped he found someone to replace Auropha. At times... she wished just a bit that she could be that woman. He would never cheat, as her former fiancé Edward had. He would never seduce another woman under her nose, as Ronan would. But she and Tynan shared no spark. He was still grieving his loss, and she had lost interest in every male except Ronan.

"It's not you," she vowed. "I'm really tired."

As she stepped back to admit him and flip her sign to "open," Tynan shuffled in and studied her in the bar's golden light. "Tired give you those whisker burns on your cheeks?"

Her entire body flushed. Could a big hole open up and swallow her? "You're here early."

He accepted the change of subject with a wry smile. "Celebrating. I'll let you in on another secret you must keep silent. There's a group of magical warriors fighting Mathias. They're called the Doomsday Brethren, run clandestinely by one of the Council members, Bram Rion. Just found about them last night. I bullied my way into joining."

"They didn't want you?"

"They assumed my loyalties lie with my grandfather, who is also a Council member and would be opposed to Bram's vigilante justice...if he knew."

The Doomsday Brethren's assumption of Tynan's loyalties made sense to Kari, but if he wanted to belong, she was glad he'd convinced them otherwise. "So you blackmailed them?"

He sent her a dazzling smile. He really was knee-swimmingly handsome. Why couldn't she want him instead?

"They'll learn soon enough that I'm loyal to anyone determined to kill Mathias."

She took his hands in hers. "I hope this brings you some peace."

Tynan opened his mouth to speak. Before he could, the bell above tinkled. In walked the biggest, baddest leather-clad man she had ever seen. Kari could make out nothing of his eyes behind black sunglasses, but sensed that his gaze zeroed in on Tynan.

"You O'Shea?"

A long pause later, Tynan shifted, subtly putting her behind him. She peeked around his side in time to see the huge bloke with long, dark hair and bad attitude smile. "What do you want?"

Tensing, Tynan was clearly poised for a fight, but the other man merely slouched with a practiced air. She didn't buy for one second that he was relaxed. "Shock Denzell."

"Denzell?" Tynan's tone rang with suspicion as he eyed the man. "You followed me here?"

"I hear you don't like me."

Tynan tensed. "I doubt you came here because you worry we won't be best friends."

Shock snorted and crossed his arms over his massive chest, then sent him a dark smile. "You interested in playing the hero or do you have another agenda?"

"Answering that question may be hazardous to my health. Despite the fact you're supposedly one of the Doomsday Brethren, you Denzells have a long history of supporting

Mathias.”

The scary stranger raised a brow. “Verbal diarrhea in front of the human?”

“She knows.”

Kari sensed Denzell’s disapproving gaze taking an instant inventory of her. “So you don’t trust me because of my family? You always blame a son for his father’s sins?” Shock goaded.

“Trying to convince me you’re not following family tradition?”

“I’m a bitter disappointment to Mummy and Daddy.” His mouth twisted bitterly. “Why do you want Mathias dead?”

Tynan briefly explained Auropa’s rape and murder. Kari’s stomach turned as she heard the details. That poor woman... How Tynan could speak of such evil without breaking was beyond her.

Shock, on the other hand, didn’t seem at all surprised. “Bram can use more blokes like you. Good luck staying alive.”

Kari wasn’t sure if that was a quip or a genuine warning.

Then Shock disappeared—literally.

Kari had seen a bit of magic before but to watch it, here then gone... Unbelievable.

“Who is *that*?” she asked. “Odd name, Shock.”

“From an even odder family. Lots of rumors that he’s half-vampire or infected with Dark Lust. No one knows for certain.”

Half-vampire? Dark Lust? Kari shivered. She wasn’t sure she wanted to know what that meant. Magickind’s world was far more complex than she’d imagined. Ronan had shielded her from most of the details.

Another indicator he doesn’t see you fitting in.

"I don't trust him," Tynan cut into her thoughts.

Shock following Tynan here seemed odd, as if Mr. Bad-to-the-Bone had been sizing Tynan up, gauging his motives...

"Watch yourself around that one," she offered.

"I definitely will." Then Tynan focused on her with a concerned stare. "But let's discuss you. Dark circles under your eyes, whisker burn, and a sad frown on that pretty face. Need I ask who put it there?"

Kari blushed. "No."

Tynan leaned in, sniffed at her hair, her neck. Then he froze. "I smell him on you. All over you."

She gasped. "I showered! Twice."

"The only way to leave you covered in his scent like this is to be *very* thorough."

Ronan had definitely been that. Kari looked down, fearing he could read every thought on her face.

"Which would be all well and good, if you looked happy. What happened?" He folded her hand in his. "Do I need to be ready to fight him like any big brother defending his sister from a cad?"

The offer, even if delivered in jest, touched her. "No. I've nothing to blame but my own foolishness. I'd hoped that he would think I was his mate but—" she choked. *He used me and I let him*, stuck in her throat. She couldn't say the words. Voicing them would only make the truth more real.

To her horror, tears stung her eyes and overwhelmed her defenses, falling before she could stop them. Immediately, Tynan came to her rescue and wrapped his arms around her.

“Oh, little one. You love him?”

She nodded miserably. “He doesn’t feel the same.”

Tynan held her tighter and kissed the top of her head as the bell rung again. The door crashed against the wall. Ronan appeared.

In a glance, he took in the scene, Tynan’s arms around her, hers clasped desperately to him in return.

Ronan slammed the door behind him and growled. “Get your fucking hands off her, wizard.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Slowly, Tynan pulled away from Kari. She clung to his biceps, her blue eyes round, stunned.

Ronan cursed. “Let him go.”

“Don’t hurt him!” Kari insisted.

Her words twisted the knife in his guts.

Beside her, Tynan wriggled loose and laughed. “You don’t have to protect me, little one.”

Bloody bastard even had an endearment for her. Ronan wanted to rip the other wizard apart with his bare hands. Using magic wouldn’t be gory or satisfying enough.

“You have no right to touch her.” Ronan took a menacing step closer, hate thundering through his veins.

“Nor do you. You made no Call. She did not Bind to you. Until then...” Tynan poured petrol on the flames by leaning down to kiss her cheek and stroke her hair.

Ronan knew the wizard was messing with his mind. Didn’t matter; the sight of another wizard’s mouth anywhere on Kari sent him ballistic.

And by Tynan’s smirk, he knew it. “I will return later.”

Ronan charged at Tynan, white-knuckled fists at each side, ready to kill the bastard. But Tynan disappeared, leaving nothing but air in his wake.

Bloody hell! When he caught up with the wanker...

Still, the other wizard's words rang in his head. Kari wasn't his. He had not Called to her. Unless he did, she could not Bind to him.

In fact, Ronan had awakened alone this morning, painfully aware that Kari was no longer at his side and could be with another male at any time she chose. The thought alone nearly unleashed his anger and caused him to bring the building down. Entering The Witch's Brew and seeing her wrapped in Tynan's arms had made him damn near murderous.

He stormed over to Kari, grabbed her, and sniffed. Thankfully, the scent of the other male drifted only over her clothes and dissipated quickly. She had not shared her body with him. Yet.

"Why did you sneak out of my bed this morning?"

She jerked from his grip and crossed her arms over her the sweet breasts he remembered suckling last night. Ronan winced as the mere thought made him hard again. His whisker burns abraded her neck, and he smelled himself all over her. Tynan had to have noticed.

Then again, the other wizard might not care. Tynan's magical signature, the aura around him, told Ronan that he was unmated and had not yet Called to a female to make her his. Perhaps the other wizard found Kari as irresistible as he did.

"You got what you wanted." She raised her chin. "You shagged me, like every other woman. We both know that was it. I saw no reason to linger. I have a life here. Responsibilities."

"And another magical—" What was the human term? "—boyfriend?"

"Don't you *dare* behave as if I matter to you! After last night and this morning, I know perfectly well that I don't."

“What the bloody hell are you talking about?”

“Don’t act jealous or pretend you care what I do with Tynan.”

Ronan tensed. What she did with Tynan? His brain instantly conjured visions of the other wizard divesting Kari of her clothes, pressing his lips to the sweet red bow of her mouth, holding her hips as he sank deep inside her. The murderous urge returned, along with another, stronger urge to claim her.

To Call to her.

Foolishly, this morning he’d even gone so far as to scour his uncle’s magical reference books and read the ritual words, which he’d never seen before. He did more than read the words; he memorized them. Ronan couldn’t explain why except that something compelled him.

Calling himself every sort of idiot, he cradled her cheek in his hand, holding firm when she would have pulled away. “I don’t know what gave you the notion I don’t care or that you’re like every other woman. Nothing...” He swallowed. “Nothing could be further from the truth.”

Kari pressed her lips together and closed her eyes, shutting him out. “Don’t. Raiden told me...”

“What?” His eyes narrowed as he contemplated beating the hell out of his twin. “What did he tell you?”

“I’m not special. You take every woman to your room, your bed, then shag them breathless.” She gave a hollow laugh. “The sheets seemed clean, thank goodness. But—”

“That is a lie! I have *never* taken a woman in my bed. I never wanted any of them in my personal space, never wanted to picture them there. You... I had to have you there. Nowhere else would do.”

Kari squeezed her eyes shut, and tears rolled down her face. Damn it, why wouldn’t she

believe him?

“Raideen already told me the truth, please...just—”

“He told you shit!”

Suddenly, Kari twisted away from him and ran toward the back room. He sprinted after her, unable to let her go, at least until he’d convinced her of the truth. Then he if she still wanted him to leave her alone...he’d respect her wishes, even if it ripped his heart to pieces.

Just before she disappeared behind the door marked “Employees Only,” he grabbed her arm. She spun around. Her nose had gone red and tears tracked down her face. And still she looked beautiful to him. His heart lurched at the thought that, in his pursuit to give Kari pleasure, he had caused her pain.

“What do you want? You wanted to shag me. I let you. It’s done.”

“No! You’re more than a fuck. Far more.”

She shook her head. “So what do you want now? To hear that I love you? Will your conquest be incomplete until you rip out my heart completely? Fine. I love you. I’ve loved you for the past six months, at least. Watching you disappear with woman after woman, knowing exactly what you were doing with them... I can’t take it anymore.”

She loved him? No instinct needed, just the simple emotion in her heart. And she trusted it, believed it. Ronan paused. What was in his heart? After nearly a century of numbness, an empty void of a heart, he’d never given his heart much thought. But he did now.

He loved her, too.

Deep in his chest where his heart beat, it beat for her now. The thought of taking another woman to his bed no longer appealed. He wanted to know that *her* every day and night was his to fill, her body and heart his to love.

Was this his mating instinct? Perhaps the curse was rubbish, prorogated by ancestors who would rather shag their way to the grave than belong to any one woman.

It was possible. He was no longer like his sire, his twin, his uncles... He wanted one woman. Forever.

“Kari—”

“No.” Her voice trembled, and she drew in a deep breath. “I’ll miss your friendship, and I don’t want to turn away your business. But I need time away—”

“I can’t give it.” If “away” meant away from him, no.

He cupped a hand around her neck and pressed his mouth to hers sweetly. She gasped against his lips, then softened against him. Gently, he nudged his way inside and nearly drowned in the sweet, addicting taste of her. He’d never get enough of this, of her.

As he moaned and pressed closer, she broke away.

“Ronan—”

“Become a part of me, as I become a part of you. And ever after, I promise myself to thee. Each day we share, I shall be honest, good, and true. If this you seek, heed my Call. From this moment on, there is no other for me but you.”

There. He’d said it. And inside, he rejoiced.

Kari blinked once, twice. “Are those words...the Call?”

She looked shocked, and his nerves set in. What if she refused?

“Yes. I want you forever.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

Ronan forced down panic. “There are two responses. You either wish to Renounce me or Bind to me. Tell me which, and I will give you the words.”

“I—”

Suddenly, the front door smashed open, splintering into pieces. The winter wind *whooshed* in, along with a pale, leggy brunette. A witch, based on her magical signature. Dressed in lingerie that looked barely street legal, she was bound to turn heads. Ronan wasn't interested in the least—especially once he looked into her ruthless gaze.

“I'm Rhea. Good evening.” She drew her wand, her expression hinting at trouble.

“That's my door!” Kari protested. “You'll pay to fix it.”

Cursing, Ronan grabbed Kari and put her behind him. Couldn't she see that, despite her gender and clothing, this witch had something unpleasant on her mind?

Rhea laughed. “How touching. You've Called to her and seek to protect her.”

“What do you want?”

“To talk to her.” The witch gestured to Kari. “About something that happened before you arrived.”

“She knows nothing.”

“Say another word, and it will be your last,” the barely-dressed witch threatened. “We'll see to it.”

We? Ronan turned. Two wizards stood at the back of the bar, blocking Kari's only other means of escape. They also wore merciless expressions.

Could he alone protect her? He'd always joked that was a lover, not a fighter. At the moment, he wished very much that he'd poured half as much energy into learning to fight as he had into the carnal arts.

Carefully, he slipped his arm around Kari. If nothing else, he could teleport out...

“Take your hand away from her,” Rhea barked. “Let her speak—or else.”

Kari touched his shoulder. "I know nothing. Once she learns that, it will be fine."

Ronan didn't like it, but if he couldn't transport her out of here and she couldn't run, he certainly wasn't leaving without her. Maybe they would ask their questions and leave. If not, well...he was holding his wand. He'd save Kari. Somehow.

#

"What do you wish to know?" she challenged the woman whose outfit could have been a prostitute's. But her gaze said pure psycho.

"A human with sense." Rhea looked at her as if she was an oddity. "A tall wizard in black leather and sunglasses was here recently."

"The one called Shock?"

She smiled. "The very one. What did he want?"

Would admitting the truth put Tynan in danger?

"I don't know exactly."

The witch raised a skeptical brow, and Kari cursed the fact she was a terrible liar.

"He was here at the same time as Tynan O'Shea."

"O'Shea?" Ronan muttered behind her. "Related to the Councilman O'Shea?"

"His grandson," she murmured.

Ronan cursed.

"His grandson who seems to have joined the Doomsday Brethren. Sound familiar?" asked Rhea.

"No. I merely overhear occasional conversation, but that—"

"Stop prattling. Did Shock and Tynan speak to one another?"

Lie. She had to lie—and well. Tynan's life may depend on it. So might hers. "I don't

know. I was in the back. Didn't hear a thing."

"I don't believe you. Let's see if this helps."

Before she knew what hit her, Rhea raised her wand. An arc of light streamed toward Kari, blinding, green. Dangerous.

She screamed, and Ronan shoved her, but it was too late. The blast hit her in the abdomen. Pain crashed through her system, and she fell to her knees. God, she felt mere breaths from death.

"What did Shock and Tynan discuss?"

Kari opened her mouth...and had no idea what to say. She sensed the truth could get either or both men killed.

From behind her, a hand clamped around her arm. Rhea shouted, her face contorting. Then he and her pub disappeared. Nausea hit her stomach, and the feeling of floating smacked her with dizziness.

Moments later, she collided with Ronan's chest as they landed on a soft sofa.

The pain slammed her again, stealing her breath, threatening her consciousness.

"Stay with me," he pleaded.

"Where are we?"

If he heard her slurred words, he didn't comment. "The home of a magical healer. He will help you. Don't give up."

She was sweating and suddenly very cold. It took every ounce of her energy to shake her head. "Won't."

Ronan held her on his lap. Kari sensed he wanted to grasp her tightly but knew it would cause her pain. Feeling him against her was comforting.

“Will I die?”

“No.” He spoke with the conviction of a vow, not any real knowledge, she sensed.

“But you must promise me one thing,” he said. “Do not Bind to me. Ever.”

CHAPTER SIX

The next four days nearly killed Ronan. He stayed by Kari's side for the first two, holding her as the healer worked her slow magic, ensuring his beloved would live. The bitch who had attacked her at The Witch's Brew had blasted her with some sick magic he'd never seen before. If Ronan hadn't pushed her out of the way, her attacker might have succeeded in killing her.

And he didn't have to guess if her near-death experience was because he had Called to her. He had no doubt. By tempting fate and the curse, he had unleashed this on Kari. For his impulsive and selfish need to have her always, she'd nearly paid with her life.

Never would he put her in that position again.

Ronan would love to simply explain the curse, help her to see that no matter what he felt, they were doomed. But would she believe him? As bizarre as it was, why would she? Likely, Kari would see it as a fabrication designed to end their relationship. She'd think he had cold feet. *Bloody hell.*

He'd been relieved when the healer had proclaimed Kari well, ending days of nail-biting fear. He'd reluctantly returned her to the pub—only because she insisted. He'd wanted to place

protections around the *Brew*, but they would keep anyone magical out...and seriously infuriate her. But he would do his best to ensure she remained safe.

To that end, he paid a visit to a former lover, now mated to another. Swallowing his pride to ask Avalyn for a favor had rankled. Once, she'd fancied herself in love with him, and Ronan was ashamed to admit that in his youth, he had taken advantage of that. He rejoiced that she was now happily settled with a good wizard.

Thankfully, Avalyn found the irony in Ronan's request and acceded. Long out of love with him, she was a strong witch who'd grown up around the fringes of dark magic. If anyone would watch over Kari until the threat passed, it was Avalyn.

Because if he went near Kari again, Ronan didn't know if he had the strength not to beg her to Bind to him. If she did, he would be the death of her.

After laughing herself silly at his predicament, Avalyn agreed to bodyguard Kari at The Witch's Brew. Unwilling to leave her to fate, Ronan watched from outside the pub each night.

He also waited for Tynan. The curse may have been the reason for the attack that nearly killed Kari, but whatever the other wizard was involved in provided the excuse for the violence. Tynan would not go near Kari again.

Watching the pub while avoiding his twin added another complication. Ronan had not been home since the terrible night of the attack. With one glance, his family would see his altered signature and know that he had Called to Kari. Raiden, especially, would be the worst. Still, Ronan could feel his twin's confusion turning to concern and he cursed. He had no bloody idea what to do about his family. He'd untangle that mess after he knew Kari was safe.

Suddenly, Avalyn emerged from the bar, her tall, curvaceous figure shown to best advantage under street lamps shrouded in fog. She'd always known how to make an entrance.

Ronan's heart pounded. "What?"

"Your little human is smart. She's suspicious of me."

He raised a brow. "Because...?"

"Dearest Raiden paid her a visit." When Ronan frowned, wondering when his twin had escaped his watchful eye, she continued, "He's been there since the pub opened, before you arrived."

Of course. Raiden was nothing, if not persistent.

"Then your brother decided to chat with me. Kari overheard that I once...knew you and surmised that you'd sent me." Avalyn pushed her waist-length platinum tresses behind her shoulders. "She loves you and hasn't given up. Some of her magical customers have taught her the Binding. You can't avoid her forever. What will you do?"

Crush her as you did me? The air rang with her unspoken question, and frustration clawed through Ronan. He wanted nothing more than to claim Kari. He didn't dare.

"What about Raiden?"

"He was his usual charming self. Found some bitch in heat within five minutes, and they popped out the back." She leaned closer. "I can't fault your taste in women. I like Kari. Which is why I think you need to explain your reticence...whatever it is."

He'd never shared the family curse with anyone. If he confessed to Kari, Ronan would be hard-pressed to guess whether she would throw him out or laugh in his face.

He regarded Avalyn. "Can you just—"

"No. Not tonight. I have my own mate to take care of. See to yours."

"She's not mine. She didn't Bind—"

But he was talking to air. Avalyn had made her way to a shadowed corner of the busy

street, then vanished. Ronan cursed.

How could he quickly dissuade Kari from pursuing this...growing, glowing love between them?

The answer hit him quickly. Cursing, he pushed his way into the pub.

The boisterous, smoky atmosphere enveloped him. Even so, he caught sight of Kari behind the bar and refused to look her way.

He scanned the pub, looking for the most available human female, the most alone... *There.* An obvious blonde, slightly older, with enhanced breasts and gobs of black eyeliner. The low-cut wrap dress left nothing to the imagination, and he felt certain she wasn't wearing a bra. Perfect.

"Drink?" He sat beside her, uninvited.

Her gaze perked up immediately, and Ronan felt Kari's eyes like twin coals burning his back. She seared through his skin, all the way to his heart. Hurt poured off her, and it nearly killed him. He gritted his teeth and pushed on.

"Sure." The blonde leaned in, giving him a clearer view down her dress, then dropped her hand dangerously high on his thigh.

"Or do you prefer to fuck?"

Ronan regretted the words instantly. Was that even possible? The human didn't attract him. Damn disadvantage, not growing up in a house where mate bonding was discussed. What, if anything, had issuing the Call to Kari had done to his ability to bed another woman? Time to find out...

A naughty smile curled up her mouth. "Even better."

"Let's go." He helped her to her feet.

She wrapped her arms around his middle and clung to him like an octopus as they made their way out the door. Still, he avoided Kari's gaze—but he felt it every step of the way. His stomach turned, and his insides fumed with anger and shame.

"My flat isn't far away," the blonde purred and crept her hand under the hem of his shirt, over his abdomen. "Yum."

Ronan closed his eyes. God, the stranger's nearness was wreaking havoc on his ability to keep his lunch down, and everything inside him was screaming *no*! He neither needed nor wanted this woman. He didn't know her. Certainly had no feelings for her.

Had issuing the Call changed his ability to take pleasure in a woman other than Kari?

He grabbed the woman's face and planted his mouth on hers, tongue diving deep. He had his answer immediately. His body recoiled, and everything within him revolted. He backed away, shaking his head.

Weak and now sweating, he looked at the blonde. "I...can't. I'm sorry."

Then he darted off into the night. In an odd way, learning that he could touch no one but Kari was a relief. Now, he had decisions to make.

#

Kari unlocked the pub's new door, which Ronan had likely provided, at exactly four o'clock. Every muscle in her body hurt. Her eyes felt as if they were sinking into the back of her head. It wasn't enough that Ronan had sent a former lover to her pub to spy on her. But over and over, she kept seeing Ronan leave with the blonde stranger. Visions of their night together haunted Kari. Ronan taking the other woman to his bed, laying her out, and filling her with his hard flesh again and again, murmuring in her ear how good she felt, how she was his fever.

She swallowed. Time to snap out of her pityfest. Ronan had made himself perfectly clear

last night. He'd rather bed a different whore every night than risk love. The fact he'd issued a mating Call, then run away made no sense. Perhaps Tynan's presence had provoked his jealousy, and he'd said what he thought would pacify her? Honestly, Kari had grown weary of trying to figure him out.

With a tired tug, she opened the door, expecting to be greeted by a sweep of chilled air.

Instead, Ronan stood on the threshold, waiting.

Panic flooded her, and she tried to slam it. With an open palm, he held it open and entered, no magic required. Stupid, really. She was going to have to face him someday. But now, she was wiser. Heartbroken, but wiser.

"Scotch?" Her voice trembled.

"I must talk to you."

Kari glanced up at Ronan's face, and those green eyes of his ensnared her all over again. Beautiful man...black heart. *Don't listen. Forget him.*

She disappeared behind the bar, putting it between them. "We've nothing to say. If you're not interested in scotch, would you like something—"

"Damn it." He pounded his fist on the bar. "Don't look at me like I've cut out your heart."

He had, and why should she spare him the guilt? "If you don't like it, then leave."

"I can't. Last night was...a mistake."

She'd learned this speech from Edward. "Of course it was. You feel terrible, so contrite and sick to your stomach. It will never happen again, etcetera. Have I got that right?"

"I— Yes. Exactly."

"Spare me. You and my fiancé are cut from the same cloth. Man whores."

He swallowed. “Fiancé? A human soon-to-be mate?”

Clearly, he struggled with human terms. “Soon-to-be ex-mate, actually. Women loved Edward, and he never missed an opportunity to indulge. Like you. Every time my back was turned, he went missing or I caught him in a lie or smelled perfume on him. It all meant he was shagging someone else.”

The humiliation of those memories flooded her eyes with tears. Damn it all, she didn’t want Ronan to see her feeling weak. She wanted to fling his licentious ways in his face and make him squirm.

Her heart had other ideas, and she turned away when she couldn’t control a sob.

“Kari.” He cupped a gentle hand on her shoulder.

She whirled and backed away. “Don’t touch me. You had your chance. At least Edward didn’t flaunt his conquests in my face. You propositioned her in my pub, where I was certain to see. It doesn’t get any meaner than that.”

Ronan winced at the sound of her former fiancé’s name. Cheating bastard. And yet, in Kari’s eyes, what he’d done was ten times worse. “I didn’t want her. I did nothing with her.”

She gave a bitter laugh. “You have a great deal of testicular fortitude to look at me and lie.”

He shook his head, his eyes imploring. For a moment, she was tempted to believe him.

Fool.

“God’s truth, I swear.” His voice deepened, cracked.

“So you never even kissed her?” she challenged, wondering how far he’d take the lie.

He hesitated. “I—I did. Once.”

That was it. *It!* She had to get away from him now, before she truly broke down and

humiliated herself even more. She ran for the back of the pub.

And still he shouted after her. “Kari, I swear it. And as soon as I kissed her, I knew I could never touch her. She made me ill.”

“Bad breath?” she quipped.

He caught her by the elbow and spun her to face him, his green eyes so bloody earnest... “No. She wasn’t you.”

Damn if he didn’t have that sincere look down pat. Good line, too. “So you pondered this all night alone and not between her thighs?”

“After that kiss, I spent the hours alone, trying to discern how I could love you without risking you.”

“Risking me?” She paused in front of the pub’s private room, determined to hide, then remembered it was currently occupied. “That’s rubbish.”

And she didn’t want to hear his excuses. And she knew the fastest way to get rid of him.

Clutching the knob of the private room’s door, she pushed it open. Tynan rose to greet her with a frown of concern.

Ronan froze. “What the devil is he doing here?”

Tynan looked between her and Ronan, then back again. His heavy gray gaze finally settled on her. “He Called, but you did not Bind to him?”

“How did you know?”

“His magical signature.” Tynan scowled. “There’s a missing section that’s wrapped with your colors.”

Kari had no idea what that meant. “Whatever. I’ll never Bind to him. Cheating bastard.”

Suddenly, another man rose to his feet, this one tall, golden, formidable. Authority rolled

off of him in waves.

She gasped. “Sorry. I didn’t know...”

The man approached. “Bram Rion, Councilman.”

With trepidation, she shook his hand. Then he nodded and peered around her at Tynan. “I hope she’s the only human here who knows about us. That’s one more than we need.”

“She’s the only one,” Tynan assured.

Bram frowned, displeasure evident. Then he speared Ronan with a glance. “Ronan Wolvesey. In a pickle, as usual, I see.” Then Bram turned back to Tynan. “I hope their love life isn’t more important than Mathias running loose, turning masses of humans into soulless minions. Are we ready to discuss reality?”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Ronan stared at Bram, a wizard he hadn't seen in decades. He and the man's sister, Sabelle, had played together as children, but now wasn't the time for pleasantries.

"Did you say Mathias is running loose? Not Mathias D'Arc. He was exiled—"

"And he broke free over a month ago. He attacked the MacKinnetts and killed the witch Tynan planned to mate."

Did that mean Tynan had no designs on Kari? Or had he latched onto her to replace the woman he had lost?

"Mathias has been killing innocents and wreaking havoc since."

Trying to wrap his mind around something that should be impossible, he stared at Bram. "You said he's creating soulless minions as well. Anarki?"

"Indeed. We're up to our elbows fighting them. And they're impervious to magic. Mathias is creating them faster than we can kill them."

Ronan scrubbed a hand down his face. "We?"

Bram and Tynan exchanged a glance. "The Doomsday Brethren. We've banded together to defeat Mathias."

Ronan's blood ran cold. Rhea had mentioned the group just before attacking. His instinct to protect Kari went on alert.

The "Brethren" part made sense, as another group with that name had fought Mathias centuries ago. But "Doomsday?" Only one object in magical lore bore that moniker.

"Doomsday, as in the Doomsday Diary, Morganna le Fay's enchanted book?"

"That grants its user any power, even to destroy the world? Yes, the very one," Bram quipped. "We recovered it a few weeks past. So our mission includes keeping it from Mathias."

Ronan nearly choked. Such a weapon in the hands of a madman... He shuddered.

"How have I missed hearing all this news?" Ronan had no idea that recent matters had become so grave.

"You know the rest of the Council." Bram shrugged.

Indeed. Very closed-mouthed, even to magickind's detriment.

"You're involved in this?" he asked Bram.

"I formed the group. Mathias must be eliminated."

Ronan only knew of the evil wizard from history. He hadn't been alive when Mathias last terrorized magickind. But if history was even half accurate... God help them.

"Agreed. But you cannot be here. You put Kari in danger."

"You don't tell me who to serve in my own pub," Kari warned.

Ignoring her, Ronan turned on Tynan. "A few days ago, she was attacked by a witch named Rhea, who was looking for you. Tall, dressed like a streetwalker. Ring a bell? She blasted Kari with some sort of spell I've never seen."

Tynan and Bram exchanged another glance, then shook their head.

Frustration pounded at Ronan as he addressed O'Shea. "Rhea wanted to know what you

and Shock discussed.”

Bram pinned Tynan with a stare. Tynan shrugged. “Since his family has long supported Mathias, I wasn’t keen on the idea of his involvement. Apparently, he got wind of that fact.”

“I’m not certain anyone is,” Bram admitted.

“Who is this Rhea and why would she spy on Shock?” Ronan asked. “Or attack a human to learn about Shock’s conversations?”

Another exchanged glance between the wizards. They both shook their heads.

“Bloody hell, figure something out!” Ronan demanded. “My mate is in danger!”

“I am not your mate,” Kari protested.

Ronan sent her a look to let her know that denying his possession now would not be wise.

Bram sighed. “Shock Denzell is a member of the Doomsday Brethren...in theory.”

“Should we assume, then, that Rhea supports Mathias? And that Mathias wants to know where Shock’s loyalty lies and is using the witch to find out?”

“That would be my guess. Ask many more questions, however, and I’ll conscript you.”

Ronan ignored him. “Who else has joined?”

“I can’t say.”

“Who else must I keep away from Kari?” Ronan growled at Bram.

Bram stared for a very long time. “This does not go beyond these walls, and I’m trusting you only because you were my sister’s childhood friend and you’re clearly overprotective because of your unanswered mating Call.”

“Lucan MacTavish fights with us...or he did until he was felled by mate mourning. Mathias took Anka from him while Lucan was away protecting the Doomsday Diary. We have been unable to locate her. His brother, Caden, is helping a bit. Isdernus Rykard and Simon

Northam, the Duke of Hurstgrove, as well. Tynan, here,” Bram pointed to the other wizard, “Has just joined. An immortal human warrior, Marrok of Cadbury, trains us in human combat. And Shock Denzell plays the double agent.” Bram shrugged. “We’ll see whose side he ends up on.”

“A motley collection.” Ronan frowned. Those men were from all walks of magic and humankind, high to low, from dedicated to dodgy. “That’s only eight warriors, including yourself.” Ronan frowned. “How will you fight Mathias’s larger army?”

Bram gave him a tight smile. “We’re...working through the details. Interested in joining?”

His automatic answer should have been no. Wolveseys were noted for their achievement in bed sport, not battle. But...for the last few years, Ronan had felt aimless. What did he have to devote his time to now except protecting Kari? The real question was, would his involvement provide Kari more protection or put her in greater danger? And what would befall magickind if this group of wizards failed?

“My mate’s safety comes first,” Ronan insisted.

“I am *not* your mate.” Kari shot him a mutinous glare.

“Agreed. We would help you defend her,” Bram said, as if Kari had never interjected.

“You and Raiden would be good additions to our force.”

Kari scoffed. “If you could keep either of them from chasing skirts long enough.”

That did it. He wanted Kari alone now. Right now. Two urges hit him at once: lay down the law and kiss her senseless. She made him crazy with her vulnerable, mutinous streak of feminine independence. Yet that maddening backbone was part of the reason he loved her.

As if he sensed the shift in the mood, Bram motioned to Tynan. “I’m done bringing you up to speed. Let’s go.”

Ronan silently thanked Bram for being astute as they teleported from the pub. Finally, he and Kari were alone.

He cupped his hands around her shoulders and held her when she would have squirmed away. “Listen to me. What Bram and Tynan are involved in is very dangerous. You can’t even comprehend...”

The thought of Kari tangled in anything of Mathias’s making pushed him to the edge of panic.

She propped a fist on her hip. “*You* didn’t refuse Bram’s request to join.”

“I don’t wish to fight Mathias, but it’s possible the Domsday Brethren can help me protect you. However, it won’t work if you don’t cooperate. Keep Tynan, Bram and the other Domsday Brethren away. You don’t know Mathias.”

“And you don’t bloody know *me*! I won’t take orders from a man who tells me he loves me one night, then shags another the next. I learned from that mistake once.”

Though Ronan had done his utmost to be the bigger dirt bag in Kari’s eyes, he didn’t like being compared to Edward.

“I did not shag that woman!” he growled. Damn, how he regretted hurting Kari. Stupid plan. “In my heart, you are my mate. Let me explain—”

“Shove off. In my heart, you meant nothing the moment you left with your slut *de jour*. Now go.” She sniffed, and the tears brimming in her eyes crushed Ronan’s heart. “And don’t come back.”

#

Ronan teleported to his home in a foul mood. This was when being magical sucked. A human male would never have a mating curse hanging over his head. A human male wouldn’t

trifle over his missing instincts. He would weigh whatever feelings he had and make a rational choice.

Right now, Ronan felt anything but rational.

“So you’re finally back?” Raiden lounged in the doorway. Then his body tightened, his eyes sharpening on the outline around his twin. He swore loudly. “You Called to her? Are you out of your fucking mind. Do you want her to die?”

Ronan blinked. Of all the things he assumed Raiden would express, concern for Kari’s safety hadn’t been made the list. “No. And she was nearly killed a few days past. Did you know Mathias D’Arc has returned from exile? And he’s created an army? He’s killing innocents!”

“You’re certain?” Raiden’s expression changed from fury to astonishment. “Is that possible?”

So his twin hadn’t known, either. Little wonder. Both of them had been shagging their way through life, giving little thought to tomorrow, to roots or family. He didn’t want to be like his father, slowly aging and alone, yet still attracted to the sort of woman willing to bed down for the night with any halfway good-looking bloke. Since his father advised him that Raiden would soon be a father, Ronan had been surprised to realize that he didn’t want a child with a woman for whom he had no feelings.

Bloody hell, if this didn’t make him the family freak.

“Indeed. Not only possible, but real. Some of Mathias’s followers attacked The Witch’s Brew. Kari was nearly killed.”

“Of course she was. We’re *cursed*. You knew that.” Raiden raked a hand through his long golden hair. “Daft prick. She likely would be dead if she had spoken the Binding.”

“I stopped her.”

“Good.” Raiden nodded. “Resume your normal life. We’ll go out tomorrow night and—”

“I can’t.” Ronan closed his eyes. He didn’t want to confess this, truly. But neither could he lie, especially to Raiden. “Something inside me...changed. I can no longer endure strangers.”

“What are you saying? You plan to be...faithful?” Raiden spit the word. “To a woman who will *never* be your mate?”

“I know it sounds foolish—”

“It sounds ridiculously self-sacrificing, actually. If you’re attempting to deepen Kari’s feelings for you, you’re wasting your time. She’s already madly in love with you.”

And he’d hurt her. Deeply. After spending the night with her, he’d destroyed her feelings by leaving the pub with another woman. Shame roiled through him.

“Not any longer. She thinks I bedded another woman.”

Raiden frowned. “She *thinks*? You didn’t?”

Ronan shook his head.

“It’s been days since you...” Understanding dawned. “Are you utterly daft?”

“I couldn’t hurt her more,” Ronan argued, though that was but half the truth.

“Nor can you complete that mate bond. Or you’ll have her death on your conscience.”

So he must either break her heart or be her death. At the moment, he felt as if either would kill him. “Raiden, I tried to bed another woman. I couldn’t abide her touch, her smell. Her kiss made me retch. Literally.”

This time, Raiden had no sarcasm or growled advice. “I won’t ask if she was unattractive. No woman has ever been so unattractive to you during sex that you became ill.”

“She was perfectly acceptable. Completely amenable. One kiss and I...” He shuddered.

Raiden stared a bloody hole through him. “Maybe another woman? Another day—”

“I don’t want anyone else.”

His twin paused. “So you’re going to leave me to our usual haunts and activities alone? Though we’ve shared the same curse and taken the same path for decades, you’re planning to abandon me?”

Ronan tensed. This was it, the question he feared would drive a permanent wedge between them. “I can no longer be who I was.”

With a shout, Raiden turned and punched the wall. “You’d rather sink into your fucking fairy tale where love and happily-ever-after can happen for a Wolvesey? What you want, Ronan, is impossible.”

Perhaps, but that changed nothing. With everything inside him, he wanted Kari for his mate, to see her grow round with his children, to love her for the next nine hundred years.

None of that would ever come to pass.

“If it pleases you, knowing that I’ve lost Kari and will likely lose you as well is killing me.”

Raiden looked at him as if he talked to a complete stranger. Then he shook his head. “Did you ever think that, perhaps, I had feelings for someone?”

Ronan stared, stunned. No, he hadn’t. “You never shag anyone more than once.”

Raiden looked away with a guilty flush. “Tabitha carries my child now. It’s all I can do to stay away from her, to ensure her safety. It’s best for her and the baby.”

What a bloody mess. Ronan felt like a failure. He wanted to know how his brother could stand to share a bed with one woman with another in his heart, but he knew: close your eyes and pretend. But for Ronan, that was impossible now.

With a snort of disgust, Raiden turned away. “Let me know when you’ve come to your

senses. Otherwise, stay the fuck away.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Ronan sat in his usual table, in his usual corner. And he watched Kari's every move from across the room.

The pub was busy for a Thursday night. Humans mingled with magickind without ever knowing they flirted with someone not quite their own species. Music blared, drinks flowed, people laughed—and Ronan had never been more miserable.

Kari refused to talk to him. The first night he'd occupied this spot, she'd never acknowledged him. By the following evening, she'd hired a waiter—a large one—with a shaved head and a skull and crossbones tattoo on one forearm and a fire-breathing dragon on the other. Human, so not much of a threat to him, but Ronan received the message clearly: piss off.

Nursing a scotch, he watched the ebb and flow of the patrons for the twelfth straight night. He'd long given up hope of Kari talking to him. But he would ensure she stayed safe, no matter what it took. The one ray of hope was that Tynan had been too busy with the Doomsday Brethren to put in his usual appearance at The Witch's Brew. Small favor, that. But one that kept her safer.

Again, Ronan wondered if Kari would be better protected if he actively fought evil, rather

than sat her at the pub waiting for it to strike. Now that he no longer chased a different female every night, he realized he'd given little thought to the future. What would he do? A part of him wouldn't relinquish the idea that joining the Domsday Brethren would both give him purpose and protect his mate.

Because regardless of what Kari said or didn't say, she was his mate.

New fallen snow blew in as the door opened. Ronan cursed when Shock Denzell walked in, his gaze hidden behind dark sunglasses as he canvassed the room. Damn, Ronan had really hoped the prick would stay away. Since Shock hadn't, he rose to his feet, refusing to risk anyone attacking Kari again.

Before the other wizard took more than three steps inside the pub, Ronan stepped in front of him and growled, "Get out."

Shock scowled at him as if he was a gnat. "Who the fuck are you? Not the pub's owner."

"Her mate. I don't need you bringing more trouble here."

Shock eyed Ronan's magical signature with disdain. "Not her mate."

That truth rankled, but he pushed on. Kari would not be in danger.

Ronan glared. "I'm not arguing semantics. Moments after you last left here, the pub was attacked and Kari nearly killed. That won't happen again."

"Attacked by whom?"

"This isn't an interrogation."

"If you want to save her life, start talking." Shock crossed his arms over his massive chest.

"How do I know you won't simply end her life?"

Shock shrugged. "You don't. But how can you protect her when you don't understand the

threat?”

Ronan wondered how Shock would take the news, then shrugged. Not his problem...

“Apparently, the witch who attacked her is called Rhea. She was quite interested in knowing if you’d been conversing with Tynan O’Shea and what was said.”

The expression Shock hid behind those sunglasses was flat and nearly impossible to decipher. Something about the way his body froze, however, told Ronan that Shock was furious.

“Rhea is my issue.”

Though the other wizard was a bit taller and possessed of the mystique of all that leather, Ronan suspected that in any magical battle he’d quickly thrash Shock. He had anger on his side. At the moment, Raiden would be beyond angry, and Ronan could channel his twin’s energy when necessary. The secondary energy had saved him more than once.

“Mine as well if she comes back to kill my mate.”

But whose fault is it truly? I brought the curse to Kari, and it nearly killed her.

“What bloody curse?” Shock’s pried into his thoughts with all the subtlety of a crowbar.

“What are you on about?”

He can read my thoughts?

“Bingo, Einstein. Take you this long to figure it out?” Shock scowled. “What curse?”

None of your fucking business. “That compute for you?”

“Many curses are crap, but...” Shock shrugged. “Your hairshirt to wear. I figured that since I know a thing or two about dark magic that you don’t, I could help, but if you’d rather handle it yourself... Fuck off and let me past.”

Ronan hesitated. *Many curses are crap?*

Sighing, Shock glared at him. “If you’re going to mentally repeat everything I say, this

will be a bloody long conversation. Yes, utter crap.”

“How so?”

“Most of magickind doesn’t have the faintest clue how to create a strong curse, much less a lasting one. There are other factors, as well. Were you the one cursed?”

“No, an ancestor,” Ronan supplied. He didn’t trust Shock, but didn’t see how sharing this information could hurt him.

Shock rolled his eyes. “Unless the thing was done properly, the curse’s effectiveness to extended family is weakened. Was the curse placed recently?”

Ronan shook his head. “It’s been nearly a thousand years.”

“Unless this was some extraordinary wizard—”

“Witch,” Ronan corrected.

“Whatever. An old curse placed on a whole family by some witch who was likely both incensed and inept...it can’t last.”

“Dark curses fade?” he asked suspiciously.

“Most, yes.”

He shot a skeptical scowl at Shock. “Why have I never heard this?”

“How much do you know about dark magic?”

“Very little.”

Shock sent him a trite smile. “Exactly. Only those engaged in the dark know how to wield it.”

“So old curses don’t have to be countered or solved? They can simply...fade away.”

“Often, yes,” Shock confessed. “After a time, the only power they possess comes from those who still believe. If you do, the curse works against you.”

Amazing. If the leather-clad wizard wasn't lying, then Ronan might be free. But Shock's explanation sounded...fishy. Then again, what reason could the other wizard have to put Kari in danger? Did she pose some unseen threat to the Anarki?

"A human barmaid?" Shock sighed. "Seriously?"

Ronan scrubbed a hand across his face. Honestly, he wasn't certain what to think. Except...one way or the other, he had to tell Kari why he hadn't allowed her to Bind to him. He owed her that. It was possible she'd still think he was lying or mad. But the truth would be out. Then, he could either continue to avoid Kari and be utterly miserable for the next nine hundred years or—

"Oh, spare me the theatrics of the young and indecisive. Get. Over. It."

Ronan considered Shock. "Why would you explain curses? Why help me?"

A smile tugged at Shock's rugged face. "Tynan says Kari serves some of the coldest ale around. Who am I to resist?"

#

As Kari prepared to close up for the night, she searched out Ronan in the mirror above the bar. He still sat in the same spot, nursing a scotch the waiter had served him earlier, his gaze never wavering from her. She flushed, wondering if maybe Ronan did care for her, at least more than she'd believed. He *had* Called to her. According to Tynan, once a wizard did that, he never wanted another woman. Never loved another. Maybe she'd been harsh, overreacted because of Edward's infidelities. Was it possible Ronan hadn't been lying when he said nothing had happened with the other woman?

It was equally possible she was rationalizing because she wanted so badly to believe him.

She'd been contorting herself through these mental gyrations for nearly two weeks and

she still had no conclusion.

Again, she glanced at Ronan in the mirror as she pretended to clean a glass. Another woman approached him, and Kari tensed. The stranger was gorgeous. Fair hair and complexion, pouty mouth, generous cleavage—all the items on Ronan’s must-have list.

Kari wanted to turn away, but forced herself to watch, breath held. As with every other woman that night, as well as nearly the past fortnight, Ronan smiled politely and declined. The woman quickly left. Kari exhaled.

Was it possible Ronan actually...loved her? Was it possible that he had instinctively identified her as his mate? If so, why wouldn’t he want her to speak the Binding words?

Honestly... Why couldn’t she fixate on another man, a normal one? Human. An accountant, maybe.

Because she would find him utterly dull.

“Kari?”

Ronan’s voice. It sent shivers racing through her body. She broke out in goose pimples. Her nipples beaded. And, no doubt, he saw it all.

She did her best to turn toward the long bar and the gorgeous wizard with a polite smile. His smoldering gaze wiped it from her face.

“A word?”

The kind that would seduce her out of her knickers and leave her broken-hearted again, no doubt. “I’m closing up. It’ll have to wait.”

She did her best to sail past him, but Ronan grabbed her arm. The shivers exploded into tingles. With one touch, she was a mass of need, completely aware of her damp, empty sex clenching hungrily. Of her heart crying out for his tenderness.

“Please. I know I’ve been a shit lately. Let me explain.”

“Explain?” Why he’d hurt her? Why he’d left the pub with another woman? Why he had acted like she was the only woman for him, then moments after that terrifying attack seemed to whittle her out of his heart with seemingly little effort?

“It will sound mad, and you may not believe me, but I swear...it’s the truth.”

Something pleading and honest crossed his face. Did she dare believe him?

Thrusting her hand on her hip, she sent him an expectant glance. “Go on.”

“The reason I told you not to speak the Binding and I’ve behaved so badly...I’m trying to protect you. I kept this to myself, fearing that telling all would only put you in more danger. But it’s also made you miserable. And me, as well.”

She tugged her arm free and leaned against a stool she kept behind the bar. “Tell me what?”

“My family is cursed—or I’ve long believed they are. Because of it, no Wolvesey ever takes a mate.”

Raiden had warned her that Ronan would never mate. Because of this curse? “I don’t understand.”

Ronan swallowed, his face imploring. “As the curse goes, any Wolvesey who takes a mate will be forced to watch her die and is doomed to be alone for the rest of his life. I’ve been terrified that mating you would be your death.”

Kari hesitated. It sounded farfetched, but what did she know of magic?

“When you were attacked so soon after I Called to you,” Ronan went on, “I was terrified that my need for you had killed you. My only hope was to put distance between us, forbid you to Bind to me...and hope it saved your life.”

“And the blonde tart?”

“You weren’t giving up on me, and I knew that after the terrible way Edward treated you that you would be both furious and disgusted with me if I appeared to bed another woman. But it’s God’s truth that I kissed her once and felt ill. Even if I hadn’t...I had no interest. I want you. Only you.” He swallowed, frowned in pain. “I don’t know if we can be together. The curse may have faded. But...I can’t take a chance with your life.”

He looked so sincere that, despite his bizarre assertion, Kari was torn. Even if it was rubbish, he appeared to believe it. But one fact flared her temper immediately. “You came to tell me why you’ve chosen to tear my heart out but not ask me *my* wishes on the matter?”

Ronan streaked his fingers through his midnight hair. “Did you hear me? You could *die*.”

Slamming the glass down on the counter between them, she challenged, “I could die walking across the street tomorrow. I’d rather take a chance than spend my life in misery. But since you’ve elected to doom us both, rather than try to find happiness...get out. If you come back, I’ll kill you myself.”

CHAPTER NINE

Kari stormed away from Ronan, hoping to reach the back room before she dissolved in tears. Clearly, he believed this curse, enough to haunt her pub for the past twelve nights, his watchful gaze never straying. Even Raiden's lone visit to her establishment hadn't made Ronan budge from his protective perch. But damn it, he thought nothing of condemning them both the hell without consulting her. *Prick.*

Suddenly, Ronan appeared in front of her and grabbed her arms. "I must keep you safe. Please don't hate me for it."

She glared at him with a stormy expression, knowing her pain was written all over her face. Let him see. Maybe he'd feel a tenth of the crushing despair she did. "If you cared for me, you—"

"Would do everything in my power to make certain you don't die. This curse has afflicted my family for nearly a thousand years. It's robbed of us of our ability to sense our mates as other wizards do."

That took the wind from Kari's sails. "You never sensed me as your mate? But I thought... The fever in your blood..."

Apology and regret crossed his face. "I know little about the instinct. No living wizard in my family has ever felt it. None have been able to say how the instinct feels." He grabbed her shoulders tighter. "I can truly say that when I'm with you, I've never felt anyone more right, tasted anyone sweeter, held anyone who gave me such fever. Every other woman left my heart empty. But you fill it. Completely."

Kari sucked in a breath. *Was he saying...?*

"I love you," He murmured. "I don't need an instinct to know that."

Three words. That's all it took for her defenses to crumble. She knew she should be stronger, make him suffer. But why keep them apart when it was the last thing she wanted?

Kari ran into Ronan's arms with a cry. He held her against his chest, stroking a gentle hand over her hair.

"I love you, too," she admitted between sobs. "I'm scared to trust you."

"I know. Don't cry, love. Shh." He stroked her hair. "My heart knows no other."

Slowly, the tears stopped. Ronan wiped her tears away with his thumb and a smile.

God, he was beautiful. And when she looked into his eyes, she could see the caring wizard she'd fallen for, not the remote bastard he'd played these past days. The gentleness he showed her warmed her heart. Ronan was a good man. *Her* man. She understood that he had too much concern and pride to risk losing her if there was even a chance his family was cursed. He'd been willing to sacrifice his heart to keep her safe.

But she refused to give him up to play it safe. They'd overcome whatever stood between them together. No curse would beat them.

Grabbing his face in her hands, she pulled Ronan's mouth to hers and kissed him, pouring all her love into the gesture. He stiffened, gripping her shoulders with tight fingers.

“Kari, no. I love you but—”

She cut off whatever he’d planned to say with another kiss, this one deeper, dancing her tongue around his, teasing him, tempting him.

He tore his mouth away. “I won’t risk disaster. The curse...”

“Won’t come between us again.”

“I don’t know how it can be otherwise.” He backed away.

“Ronan...” She taunted in her sexiest, come-hither voice. Then she began to unbutton her shirt, one button at a time.

His eyes bulged, and he looked as if he swallowed his tongue. “Oh, don’t. Kari... I can only resist so much.”

“Then stop trying.” She reached around him and pushed the door to her back room open, fumbling until she found the stark overhead light. Then she yanked on his shirt and pulled him inside, slamming the door behind her.

Kari drew her shirt off her shoulders, and Ronan closed his eyes, looking as if he was praying for strength.

“I won’t risk you.”

And she loved for his concern. “It’s my life to risk.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“I disagree.” She unsnapped her jeans and toed off her trainers, wriggling her hips until she could kick away her clothes, knickers and all.

Ronan stared. Hard. He swallowed, his fists clenching at his sides. “God help me, woman, you could test a saint. And that’s something no one has ever accused me of being.”

Thrusting his hands into her hair, he tugged until her mouth was just beneath his. Then he

devoured her.

The kiss went soul deep, and Kari swore she could taste his anxiety, concern, determination...and love. Her heart flipped in her chest, and she knew she'd made the right choice. They must be together, curse bedamned, starting tonight.

With nimble fingers, she attacked his clothes, determined to pull them off his body as quickly as possible. Ronan ended the kiss and stared at her with eyes so green, they sizzled with hunger and promise. The look ignited an ache between her legs.

A flick of his wrist later, and his clothes melted off his body, piled in a corner of the room. Kari gasped and took in every amazing bit of his body, wide shoulders, hard chest, ridged abdomen, and the thick stalk of his cock standing up for her.

Eager to love all of him, she sank to her knees and gripped his thighs, taking him in her mouth before he could do more than cry out her name. She stretched her lips wide to take him, and sank deep until he touched the back of her throat.

"Yeeessss. Oh, love. Your mouth..." He bucked up, sliding against her tongue.
"Heaven."

She wanted everything between them to be like that. Perfect. It was up to her to demonstrate that it could be, that they couldn't let a curse stop them.

"Stop." His voice cut into her thoughts. "I must get inside you now."

Kari was still guessing his intention when he lifted her and set her on a nearby crate, draped with a moving blanket. Inside were bottles of liquor, waiting for her to unpack. Instead, he gripped her thighs and spread them wide, crooking his hands in her knees and pulling her bottom to the edge of the crate.

"Put your hands behind you. Lean back," he demanded.

His voice alone made her shiver, and she complied.

“Good girl.”

“Hurry,” she demanded.

Wrapping her legs around his waist, he shifted one hand to her hip. “Look at me.”

Ronan waited until she lifted her bedazzled, heavy-lidded stare. Their gazes met, and her insides crackled with heat. Sensual need poured through her veins, making them rich and heavy, even as her heart beat with utter devotion.

A moment later, Ronan drove home, filling her to the hilt in one demanding stroke. She absorbed him with a cry, feeling complete. Whole. Ecstatic.

Groaning, he set a fast pace, nearly harsh, as if he could claim her so thoroughly that nothing could ever take her from him.

Kari melted all over again.

He held her gaze as he filled her body repeatedly. “You please me as no other has. As no other could.”

Then his mouth crashed over hers again, and Kari was lost in a storm of passion. Admittedly, before Ronan her sex life had been brief at best, but even with her relative inexperience she knew the feelings they shared, the sensations their lovemaking produced, were different. Special.

She threw herself into the kiss, gasping against his lips when his thumb slid over the swollen bud of her clit and lingered, pushing her toward the edge of pleasure in rhythmic circles.

Burning with need, Kari felt her body tighten around him. Swelling with need and love, she hurtled straight into a chasm of pleasure so deep and wide, she screamed. Her cries echoed in the large room. Breath, thought, and sanity eluded her until he raised her hips, leaned over her

body, and filled her with his most demanding strokes yet. Then, with a shout, he followed her into the abyss.

#

For long moments afterward, they remained wrapped in one another's arms, struggling to catch their breath and reclaim their ability to think. Ronan savored the bliss of holding her...because he knew reality and regret would quickly set in.

"I won't let you go." Kari wrapped her arms around his shoulders even tighter, despite the fact he was still inside her. "I want to speak the Binding."

Her insistence and loyalty was touching, but futile. "Kari, love, I want that as well. I have to research the curse more, find out if it's possible—"

"I refuse to believe it's *impossible*. If we heed the curse we'll be separated, and it will have beaten us. Together, we have a chance."

Why couldn't he make her understand? "One that may cost you your life!"

"What sort of life would it be if we're apart?"

A miserable one. She would, perhaps, fall in love again and marry some human. As much as the thought made him murderous, he knew it would be best to release her so she might find happiness. He, however, would be alone for the rest of his centuries.

Year after bleak year, that stretched into empty decades, lay before him. Ronan swallowed the bitter pill. Damn his foolish ancestor who had betrayed a witch willing to curse him. Damn his family—himself—for never researching the curse, doing anything necessary to break it, discerning if it was possible that believing in a curse gave it strength.

He was motivated to end it now.

Ronan kissed the tip of her nose and pulled away, clothing them both with a wave of his

hand and a quick bit of magic.

“If there is a way for us to be together, one that ensures you’ll not be at risk, I will seize it with both hands and never let go,” he vowed.

Kari threw her arms around him and clung, and Ronan found himself grasping her just as desperately. She’d become his heart—his everything. If the curse forced him to give her up, he had no idea how he would bear it.

He leaned in to kiss her softly—and felt a disturbance in the air.

Quickly, he thrust Kari behind him and faced the threat. Instead, he found Tynan. Another *whoosh*, and Bram stood beside him. Then more: a bloke with wavy brown hair and resentment broiling in his very blue eyes, a hulking wizard with a nearly shaved head and an angry mien, and a sophisticated-looking fellow in Savile Row tailoring. He held the arm of one of the biggest humans Ronan had ever seen. With black hair and goatee, along with an expression to match, he looked like one to watch.

“Ronan.” Bram blinked in surprise. “We expected an empty room. Kari said we’d have a place to hide from my all-too-nosy sister... Anyway, this is Caden MacTavish, Ice Rykard, and Simon Northam, Duke of Hurstgrove.”

“Just Duke, please,” said the one who looked like he’d stepped out of *GQ*.

“The big warrior is Marrok. I think you know everyone else.”

Fashionably late, Shock appeared, looking both sharp and annoyed.

Ronan whirled on Kari. “You’ve let the Doomsday Brethren meet here?”

CHAPTER TEN

“I have.” She held up a hand. “And before you remind me that you told me not to, I’ll remind *you* that that you have not allowed me to Bind to you. You have no say.”

Ronan looked ready to explode as he grabbed her arm. “I only want to protect you.”

“I need your love far more than your protection,” she whispered, then yanked her arm from his grasp and turned to Bram. “It’s all yours, gentlemen. I’ll close up the front so you’ll have privacy and—”

The door behind the warriors crashed open. Ronan looked up to see Mathias’s witch Rhea clad as scantily as ever, surrounded by a cluster of hooded figures.

“Fuck,” he heard Shock mutter to his right.

“What the hell are you doing here, Rhea?” Shock demanded.

“Your presence is requested.” The witch drawled nastily. “Call it a family emergency.”

“Since when is Mathias family?” Bram muttered.

Shock gritted his teeth as he shouldered his way through the other warriors and approached her. “What, think you’re my mummy now?”

“Your conscience, who answers to a higher power.”

Ronan sneered. Had Mathias so fooled enough of magickind into believing him to be good? Unbelievable but true.

Tynan looked ready to throttle the woman.

With a stern glare, Shock stilled the warrior. “Where am I needed?”

Rhea’s grin widened. “My friends will escort you there.”

Ronan watched the byplay between the big wizard and the small witch. On the surface, it looked as if Rhea had won the encounter, but Ronan had the feeling Shock was merely placating her, though his face revealed nothing.

“Once there, Shock, you can explain to Mathias why you’re here with these...people.” Rhea’s gaze swept over them as if they were lower life forms. “I’ll stay behind and take out the trash.”

“Or we can just take you hostage,” Bram suggested to Rhea, stepping forward.

“I wouldn’t suggest attacking us. As you can see, we’re not alone.” She motioned to the score of robed wizards. “These Anarki are older and stronger than the last you encountered.”

Caden rubbed his hands together. “Mopping them up sounds like fun to me.”

“Aye,” Marrok seconded.

Shock turned and bared his teeth at Bram.

Before Bram could reply, he disappeared.

At Ronan’s side, Kari gasped. He soothed her by pulling her closer and squeezing her hand, but his mind whirled. Shock had likely saved his own backside, and Ronan didn’t respect that at all.

At the front of the room, Rhea laughed derisively like a warrior wearing full armor rather than nearly transparent knickers. “Big Bram Rion thwarted. How delicious.” Then she glanced

Ice's way. "Mathias is very much looking forward to seeing you soon, Mr. Rykard. He'd love to extend you the same courtesies he did your dear departed sister."

Ice stomped across the room, giving Ronan the distinct impression Rhea had just baited an angry bear who would maul her without remorse.

Bram pulled Ice back by the back of his shirt and arched a golden brow. "I make it a point never to pick on those I can squash without even lifting my wand. Do the same."

Ice cursed under his breath, and Ronan could see his need to attack in every line of his taut body.

Rhea's eyes narrowed, clearly hating that Ice could be reasoned with. "The Doomsday Brethren too afraid of a mere witch to fight?"

"Too smart to expend the energy," Caden tossed back.

Duke laughed. Rhea's cheeks flooded with red fury. Ronan didn't like that look, and eased Kari completely behind him. He needed to leave with her, take her from harm's path. When he reached for her so he could teleport her elsewhere, she backed away.

"Stop," she protested.

He ignored her. "I will not lose you."

"Lose her? You'll all lose. You'll all die," Rhea assured and raised her wand. "And Mathias will adore me forever for it."

In seconds, the fact the Doomsday Brethren were severely outnumbered became frustratingly obvious. Even as Ronan threw himself into this battle, he feared their seven against the opposing twenty would be a slaughter. And in the midst of it, he must keep Kari safe.

Magical trails blazed through the cavernous, semi-dark room. He ducked an oncoming spell, pulling Kari down, as he shot a paralyzing spell at the robed figure in front of him. It

bounced off, as if repelled. A blast of cold coming from the creature radiated toward him as it pulled back a warped mouth to reveal skeletal gums in a menacing smile.

“Oh my goodness...” Kari sounded every bit as shocked as he felt.

What the hell was that?

“Know anything about fighting like a human?” Caden said beside him suddenly.

“Not a thing.” In fact, he knew little about fighting like a wizard since he’d always been devoted to carnal pursuits. Now, he regretted that like mad.

“The robed figures that are half rotted and cold-skinned are dead humans with no soul. They are immune to magic.”

“Like an untouchable?” No one had heard of such a person in a thousand years or more.

“Not that special. You can kill these easily.” Into his left hand, Caden slapped a long, wicked blade, its serrated end promising maximum damage. “Jab this into the chest or belly, then stand back and watch them bleed.”

A moment later, Caden demonstrated. Ronan’s eyes widened. The creature bled black before it collapsed to the ground and died.

It was both barbaric and effective. Still, he’d have to get unnervingly close to the creature...which meant Kari would as well. His every instinct as a mate resisted it.

Two more of the creatures crept his way, and Rhea eyed Kari with malevolence. “You can’t protect her. She’ll make a tasty little sacrifice to Mathias’s pleasures.”

Ronan growled. *Never!*

Tucking his wand away, he transferred the knife to his dominant hand and edged closer to the first of the two attackers.

“Stay close to me,” he said to Kari, grabbing her wrist.

The first creature bared its teeth, then leapt on him quickly. Its skin chilled him, freezing his muscles, pinning the knife between them, as the other rounded him, his gaze fixed squarely on Kari. Ronan twisted and surged, trying to get free, but the creature was astonishingly strong, and the deep freeze of his body frighteningly effective at holding him immobile.

“Ronan!” Kari screamed close to his ear.

His heart stopped, then chugged into overdrive. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the second creature lurch closer to Kari. She shivered against him, recoiled. Ronan could smell her fear. And redoubled his efforts to get her free.

If he didn’t she would die. Had his affection, the curse, put her in the wrong place and the wrong time? Would he lose her forever—if he made it out alive himself?

Or was Shock and Kari right; no one was assured a long life?

“I’m frozen.” He hated to admit it, but he owed Kari the truth.

Then he saw the second zombie reach out a hand with rotting flesh. A second blast of cold trapped him, though his belly burned with fear for Kari. And with regret.

Just before the monster grabbed her hair, Kari ducked between Ronan’s legs, grabbing frantically at the sword in his icy hand. As she pried it out of his stiff fingers, Ronan felt the creature in front of him place decomposing fingers around his neck and squeeze—hard.

The grip was bloody strong. His oxygen disappeared immediately.

He tried to fight, cough, sputter, wrench free. To no avail. The creature’s hold was chilling and absolute.

The edges of his vision were graying and his hope fading as he reached out to his brother through their twin bond and begged for energy.

Ronan felt nothing from his brother, and as the zombie behind him clawed its way down

his back, sending the deep freeze all the way through his blood, he felt his heart slow.

His heart stopped completely when the fiend grabbed Kari by the hair and loomed over her with malevolent glee. But she didn't surrender.

"Die, you bloody bastard!" She shoved the knife into the monster's belly.

It staggered away, black sludge oozing from the open wound.

The beast still choking Ronan snarled, then tightened his grip. The freeze stopped the blood running in his veins. His world narrowed to a pinpoint with Kari at the center as he fell to his knees. The end had come.

Get out! Love you, he mouthed.

"I'm getting out—and you're coming with me."

With that, she kicked at the zombie's rotting hip. It dislodged from its socket, and the leg fell away, crumbling out from under him. The monster stumbled, reaching out to Kari to defend or balance itself. Suddenly, one hand at his throat was gone, and Ronan could breathe again.

Before he could strike his attacker, Kari linked her hands together above her head, then swung them down right on the fiend's elbow.

The arm broke in half—and ended his hold on Ronan. The weakness it left behind was debilitating. He literally had been chilled to the bone. His heart was barely beating, his oxygen not flowing. He watched the melee around him as if it was far away.

Hopping back, the creature glared at Kari, then grabbed her neck with his good arm. A solid push later, and she fell to the ground, on top of the zombie, who enfolded her in his icy, deathly grip.

"Not happening," she grunted, then stabbed the sword into the zombie's side.

It howled, and black flowed from its open wound.

Kari hopped away—only to be dragged to the ground by another hollow-eyed monster. Her scream chilled his blood in a way the creatures' icy clutches never could.

God, she'd made such a valiant effort to save them both, and though he could finally feel the bloody beating through his heart and his hands tingling as they defrosted, he could still barely move. Still had no energy.

Raiden! he screamed down his senses. *Please. My mate...*

A flood of resentment invaded his consciousness. Then Ronan understood: Raiden didn't loathe him; his twin was jealous that he had no mate of his own.

Ronan vowed to do whatever necessary to help his twin if he made it out alive.

A moment later, Raiden's energy drenched him, a wellspring of force and intensity. Along with his own determination to see Kari safe, it was enough for him to wrench the blade from Kari's hand and sever the head of the robed figure attacking her.

Together, they had sent three of the terrible things to hell. Around him, Bram and the rest of the Doomsday Brethren had nearly dispensed with the rest.

Duke reached out for Rhea, intent on trapping her. She flicked her wand at him, a nasty spell. Ronan could only guess at its dark magic. Thankfully, the wizard warrior deflected it, rage stamped across his chiseled features.

With a scream, Rhea teleported away, leaving the fallen bodies of Mathias's soldiers for their disposal.

Ronan's energy fled, and he fell to the ground. Kari dropped beside him, her hands clasping his shoulders. "Are you all right?"

An instant later Raiden appeared at his feet, his watchful gaze taking in his mate's devotion. Ronan felt another spurt of jealousy. He didn't want Kari for himself...but he did want

that sort of happiness. Why hadn't his brother let him feel that earlier?

"Raiden," Bram greeted, panting. "A bit late to join the fight."

"But the perfect time to take care of my brother and see for my own eyes the brutality Mathias has brought to magickind."

"I'm fine." Ronan stumbled to his feet and brought Kari against him. "She saved my life."

"And you ended those creatures. We're safe and alive."

Because she was tough and tenacious, clever and strong. Because she'd refused to become anyone's victim and die easily.

"And we succeeded together," he murmured, kissing her softly.

"This is where I leave," Duke muttered grabbing a few of the bodies and disappearing.

After he departed, Caden and Ice followed suit, each grabbing more of the fallen to haul them away. Marrok placed one hand on Caden's shoulder, and held three bodies with the other. In the next moment, the small group disappeared.

Bram approached the twins, looking from one to the other before he fixed his gaze on Ronan. "Not bad for a first effort and no training. Want to join us permanently?"

The fight would be dangerous and long and filled with struggle. He looked at Kari, who said, "I think you should. Forces like this can't be allowed to prevail. There's strength in numbers."

"Exactly," Bram seconded, then looked at Ronan again, "So?"

Slowly, he nodded, seeing their wisdom. "The cause is worthy and the battle necessary. I will."

"And you?" Bram slanted a gaze at Raiden.

His twin snorted. "Someone has to keep him out of trouble."

"Our bond was invaluable today," Ronan said solemnly. "Thank you."

Raiden sighed. "I might have wanted you to fuck off, but not forever. If you're going to join this war, I'll follow."

Ronan's heart filled as he brought his twin close for a brotherly hug. After a moment, Raiden returned the gesture.

"Will she Bind to you now?" his brother asked softly in his ear.

"I hope so. Will you accept her?"

After a brief pause, he nodded. "If she makes you happy."

"You will find your own happiness."

Raiden pulled away with a tight, empty smile. "See to your woman. I will confer with Bram and inform you later."

Ronan hated that his brother couldn't picture his own happiness, but time would hopefully reveal the path to him. "Thank you."

Raiden and Bram collected the remaining bodies, then teleported away.

"What was that about?" Kari asked.

"An understanding."

"Perhaps we can have one as well?" Tynan asked. "If you're going to join the Doomsday Brethren, we must learn acceptance and trust."

Ronan's eyes narrowed. He had Called to Kari, and she had told him that she loved him and begged to Bind to him, not Tynan. He needed to keep that in mind.

"You will maintain proper behavior with Kari."

Tynan raised a dark brow. "She will be as she has ever been: the little sister I never had."

“As you’re the annoying big brother who tries to tell me how to run my life,” Kari teased.

In their exchange, he saw affection but not desire. Finally, the last of his worries eased away. “Very well. I sense we will need friends in the dark days ahead.”

“Indeed.” Tynan shook his hand, then disappeared, leaving him and Kari blessedly alone.

So many things he wished to say to her. After nearly losing his life—after nearly seeing Kari lose hers—he would not losing her again. He needed her as his mate. Now.

“Bind to me,” he commanded softly.

Her gaze tripped up to his, wide and startled. “What about the curse?”

“Whether I’m cursed or not hardly matters. I now know that ten minutes with you is far better than an eternity without you. Avoiding you to avoid the pain only made me hurt worse. Every moment we have is precious. *You* are precious. I love you. Please, Bind to me.”

She smiled, and tears of joy seeped from the corners of her eyes. “As I become a part of you, you become a part of me. I will be honest, good, and true. I heed your Call. ‘Tis you I seek. From this moment on, there is no other for me but you.”

Rightness settled across his skin, into his bones. This woman was meant for him, and he for her. Nothing would ever keep them apart again.

“For one cursed, how did I get so lucky?” he asked softly, then pressed a kiss to her mouth. “How did *we* get so lucky?”

“You’re not cursed, and we’re not lucky.” With a mischievous smile, she pulled at his shirt until it fell to the ground. She did the same with her own. “We’re fated.”