

Scarlet Hyacinth

# Artie, the Good Witch



*Artie,*  
*the Good Witch*

Scarlet Hyacinth

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## Dedication

For my little familiar, Fred.  
You're the best cat ever, even if you're not black.

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## Chapter One

*Once upon a time in a kingdom far, far away, there lived a wicked, evil wizard. In his tall tower he dwelled, surrounded by the evil minions he sent out to torture the poor, unsuspecting souls of the human villages nearby.*

*This persecution ended when a noble knight braved the horrible dangers of the wizard's creatures and destroyed the vile being. The villagers rejoiced when they saw the knight burn the wicked creature at the stake and crowned the knight king.*

*Or so the story goes... But really, other than the "once upon a time," all that is a tremendous lie. Folk make up the stupidest tales, I'm telling you. Our kingdom isn't even so far, especially with the recent advances in technology. I'm particularly fond of the new model of broomsticks, but regretfully I don't own one. Most likely, I wouldn't even know how to use one. But I digress. The supposedly tall tower is a ruinous, pathetic thing, and the evil disciples are black cats that, granted, torture one with their yowls.*

*I would know. I live there. And of course, the wizard in question was just an eccentric old man who ate far too many pastries. Granted, he did have a wicked way with his*

*staff, but unfortunately, this talent didn't help his cholesterol.*

*And so, Brennan, or Brew, as I called him, found his death through the consumption of a delicious éclair. Mind you, few people have this close knowledge of Brew's proclivities, but you're just a diary, so I trust you won't tell anyone. The thing is Brew's death is not only very sad, but also problematic for me.*

*You see, I am his grandson, and as such, I inherit his possessions: the tower, his cats, everything. Even you, my grandfather's magical journal. However, in the process, I also inherit his responsibilities, a tradition I find very stupid, but that is the way of the wizards. Believe me, I have many times tried to change his mind. I am not even a wizard, mind you, but a witch—and yes, there is a difference that has nothing to do with gender.*

*The old man was, however, a rock on this point, claiming he could not think of anyone better who could take on his important duties. "Artie, my boy, you just haven't found your way," he'd say. "You'll know when you do."*

*Oh, Goddess, now I'm crying. Perfect! Stupid old bastard! Why did you have to eat so much cake?*

*Anyway... Someone's knocking at the door. I'm going to check. I'm sure it's some creditor Brew conveniently forgot to tell me about. Perhaps I can just*



*hide inside, but it's unlikely. Those damn loan-sharks have a way to getting anywhere these days. Damn it!*

I closed the heavy journal, coughing as dust began to settle around me. It was a mystery why I'd decided to even open the damn thing. Perhaps it made me feel better to procrastinate rather than think about all the things Brew had left behind when he departed this world for pastry heaven.

I made my way down the dangerous stairs of the old tower, the experience of many years living here the only thing that kept me from falling and joining Brew in the afterlife. The stupid black cats seemed to dislike their new master, as they kept getting in my way.

"Would you stop it already?" I shouted at them.

Cat Number One gave me a bored look. "Sorry," it replied. "We're hungry."

Stupid feline didn't sound sorry at all. In fact, it sounded quite pleased with itself. I wished I had my grandfather's power and could set its tail ablaze. Unfortunately, as a witch, my only power was communing with nature. Lame, I know. So unless I talked the cat to death, I didn't have a chance of ever getting it to fear me.

With great difficulty, I reached the bottom floor. After an arduous trek among artifacts whose only purpose

was to collect dust, I found the door at last. No lie. I found it. Due to a dubious spell that went awry one night when Brew ate some liquor-filled chocolates, the door now changed positions. Mostly, it remained on the bottom floor, although we did have some interesting episodes when Brew had been forced to levitate us to the ground due to the door's position. None of this was apparent from the outside, but in fact, if my unwelcome visitor tried to get inside, he or she would run into an interesting surprise.

Now panting—yes, I needed to exercise more—I opened the door. There was a man somewhere to my right, standing where the damn thing should have been. He turned as he saw me, and didn't look surprised at my sudden appearance.

He didn't look like a creditor, and I immediately bemoaned my decision of ever answering the door. He bore the clothing of the royal house, and I remembered that around this time, my grandfather would have had duties at the castle.

"Brennan Penedental?" the messenger asked in a pretentious tone.

I had the sudden urge to offer the man a handkerchief to blow his nose, but quickly suppressed it, and smiled instead. It was a smile I did not feel, of course. In spite of everything, I loved Brew. A part of me always

thought the old man would live forever. He'd been there ever since I'd been born, a steady figure that never changed with the passage of time. How odd that something so mundane as a pastry would be the end of him.

Shaking myself, I replied to the messenger, "I'm afraid he is not here."

The man's expression didn't change at all. "I see." He analyzed me from head to toe, obviously finding me lacking. "And you are?"

The barely-masked disdain in his voice made me blurt out an incredibly stupid answer. "Artie... I mean, Arturus Penedental, his grandson."

I still had some trouble saying my full name, since in my opinion it sounded more pompous than the messenger who stood before me in royal garments. I regretted the words even as I spoke them. The man retrieved a piece of parchment from his jacket, and began to read.

"You are hereby summoned to the castle of His Royal Majesty, King Faren the Third, by orders of His Highness, Great Royal Wizard Evan the Wise, for the annual ritual of Beckoning."

He rolled the parchment once again and handed it to me. "You are to convey this message to your grandfather."

I considered my options. The first one would be

playing dumb and not confessing Brew had died. The second would be telling the man of my grandfather's demise and begging him to grant me some time to mourn. Whatever I chose, I would nevertheless be bound to see things through. Brew clearly couldn't have a go at the ritual, and it was my duty and my not-so-delightful honor to do so in his stead.

What little I knew of the Beckoning was that it referred to the greatest wizards of the realm, summoning the energies of the Goddess to bless their lands for the following year. The old man always left around this time to do his job at the castle. However, I hardly qualified as one of the afore-mentioned. In fact, I couldn't even read the runes I'd need for such a thing. And besides, I was a witch, not a wizard.

I doubted the High Wizard Evan the Wise would care about my incompatibilities with his ritual. Distantly, I asked myself why wizards chose such titles. Even Brew used to have one. Brennan the All-Knowing. Bleh. If he'd been so all-knowing, he should've realized he'd die if he ate that damn cake. Besides, it was so boring. Why couldn't they choose something like Evan the Happy, or Brennan the Fat? At least it would sound cute and funny.

I beamed at the messenger, feeling smug when, for once, the man stopped looking so disdainful. If there's

something I felt proud of, it was my smile. When used appropriately, it could have positively wicked results. I used to convince Brew to feed his damn felines with it, and occasionally, it even got the old man to stop eating so much. Too bad it failed that day.

My happy smile mixed with tears that, for once, weren't false. It must have created quite an effect as the man started blabbering and asking me if I was all right.

"I'm fine," I replied, sniffing discreetly. "It's just my grandfather died a few days ago."

The messenger made a sound of compassion. "I'm sorry to hear that," he said.

"Thank you," I answered. "I just... I don't know what I'm going to do without him."

It was the truth, and I felt ashamed for confessing it to a stranger. I didn't know what would happen to me without Brew. The old man had been my anchor for so long. I barely remembered a time when he hadn't been by my side. My parents were nice, but flighty. They'd left me here many years ago, and although we did receive word of them on occasion, I never really knew where they'd gone. Even now, they were probably off chasing some illusionary pot of gold. I didn't mind. I loved them in spite of everything, but they were hardly dependable. Who could I ask for help in such a moment?

The answer came to me in an instant. No one. I couldn't rely on anyone but myself. Weeping wouldn't help me. The old man wouldn't want me to mourn him. He'd lived a good life and died doing what he loved to. It wasn't such a bad way to go. I would miss him terribly, but in his memory, I would go on and do what he always wanted for me.

I wiped my tears and tried to give the messenger another smile. "Just wait here for a minute, would you?"

The man nodded, although he looked a bit concerned. I entered the tower once again and went back up the stairs, stepping on the tail of Cat Number Two in the process.

"Hey!" it yowled. "Be careful."

I ignored it, mind set to the task. Perhaps I was a witch, but even my weak powers represented a gift and I needed to start appreciating them. The thought of going to the royal castle made my skin crawl, but maybe there, I'd find some piece of advice as to how I could go about doing this, *finding my way*, like Brew used to say.

I seated myself at Brew's desk — which, like all of his possessions, had become mine. I took the quill in my hand and began to write.

"Dear Sir," I started.

No. The high wizard couldn't be called "Sir". It

wasn't a proper address. Sighing, I pushed away my first attempt at the letter and retrieved a new piece of parchment.

"Your Enlightened Highness." No. That sounded even worse. I scratched the words angrily with my quill and propped my head on the desk. "This is terrible. I don't know how to write a letter."

A feline sigh sounded over my shoulder. I looked up and turned to see the cats staring at me with reproach. "You're hopeless. Write, 'To the Esteemed High Wizard Evan the Wise,' on top, then begin with, 'Your Highness'."

I was doubtful. I didn't trust the cats, and I feared if I didn't send a proper letter, I'd start off on the wrong foot with the wizards at the castle. "I don't know..."

"Write it already!" Cat Number One yowled at me.

The screech justified the damn stories of evil minions, and I rushed to obey the cat. I didn't have any better ideas anyway. Looking content, Cat Number One began to dictate what I was supposed to write in the message. I distantly wondered how it even knew what I intended to say, but I guessed I was just transparent that way. Or maybe they'd witnessed Brew writing messages before. Who could possibly understand them?

When I finished, I reread the letter and felt a bit better about the whole thing. It didn't sound like it had been

written by a cat. In fact, it seemed quite satisfactory and wise to me. Then again, I wasn't a wizard, and I didn't know their standards. Whatever. This would have to do. "Thanks," I told the cats.

Cat Number Two gave me an evilly kind look. And yes, it was possible. Cats had that art perfected. "You can always smile at them if something goes wrong," it said.

"Also, stop crying," Cat Number One said sternly. "You need to trust your own strength when you deal with the wizards. Otherwise, they'll walk all over you."

I felt emboldened by the words of the two cats. I got up, ready to take the letter to the messenger. "And finally," Cat Number Two said, "you have ink on your forehead."

With those simple words, all my hard-acquired confidence evaporated. "You two are evil, you know that?" I muttered under my breath. As I wiped my face, I could almost hear their silent, feline laughter. Of course, it would've been much worse if they'd let me go out with my face filthy, but still...

Grumbling under my breath, I headed toward the bottom floor once more. With luck, the door would have stayed in its original location and I'd be able to get through the first task of my day.

I managed to dispatch the messenger with no further incident. A bright smile made him accept my letter without



further comment, although as a rule, royal messengers didn't take correspondence from anyone else but their lords and masters unless they were told to expect a reply.

I didn't feel too bad about it. If by chance he'd be reprimanded, he could always claim he took pity on the plight of a poor orphan child. Of course, the letter didn't sound like something a child would write, but that was a different issue entirely.

I made a mental note to thank him for his assistance once I got to the palace, snickering to myself even as I did so. Then, putting the messenger out of my mind, I considered my course of action. The ritual would take place in two weeks' time. It may not have seemed a lot, but I had an astronomic amount of work to do.

I needed to be systematic. One life of experience as a wizard couldn't be crammed into a fortnight, no matter how hard I tried, but if I at least knew what I was talking about, I'd make a good impression. Or so I hoped.

I returned to the old man's magic journal. On the desk, there was an inkwell and a quill. I opened the dusty tome to the page I'd written in before the messenger popped up. In my opinion, it always helped to put things on paper. I was forgetful at best, an airhead, really, and something to remind me of my necessary tasks wouldn't hurt.

I chewed on the quill as I ruminated over my plan.

After a few minutes of careful consideration, I came up with the following to-do list.

*Clean up tower: finding runes is a must*

*Learn more about the Beckoning ritual*

*Learn how to say my own name without stuttering*

*Study the royal family tree*

*Study the rules of the Wizard's Guild*

*Find means of transportation*

Brew didn't use a broom, since wizards never did. Unfortunately, I didn't know how to levitate or teleport or anything like that. But I suspected my mother's old one would still be lost somewhere amidst all the junk. All I had to do was find it.

A feline voice drew me out of my musings. "You know," Cat Number Two said placidly, "you look like the old man right now." I felt flattered, but then it continued, "He used to chew on that very same quill, too."

With a grimace of distaste and a screech, I threw the dreaded object at the blasted feline. Of course, the feather glided to the floor, where Cat Number One proceeded to grab it proudly and carry it away as if it were some sort of caught mouse.

I scanned the drawers for a new quill, and by some

miracle, I found one. Hastily, I added to the to-do list the most important objective of all, "get rid of cat monsters."

\* \* \* \*

As it turned out, I didn't get rid of the damned felines. Cat Number One not-so-gently reminded me I owed them for the letter, at which point, I told it if the high wizard didn't like my missive, I'd drown it and its companion in the nearest creek. In the process, I somehow managed to knock over one of the few vases in the room and splash both cats with water. Neither of them looked impressed and gave me the proverbial cold shoulder for the remainder of the day.

Not having the cats there to loom over me was both a blessing and a curse. It felt a little lonely, as the tower sounded so empty without even a yowl from its feline inhabitants. Even so, it gave me the opportunity to start on my to-do list. I began to clean up Brew's office, arranging every item in its rightful place. One wonders how I even knew how to do this. In truth, I didn't. Brew mostly kept me out of his study, most likely afraid that I'd destroy something invaluable. His caution proved to be counterproductive, since I was now stuck with a thousand-and-one random bottles and various items I had very little

knowledge about. In the end, I decided to set each object in alphabetical order and color-code the unlabeled ones. I wouldn't use them any time soon, but having them in a semblance of order might help me in the future.

Of course, by the time I reached the wardrobes and desks, I was in tears once again. Everything around this place reminded me of Brew, even the mess. I'd forgotten to add a very important item on the list: mourn Brew.

Resigned I would not be able to do anything constructive, I left the tower and walked toward the forest. Deep inside the woods, a large clearing stood, and within it, a clear lake. Brew would bring me here as a child, and every time, I could hear the voice of the Goddess talking to me. I still did.

This was the place where I, myself, had cremated Brew, with only his cats as witnesses. It should've been different, but in many ways, I thought he'd expected it. Now, he had been returned into the womb of the Goddess, there to be healed and reborn. For some reason, even if I should've felt worse here, I didn't. In this place, everything seemed so much better. The Goddess murmured in my ear, "Worry not, child. Your grandsire is safe and happy, and you are under my protection."

I sat in the shadow of a tree and leaned against the solid wood. The bark felt comfortable and strangely warm,

and soon, my eyelids began to close. Just a few seconds of resting wouldn't hurt. It would clear my head, and then, I could go back to reality.

A few seconds later, a tickling sensation woke me up from my slumber. The first thing I saw as I cracked my eyes open was a monstrous, yellow gaze looming above me. I yelped and scuttled away, trying to remember any sort of incantation that could make the beast go away.

Much to my shame, as my vision cleared of the sleepy haze, I realized the monster was a figment of my overactive imagination. Instead of a powerful witch-eating beast, in front of me sat two black cats, giving me a distinctly amused look.

"Now that's a reaction I would pay to see every day," Cat Number One said.

"In what?" I replied, irritated at it and my own stupidity. "Mice?"

The cat didn't seem shocked or insulted by my comeback. Instead, it offered an answer that surprised me. "You know, it's not safe to be here after dark," Cat Number One said seriously.

My eyes widened. I looked around and just then realized night had, indeed, fallen. I must've slept longer than I realized. Indeed, the shadows had deepened, and I had a distinct feeling of being watched. I tried to laugh it

off, but the amusement just wouldn't come. "Let's go," I told the cats.

The cats flanked me as we headed back to the tower. Occasionally, they'd look left and right and hiss, as if warning others away. When we arrived at Brew's, I was relieved. "Don't ever go into the forest at night," Cat Number Two said again, "especially not without us."

I plopped down on the one good couch in the tower, feeling overwhelmed. The entire situation was surreal. Why were they even talking to me? They'd been upset with me for the water incident. "How do you know so much about the forest anyway?" I asked "You're just cats."

I could swear the two felines snorted. "How long has the old man had us, Artie?" Cat Number Two asked with apparent randomness.

There had to be some sort of meaning behind the question, so I tried to recall when Brew had brought the cats in. As I thought back, I remembered they had been here forever, since before I even came to live at the tower. That made them decades old, older than me even. I gave them a shocked look, and Cat Number One explained, "We're not just cats. We're familiars."

"Wizards don't have familiars," I pointed out. "Witches do." It was true. Wizards did not have the same connection to the spiritual that witches did. They didn't

need it, since their power was elemental. They could summon rain, make it snow, and bring lightning upon their foes. I'd seen Brew do many wondrous things. Of course, this explained Brew's general disregard of the two felines.

Cat Number Two sighed, insofar as a cat could sigh, that is. "We were originally your mother's, but alas, she had to run off to marry a leprechaun. As you know, they're far too fond of making fun of other spirits, and he didn't like us much. This left us in quite a pickle, since a familiar, once summoned, is bound to its master. But once she brought you here, we attached ourselves to you."

"So all this time, you've been mine?" I screeched. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"You don't like being a witch either," Cat Number One answered promptly. "What would you have done with two familiars?"

I felt a pang of remorse at the thought I'd left the responsibility of two creatures who, for all purposes, belonged to me, in Brew's hands. I did convince him to feed them on occasion, but other times, I just disregarded them. Of course, they hadn't been exactly nice to me, but still...

As if guessing my thoughts, Cat Number Two jumped on the couch and situated itself on my lap. Its friend did the same, and I didn't have the heart to push them

aside. At least I wasn't completely alone.



## Chapter Two

Browsing through Brew's library proved to be easier with the cats by my side. They seemed to know their way around the dusty tomes, more so than I did. With an ease that clearly illustrated their magical nature, they indicated the books I would need to study in order to prepare for the ritual.

I'd never been a particularly arduous student, much to Brew's chagrin. My continuous frustration with my erratic powers often cast away any incentive and motivation I might've had to further my magical studies. But this time, I admitted the necessity of a crash course in witchcraft.

Alas, the mere sight of the size and weight of the volumes discouraged me. It was only the cats' insistence that convinced me to open a book on Clinical Occultism. The dust around it made me cough, and I took advantage of the occasion to make my escape, with the excuse that I needed a glass of water.

The cats were, however, on my trail and actually dragged me back to the study. Resigned to an evening of mind-numbing boredom, I began to read, clinging to the thought that this was what Brew would want me to do.

Of course, by the time I finished the first chapter, my brain was leaking out of my skull. The light from the candle seemed just as weak and depressed as me, and the distant clock signaled witching hour had come. I got up, closing the book with a decided thud. "This is hopeless," I told my cats. "I can't understand a damn thing."

The familiars looked irritated, but much to my shame, not surprised. "I figured that would be the case," Cat Number Two told me.

I ignored it and stepped out of the study. Witching hour was one of the few moments I truly felt in touch with my magical nature. If it hadn't helped boost my performance at Clinical Occultism, nothing but a miracle would.

With that in mind, I headed toward my room. As I opened the door, I noted the place looked exactly the same as I'd left it this morning. I'd never been a slob, although neither did I have an obsession with 'a place for everything and everything in its place'. But since Brew's death, I'd really abandoned all tasks, and the place seemed even messier than usual.

Even so, I had no trouble in finding the items I needed: a small crystal, a tiny bottle of pure water, and a scented candle. After that, I made my way out of the room and down the crumbling staircase. Halfway down, I

remembered the door situation. "Hey, where's the door?" I called out to the cats.

The pitter patter of paws sounded above me and then the cats joined me on the stairs. "This way," Cat Number One said.

The two familiars guided me outside. In front of the tower, halfway to the grove, was our regular ritual spot. Brew and I always gave praise to the Goddess here, thanking her for each day and each breath in our bodies. Now more than ever, I needed her support.

I carefully drew a circle on the ground, paying close attention to its shape. I always made them a bit oval, which was why Brew had usually began our rituals. Drawing the symbols for the four elements was easier. Earth, Air, Fire, and Water, each at the four counterpoints, as I'd been taught.

I took position in the center, with the cats by my side. Then, I retrieved the crystal, whispered a murmur of thanks and placed it down. "Earth."

I lit the candle, offering it to the Fire symbol. "Fire."

I inhaled the scented smoke from the candle and blew it out. "Air."

At last, I poured a few drops of water on the ground. "Water."

My cats climbed on top of me and I pet them gently.  
"Life."

*Life.* It was this final element that was specific to witchcraft rituals. Wizards generally stuck to the elements, as their bond with nature wasn't as strong. In this moment, though, I truly felt strong, and the power of the Goddess flowed through me.

The circle shone with blinding light and I almost yelped in surprise. That had never happened before. I almost thought I'd screwed up in preparing the ritual, but I didn't move, reluctant to take the chance of disrespecting the sanctity of the moment.

The light dimmed, and I realized something peculiar had happened. A tome appeared in the center of the circle, straight in front of me. As the cats jumped off me, I knelt to take a better look at it. On the cover, a laughing witch sat on a broomstick. A bubble over her said, "*Read me. Witchcraft for Dummies.*"

I picked up the volume while feline laughter sounded behind me. Even my Goddess had a sense of humor. I smiled as I uttered a prayer of thanks. Perhaps things were not so hopeless, after all.

\* \* \* \*

Twelve days after the messenger's arrival, I was ready to depart for the royal castle. As much as my cats had mocked the manual, it had proven to be quite helpful. Following the guidelines from the book and with some help from the familiars, I figured out how the ritual worked, so I wouldn't go there and act like an idiot, at least. Unfortunately, the manual didn't offer too many instructions on how to master my erratic powers, so I still needed to find a tutor.

With the cats' help, I easily located Brew's runes and my mother's broom. I did, however, encounter some trouble in riding it. Several times, I ended up landing in a tree or puddle. I feared all my preparations would be for naught, as I didn't have a way to reach the castle without a magical means of transportation.

I was getting desperate. I had one more day to get to the castle and no way to do it. The cats came to my aid once again. They tutored me in the essence of keeping one's balance on the broomstick, and when that failed, taught me to make a potion to temporarily make me more graceful. It wouldn't work for long, so I needed to take ingredients for the journey back as well.

They insisted in being taken along, and, to be honest, I couldn't have been happier about it. After the past few weeks, I was more than ever aware of my own

ignorance. At least with them by my side, I'd have a few friendly faces around. Kind of.

The potion smelled a little like cat excrement. If I hadn't made it myself, I'd have thought it really did contain something along that line. I almost balked before drinking it and gave up on the whole idea of going to the royal castle. But my dear familiars—please, read the sarcasm—were giving me the evil eye, so I had no choice but to drink the horrible brew.

In spite of the smell, it didn't taste as bad as I expected. I had time to be surprised at that fact before my world tilted and everything went rainbow colored.

"Hmmm..." Cat Number One said, "I think we may have overdone it with the angelica root."

"Nah," Cat Number Two replied. "It's Artie's leprechaun blood. You know they get happy easily."

By this point, of course, I was seeing four cats instead of two, so I kind of missed the rest of the conversation. However, through some not-so-gentle coaxing, the cats managed to get me out of the tower with the bags. The scratching gave me a bit of a clear head, but I was still giggling even as I secured the bags on the broom.

The two cats slipped into the bags as well, talking in low voices. "Are you sure about this?" Cat Number Two asked.

"He'll be all right once he gets on the broom," Cat Number One answered, certainty in its voice. "There's nothing to worry about."

I jumped on the broom and clung to the built-in handles at the top. "I'm fine," I said. More than ever, I felt certain I could get us to the castle. In fact, I could take on mountains and win. "Trust me. Besides, what's the worst thing that can happen?" I asked with a laugh.

The cats meowed desperately as I clucked my tongue. The broom took off with a swoosh, obeying my not-so-knowledgeable command. I did manage to hold on without a problem, so the potion must have worked at least to some extent. In fact, I was quite enjoying myself, and ordered the broom to go faster. The speed made me feel powerful and wild, and I loved the feeling of the wind beating against my face.

We traveled for the longest time, but it seemed all too soon that we reached the royal capital of our kingdom. Since our kings and queens have always been unimaginative, they named it just that, Capital. Of course, I shouldn't be the one to speak, since I still called my familiars Cat Number One and Cat Number Two. At least we had a name for the country, although it was just as ridiculous. Okay, so it wasn't so ridiculous. In fact, Brudiwr Deyrnas sounded quite elegant. Even so, in the common

tongue, it meant something along the line of "Wizard's Realm", to which, of course, I took a personal offense.

Not even the thought of the insulting name of my country could put me in a bad mood. In fact, I laughed all the way to Capital. It didn't help that, once we were there, I saw the pathetic state of the flags and walls. One would think the great capital of the Wizard's Realm would look better and more magical.

I was so busy laughing I didn't notice the effect of the magic potion beginning to dwindle until it was too late. I swept through the streets, laughing gaily, balancing on my broom and stealing kisses from the youths—both male and female—as I went past. And then I noticed him. A tall, handsome man stood straight in my path, watching me with an unfathomable gaze. I instantly knew he was a wizard. The way he braved my less-than-rational approach radiated stern arrogance. I disliked him on sight and wanted to teach him a lesson.

Of course, my mother's old broom chose this particular moment to act up on me. The potion's effect vanished, and the cats' yowls startled me. With a less-than-dignified yelp, I rolled through the air, landing straight at the man's feet.

From this angle, the only thing I could see was the bottom of his immaculate white robes. It had always been a



mystery to me as to how wizards, and witches for that matter, never dirtied their long garments. It was the one thing they seemed to have in common, the long robes they wore. Well, I didn't, because I loathed the damn things, but that was a different matter entirely. Could it be some sort of magic making their clothing impervious to something as trivial as dirt?

I reached out to touch the white cloth, and got my hand stomped on for my insolence. The slight pain succeeded in clearing my head a bit, and for the first time, I realized I was in the courtyard of the castle, surrounded by the entire court. I'd made a fool of myself and I needed to try to fix things as best I could.

I shot to my feet and promptly tripped against the broom. Laughter sounded around me, the inhabitants of the castle all making fun of my misfortune. Wizards, knights, and even servants snickered and cackled.

At this point, I was in tears, the taste of humiliation bitter in my mouth. I wanted the ground to open up and swallow me whole.

I summoned the last remnants of my dignity and got up once more. "Greetings," I said. "I'm looking for High Wizard Evan the Wise. Would you by any chance know where I can locate him?"

The handsome man arched a brow. "That would be

me. And you are..."

Upon realizing the identity of the wizard, I nearly swallowed my tongue. More than ever, I felt acutely aware of my dreadful appearance. My skin burned from where the cold winds had struck it and my hair was all over the place. I looked dirty and messy, and my cats were hissing angrily at me. This was so not how I wanted to meet the High Wizard Evan the Wise.

I somehow managed to find my voice once again. "Arturus Penedental," I replied. For once, I didn't stutter, but it didn't help my case much. Evan the Wise looked at me in disbelief, scanning me from head to toe, much like the messenger had two weeks back. "You are Brennan's grandson?" he asked.

I bristled at him referring to my dead grandfather with such familiarity. Now that I could think, I could see him more clearly. His black hair sat sedately on his white robes, the heavy winds not daring to move. He had a broom-up-his-ass sort of grimace, as if he'd eaten something sour that morning and couldn't quite get rid of the taste. Deep green eyes studied me like they would a grotesque bug.

"He looks mean," Cat Number Two said behind me.

"Remember," Cat Number One continued, "don't let him intimidate you."

They seemed to have recovered their wits, and I wanted to shake them for making me drink the stupid potion in the first place. Gritting my teeth, I suppressed my annoyance and wiped my face clear of the mud. They were right about one thing. I couldn't cower now. "That's right," I said. I offered him my best smile. In the background, the cats rooted for me in their own feline manner.

The expression on the high wizard's face changed almost instantly. It wasn't as visible as with the messenger, but I could tell. Insofar as the man could be astonished, he looked positively gobsmacked. "You go, Artie," Cat Number Two encouraged me. "Show them who's boss."

I felt just a bit smug when Evan the Wise looked away. Unfortunately, in the process, his gaze fell on the two black cats. "And who, or what are they?" he asked me.

In spite of my previous frustration with the two felines, I disliked the tone of the question, so I immediately turned defensive. "They're my familiars," I shot back.

Both cats began to rub against my legs, obviously pleased by my claiming them. I picked up Cat Number One and scratched it behind the ear. The cat began to purr, the sound soothing me. Cat Number Two somehow managed to climb up me and landed on my shoulder, rubbing against my cheek. I distantly wondered why their fur still felt so clean and soft when I was so dirty.

The high wizard's voice distracted me from my ridiculous dilemma. "Wizards don't have familiars," Evan the Wise pointed out. He sounded just as frustratingly stuck-up as before, and I made a mental note to learn a summoning spell in the future. Perhaps having a beehive in his bedroom might improve his disposition.

Of course I knew wizards didn't have familiars. It was the first thing I'd thought of during my fateful conversion with the cats. "Of course they don't," I replied. "But I'm not a wizard. I'm a witch."

I could swear the entire courtyard stopped breathing as I said that. Even the high wizard gave me a wide-eyed look. "Step right this way," he said, sounding a bit breathless.

At this point, I was quite happy to get out of the proverbial public eye, and followed him gladly. I snatched the broom—after all, it was my mother's—balancing it, our bags, and the cats with difficulty. "Where are we going?" I asked the wizard.

"We've prepared a room for you," he replied. "You've probably had a very strenuous journey so you should rest."

In spite of my confusion, I followed Evan. He didn't seem like some psycho killer, well, he kind of did, but not to me. None of my thought processes made any sense, but

anyway, I doubted Evan would try to hurt me.

We entered the castle and Evan led me through a bunch of dusty, winding corridors. Yet again, I found myself staring all around me at the torn tapestries and rusty suits of armor. As if guessing my surprise, Evan explained, "We've had some cutbacks lately. We hope this year's crops will help boost the economy a bit."

Gee, talk about no pressure. I nodded, even if he wasn't looking at me. It wouldn't be polite to pry. I'd have to remember to ask the cats more about this later.

Many things passed through my mind as I followed behind Evan in silence. Would I be expected to help perform the ritual? I'd been trying to prepare myself for it, but I doubted I could help in any way.

I noted in shock that the servants we passed were giving me looks of apprehension. I was beginning to get a little freaked out, when my familiars soothed me. "Don't worry," Cat Number One said calmly. "It's normal."

"Normal?" I repeated in disbelief. "How is this in any way normal?"

"Stop panicking," Cat Number Two replied. "We'll be fine."

I silently cursed my damn familiars for being so secretive. Obviously, they'd known something would happen once we got here. "You little..." I told them.

Evan's voice interrupted before I could start spouting insults. "Did you say something?" he asked.

I looked up only to realize Evan had stopped, and was now giving me a half-curious, half-amused look. He no longer looked like a stuck-up, stern wizard. The slight smile made his full lips tilt upwards ever so slightly, and my heart began to race. "N-No," I stammered. "Nothing at all."

"All right," Evan answered, his gaze never leaving my face. "If you're sure..."

"I-I'm sure."

Evan nodded and we began to walk once again. This time I felt different, feverish somehow. Sure, I knew what it was. I couldn't have reached my age without experiencing it. In fact, Brew had been quite adamant in the importance of me receiving an adequate sexual education. According to my grandfather, when magical creatures had sexual contact, they exchanged energy. The same thing applied to humans, but the effects in their case were negligible. We, however, needed to be very careful in our choice of partners. Wicked folk could want to seduce and bed us just to steal the energy we could provide through the exchange of life essence.

Touching ourselves was allowed, since that energy went to the Goddess, and was considered an honorable

offering. However, in the case of actual sexual contact, we needed to be absolutely certain of the honesty of our chosen partner, lest we get into serious trouble.

In the beginning, I'd thought Brew was being overly dramatic. I later found out Brew had not told me everything, probably fearing I would get scared. In fact the energy exchange, if not done right, could get us enslaved, or worse, even killed.

So far, I hadn't trusted anyone enough to venture into something like this. This sudden attraction toward Evan made things more complicated than they already were. But even if I knew this, I still admired the way he walked, the motions of his braided hair. The sound of his footsteps and the swish of his robes hypnotized me. And here I thought *I* had a killer smile. The wizard could give me lesson in wicked beaming.

I didn't know how much time passed when we reached what was supposed to be my room. As he gestured me inside, I nearly gasped. Taking into account the less-than-lavish exterior of the palace, I'd expected something more modest. "I hope this is pleasing," Evan said. "We had a bigger room, but I'm afraid that belonged to your grandfather and we are preserving it as he left it, in his honor."

I felt touched by his thoughtfulness. "Thank you.

I'm sure he'd have appreciated it."

I imagined him grumbling about the folly and sentimentalism of youth and laughed to myself. "He definitely would have."

Evan offered me a sad smile. "Indeed. And on this note, I'm afraid I didn't get the chance to offer my condolences." He took my hand, squeezed it and brought it to his mouth to kiss it. I licked my suddenly dry lips, my heart thundering. "If there's anything else you need..."

Before Evan could finish his phrase, his eyes widened and he let out a loud shout. He dropped my hand as if he'd been burned. I gave him a confused look, hurt by his rejection. But then, Evan looked down, muttering a spell under his breath, and I realized Cat Number One was attached to his legs, claws embedded in his robes, and probably in Evan's flesh, as well.

"No!" I shouted. "Down, boy! Bad!"

Cat Number One didn't listen, but it did release Evan, just seconds before a small shower of sparks fell right where it had previously been. I could swear the damn feline was laughing as it hid behind me. "Sorry about that," I said to Evan. "They're not very friendly."

"I can tell," Evan grumbled. The romantic mood—if it had ever existed—was broken. "Come see me after you've taken a bath and had some rest. We'll talk more



about the ritual."

"All right," I replied dejectedly. Just my luck. I thought familiars were supposed to be helpful, not sabotage one's love life. How would I ever get rid of my virginity if I didn't know people well enough?

Evan politely said goodbye, then left the room. When I was certain the wizard would be out of earshot, I glared at Cat Number One and shouted, "Are you crazy? What did you do that for?"

"He has his eye set on you," Cat Number One grumbled. "I can tell."

"Don't worry," Cat Number Two continued. "We're not letting you, or him, out of our sight. Didn't you see how he touched you? That is entirely unacceptable."

I couldn't believe my ears. My cats were actually saying they would chaperone me? This was too much. "But what if I want him to touch me?" I shot back. I wanted to be brave and take control, but I just sounded whiny.

My cats seemed to tsk. "Don't rush it," Cat Number Two said. "Everything will come in time."

"Now onto the baths!" Cat Number One ushered me. "You stink. Goddess only knows what was in the muck in the courtyard."

It occurred to me Evan's behavior was, indeed, suspicious. He'd smiled and hit on me after I'd told him I

was a witch. The entire trip to the room had been weird. That thought reminded me of something else. "You know," I told the cats, "I expected something more from the palace. It looks..."

"I believe the word you are looking for is shabby. Things have been difficult in the past few months, you know, with the economic crisis and all. Ever since that dragon ran amok and raided the crops of twenty nations, taxes have been soaring."

"The price of grain is very high lately," Cat Number Two confirmed. "Like the wizard man-whore said, they've been having cutbacks."

I almost regretted asking, but in the end, I accepted I should trust my two familiars more than a man I'd just met, no matter how handsome said man was. "At least we get a bath," I offered noncommittally.

The cats seemed to cheer up. I'd always found it peculiar, but in a strange twist of fate, my new familiars always enjoyed the water. Every feline I'd ever met would've scratched its owner to high heaven if he or she attempted to bathe it. Not so with Cats Number One and Two. In fact, both were very hygienic pets, and I quite often bathed them at the creek. In fact, I'd been washing them That Day, when we'd all left Brew alone with the éclairs.

As if guessing my thoughts, the cats meowed at me, summoning me to the adjoining chamber. I gaped at the sight of a large pool with golden spigots, filled with steaming water. "I'm getting in first," I told my familiars, knowing even as I spoke that it would be useless.

I could swear Cat Number One snorted. "As if..."

I made a move to head toward the pool, eager to get rid of my filthy clothing. I fully intended to disrobe before I got in the water and take my time washing up. Alas, things rarely worked out when I was involved, and I ended up tripping against the warm body of one of my cats.

With a frightened yelp, I collapsed face first. The shock of the water against my skin made me howl. At the very edge of it, the pool wasn't all that deep, so I even hit my leg against one of the spigots. Angry and frustrated, I tried to gather my bearings and looked around for my cats. When I got my hands on the little fur balls, they'd regret ever being summoned.

A loud chuckle notified me of someone else's presence. I turned to see Evan standing in the doorway, holding his belly and trying to smother his amusement. This time, it was all-out laughter, not just a smile. "At least I know your cats are insufferable around everyone," he said, wiping tears of mirth from the corners of his eyes, "not just me."

"It's just the way they are," I huffed. "Did you want something?"

Him seeing me at my worst made me uncomfortable, particularly since between my own paranoia and the cats, I was becoming convinced Evan had baleful intentions toward me. "Sorry," Evan said. "Just remembered I'd forgotten to bring you towels."

Towels? Towels? Sure, the castle had suffered from cutbacks, but not so much that the high wizard would be required to play the role of maid. Evan must have realized my disbelief as he laughed again. "All right, that's not exactly true," he said. "It occurred to me my behavior to you might have been a bit inappropriate."

"Him spying on you while you're in the bath certainly isn't helping," Cat Number One offered, not-so-kindly.

The entire situation seemed so ridiculous, and the past few days had been so strenuous that I burst into hysterical laughter. Ever since Brew's death, everything had started to pile up. I finished one task, only to be saddled with another. In a way, the preparations for coming to Capital had been a welcome distraction.

With the cats mocking me and the odd appearance of Evan in my life, it suddenly became too much. Somehow, I held my tears back. I didn't know if I kept my

sadness from showing.

The water lapped gently around me. I found in surprise the water itself was unbuttoning my shirt and untying my breeches. Before I knew it, my boots somehow got pulled off. This snapped me out of my little self-pity party, and I yelped, trying to get the aquatic attacker off my back.

"See?" Cat Number One said. "I told you he'd try to get into your pants!"

Evan was doing this? Right, wizards were good with elements. Why in the name of the Goddess didn't he just come in the pool with me? Why did he have to play this apology game when all he wanted was a bit of fun at my expense?

"Hey!" I shouted. "What are you doing?"

Evan arched a brow at me. "Me?"

"Yes, you!"

I took my shirt off and tossed it at Evan. It landed in front of him with a wet plop. Ignoring it, and my own half-nudity, I growled at him, "Out! Get out!"

Evan lifted his hands in sign of surrender and backed away slowly. "Sure. Calm down. See, I'm leaving."

"That's it, Artie," Cat Number Two meowed. "You show him."

It was somehow floating around me, not at all like a

cat would look like when swimming. Then again, how did a cat look like in such a situation? I had no idea. Back at the creek, they'd hardly been able to swim, as the water was too shallow. Perhaps I should have prepared myself for such oddities.

Bathing in this situation made me a bit disgusted, but they were familiars, not normal felines, and I guessed the pool to be large enough for all of us. Hopefully, they wouldn't fill it with hair.

I decided to ignore my stupid familiars and kept my eyes on Evan as he departed. I didn't hear the door of the room closing, so I guessed Evan must still be outside. What did he want anyway? Why didn't he leave me alone? I really didn't need this. Stupid wizard.

Sighing, I reached for my cock in the water. It was swollen in response to the presence of the damned high wizard. I tried to tell the damn thing to let up. I couldn't exactly touch myself with the object of my lusts right there, in the room. Well, I could, but not in these circumstances. I barely knew the guy. This was such a complicated situation. I'd ended up in a castle filled with people who, for some reason, seemed to regard me with various degrees of suspicion, awe, and apprehension. My only friends were two idiotic cats. This was not the time for a masturbation session.

Of course, Artie Jr. refused to listen to reason. In fact, all the intelligent, rational points I'd just come up with vanished as an image of Evan's smile popped in my head. Great. Just great.

Resigned to my fate, I finished unfastening my breeches and released my cock from its confines. Artie Jr. sprang out eagerly, and I sighed in relief. In the background, I heard a feline voice meow in disgruntlement. "Artie! That's gross."

"If you don't like it," I muttered, "you can damn well leave." Besides, masturbating with my cats there would just be disturbing.

This time, the cats heeded my command. They jumped out of the baths and padded back into the bedroom. I mentally sent a prayer to the Goddess to keep Evan away from my monstrous familiars.

With the high wizard's face in my mind's eye, I wrapped a fist around my erection. I squeezed my own shaft just right, moving my hand up and down. The water caressed me, and I remembered the way Evan had commanded it to disrobe me. How would it feel like if Evan himself touched me? Would his hands be gentle or rough? Would his hair be as soft as it looked?

My strokes sped up on my cock as I chased my orgasm. I rolled my balls in my hand, biting my lips so as

to smother my cries. I hoped Evan wouldn't get any more bright ideas such as bringing me hand cream or bath oils, although some lubricant wouldn't have hurt.

I reached behind myself and rubbed a finger around my hole. With the water surrounding me, it felt like I was floating. I could swear I heard Evan's voice whispering in my ear, urging me on. It almost seemed as if his hands were all over my body. I imagined his mouth enclosing on my nipples, his teeth biting down on the tiny nubs. His warm tongue would lap at the bits of flesh, soothing the sharp pain. Then we'd kiss, and I'd wrap my legs around his waist. His cock would nudge at my opening, and slowly, ever so slowly, I'd lower myself down on his erection.

Just the thought of Evan fucking me had me coming like a ton of bricks. By some miracle, I managed not to cry out too loudly, although the sounds I did make seemed to echo loudly against the walls of the bathroom. Oh, well. Too late to take it back now.

As the daze of the orgasm began to dwindle, realization struck once again. Almost immediately, I felt guilty for what I'd done. I should be mourning Brew, not touching myself and drooling over a man I'd just met.

Disgusted with myself, I finished bathing, paying close attention to my still-sensitive cock. The water must've had some sort of automatic cleansing system, because by



the time I left it, the evidence of my spent pleasure had vanished. I was grateful for that much.

At last, I stepped out of the pool and looked around for anything resembling a towel. Unsurprisingly, I found nothing, so I forced myself to pull my very wet and dirty breeches back on. Service in this castle was really lacking.

I padded back to the bedroom, uncaring of the trails of water I left behind. As I'd suspected, Evan waited there, on one of the lavish armchairs, browsing through a book.

"That was interesting," he said as he snapped the tome shut.

He wasn't referring to the book and my face heated at his comment. Deliberately pretending not to understand, I shrugged. "Could be. I've never read that particular one."

The room smelled like wet cat, but I didn't mind. It reminded me of home a bit. I looked around and detected towels on the table next to the armchairs. Somehow, I managed to snatch one without getting too close to Evan. "So?" I asked while drying my hair. "Why did you come here?"

"Actually, I wanted to talk to you before you saw the others," Evan replied.

"Talk to me?" I prodded. "About what?"

"About you being a witch and the ritual. When we meet later, everyone will be there and I won't get the

chance." He paused and looked away. "I know your familiars have been helpful, but some may not appreciate their presence."

A sinking feeling swept over me and I scanned the room for my familiars. There was no sign of the black felines anywhere. "Speaking of which, where are my cats?" I asked, my voice dripping with honey.

This time, the high wizard met my gaze head on. "I temporarily sent them away. It's not prudent for them to be here at this time."

"Not prudent!" I shouted. "Not prudent!" So he'd come to get rid of my poor cats then. "What did you do to them, you monster?" I wailed. "Tell me!"

"Stop being so dramatic," Evan huffed. "Like I said, I just sent them back to the tower."

"They're familiars!" I screamed at him. "They have to be with their witch. Besides, who will feed them? Who will take care of them?"

*Who will take care of me?*

By this point, I was hyperventilating. Who knew I'd become so dependent on my cats? And in only two weeks? Goddess... If I didn't get them back, I didn't know what I'd do.

"Hey, calm down," Evan said soothingly. "If it bothers you so much, we can get them back."

"Yes, it bothers me! Summon one of those portal thingies, now! I want my familiars back."

Yet again, Evan lifted his hands, trying to pacify me. "Calm down. Give me a second."

Waving his staff in the air, Evan pointed it at a blank spot to my right. A bluish whirlpool began to emerge. At first, it looked small, barely visible, but then misty ripples dimmed reality, and the portal started to grow more and more. I could see the image of Brew's tower through it, fuzzy, as if through a watery surface.

"Stay here," Evan said. "I'm going to get them."

As it turned out, it wasn't necessary. The cats walked in the room as if they didn't have a care in the world. The only sign they had indeed been wronged was the ugly look Cat Number Two directed Evan's way. "See if you're getting anywhere near Artie," it said.

Cat Number One didn't even look upset. "I told you Artie would come through for us," it told its companion, its tail swishing in the air.

Cat Number Two just looked pleased and relieved. "Thank you, master," it said, entwining around my legs and purring.

I picked Cat Number Two up and pet it. Even the knowledge that they hadn't been scared didn't satisfy my anger. I glared at Evan. "You had no right to cast them

away," I told the high wizard.

"I was only thinking about your own safety," Evan shot back.

"My safety?" I repeated in disbelief.

"You say you are a witch where all the castle can hear, and then bring two black cats as familiars. It's like broadcasting you're an evil witch."

"Evil witch?" I repeated. Now I was confused.

This time, Evan just gave me a look of disbelief. "Surely, you understand the difference between a good witch and an evil one."

"Of course." I snorted and crossed my arms over my chest. "A good witch accepts the power of nature and feeds it with his or her own magic, whereas an evil witch manipulates it and twists it to harm others."

Evan nodded. "That's right. In fact, an evil witch caused the dragon attack in the first place."

I hadn't known this little piece of information. Then again, I was new at this, and part of the purpose of me coming here was to have someone here teach me. "What does that have to do with me or my cats?"

"Black cats are typically the familiars of evil witches," Cat Number One replied while licking its paw. "No worries. We were prepared for this."

Cat Number Two glared. "Of course, we didn't

expect Mister High-and-Mighty to send us away, but that's a whole different issue."

"Arturus?" Evan called out. "Did you hear what I said?"

I realized the wizard had been talking to me while I'd been focusing on my familiars. A bit put out that he'd called me by my full name, I answered, "Not really. They explained the situation so I was paying attention to them."

Evan looked irritated. "Gah! You're just like your mother!"

I gaped at the sudden outburst. It made no sense that a very hot man I lusted after compared me to my mother out of the blue. I made a very unintelligent sound, and he must've realized by confusion.

"I knew Brennan well," he explained. "A long time ago, when he lived in Capital, he even encouraged me and your mother to marry."

"Oh, this is getting interesting," Cat Number Two said. "Artie's lusting over a man who could be his father."

"Tell me you didn't..." I somehow managed to say.

"Sleep with her?" Evan asked, apparently enjoying himself. "No. I did kiss her several times. She had soft lips."

His gaze went at my own lips as he spoke and I took an unwilling step back. I didn't want to hear any more. I'd

once surprised my parents in the act of copulation, and the memory still made me shiver. Thinking my mother may have had a sex life, even before marrying my father, made me a little sick to the stomach.

But Evan wouldn't be deterred. In fact, he seemed quite amused by my reaction. "She also had soft breasts, and a mouth to die for. Ah, I still remember those days fondly. She gave the best blowjobs."

This time, I didn't manage to contain myself. The exhaustion caused by my eventful trip mixed with the shock and nausea, and I threw up all over Evan's nice, white robes. Before I blacked out, I felt a small pang of satisfaction upon acknowledging that wizard clothing could, indeed, have spots on it.

### Chapter Three

The first thing I heard upon waking up was the voice of one of my feline companions. "It must have been the shock," Cat Number Two said.

"We shouldn't have teased him so much," Cat Number One agreed. "This whole thing has been hard on him."

"Nah," Cat Number Two replied. "We're not so bad. He needs someone to kick his ass."

I almost smiled, realizing they'd sensed me awakening. I felt touched. Who knew the cats cared so much about me? I cracked my eyelids open ever so slightly and scanned the room. To my great shock and amusement, I saw Evan pace at the foot of the bed.

"This is just great," he muttered under his breath. "Evan, you are such a fool." Louder, he said, "Excuse me, can you even understand me? What do we do? I didn't think he'd faint."

I realized he was talking to my familiars. They ignored him the way only cats could.

"Hmmm..." Cat Number One said. "Should we point out that you're awake, Artie?"

I didn't reply, enjoying Evan's fretting. He deserved

to stress for pointing out his gross liaison with my mother. The very thought of him kissing her made my skin crawl.

"Gotcha," Cat Number Two replied. "We're not saying a word."

"Besides, he deserves it for sending us away."

"And Artie," Cat Number Two continued, "what he said before, it's not true. Your mother never had sex with him."

That pacified me a bit, although it pissed me off that Evan would make fun of me like that. As I lay there, I wondered at Evan's previous words and actions. Since I'd gotten here, his behavior had confused me greatly. I'd seen him disdainful, cold, amused, annoyed, nice, frustrated, and angry with me. I didn't know which one of them was the real Evan. What did he hide behind those beautiful green eyes and the handsome mask he called a face?

My abilities as an actor were sorely lacking, so I decided to give up on my little charade before Evan figured it out. With a theatrical groan, I lifted a hand to my forehead. "What happened?" I asked.

Instantly, Evan went back to High-and-Mighty mode. "You fainted when I told you about me and your mother."

I glared at him, but secretly, I thought maybe I'd seen a slight peek of what Evan was like. I didn't feel as



intimidated of him as before. "Right," I said. "Because you just had to tell me in detail how soft my mother's lips were and how nicely she sucked your cock."

I surprised myself by not blushing or stammering when I said this, but I suppose having a conversation about the sexuality of a parent could do that to anyone.

"I merely stated a fact," Evan pointed out.

"Please," I shot back. "That's a lie and you know it."

Evan's gaze instantly went to the cats, and even the slightest doubt I might've had disappeared. "See?" Cat Number One said. "What did we tell you?"

"I was only teasing," Evan said in the end. He smiled sheepishly, and I had to force myself to keep hold of my frustration and anger. Evan must've noticed my stubbornness, as he hastily changed the subject. "Besides, we're getting off topic."

"We were talking about how me having black cats means I'm an evil witch." I scoffed, the memory irritating even more. "Please! That's ridiculous."

"I'm not saying you are, just that their presence makes it seem so."

"So what do you suggest, oh Wise One? Because I'm not giving up my cats." It seemed quite evident at this point I couldn't trust anyone here but my cats.

"Yes, I realize that now," Evan answered. "It's quite

problematic. You'll have to prove you're not an evil witch."

I began to get insulted. Why did people presume I was evil just because I had burst in the castle on a broomstick, declared I was a witch, and brought my two black cats along? Entirely unjustified and unfair. Of course, I probably couldn't convince Evan of the many holes in his plan, so I said something else instead. "Brew... I mean Brennan, raised me. Surely it must count for something."

"It does," Evan confirmed. "Your parentage is why you got a room and the benefit of the doubt."

That shut my mouth. He couldn't possibly mean what I thought he did. For crying out loud, I'd come here to help and fulfill my duty to my dead (sob) grandfather. How the hell did I end up being accused of being an evil witch?

"Wow," Cat Number One said. "People have really gone back ten centuries since we've been here last."

"We may have made a mistake in coming here," Cat Number Two mused.

No shit. Stupid, useless familiars. I should've let them starve at the tower, all alone and abandoned. Technically speaking, I still could. Evan disliked my cats and would summon a portal if I asked him to. But... Goddess! They were just two familiars with no other place to go. How could I push them aside? Also, they were warm, and their purrs comforted me at night, when I couldn't

sleep.

So, even if it meant I was a big baby, I didn't want to let go of my familiars. Right now, they were the only family I had.

"Ask him how we prove you're not evil," Cat Number One instructed me.

I conveyed my familiar's message, to which Evan replied, "I'm sorry. I'm not allowed to tell you that. I'll help you if I can, and if push comes to shove I can get you out of Capital. It would have been easier to just get rid of the source of the problem." He glared at the cats as he spoke. "But anyway, you'd still have to respond for bringing them here."

I groaned and plopped back on the bed, which unfortunately led my skull to have a very unpleasant meeting with the headboard. "Hey!" Evan shouted at me. "Be careful. Are you self-destructive or what? At this rate, you won't even get to meet the other wizards."

"Thanks for being so encouraging."

I met his gaze, and for a brief second, time seemed to stop. I really didn't know who this man was, or what he wanted from me. In fact, most of the time, he scared and pissed me off. He mocked me and lied to my face. But I also felt butterflies in my stomach whenever he looked at me, and clearly I was very much attracted to him. Puppy

love? Crush? Chemistry? I had no idea. But right then and there, I couldn't care less.

Evan took a few steps forward, still holding my gaze as he did so. Cat Number One eyed him suspiciously as he approached, but for once, didn't do anything. I took that as a good sign. At last, he seated himself on the bed next to me. "Arturus..." he began.

I winced, and not-so-gently interrupted him. "Please, call me Artie. Arturus is far too pretentious."

Evan smiled. "Okay, Artie. You should be ready. The most important thing is to be honest. I am convinced you're not an evil witch so I'm sure you'll do fine."

My face heated once more and I cursed my stupid leprechaun heritage. Because of my pale skin and red hair, I always blushed easier. "Thanks," I muttered in reply. "Just promise you'll be there if anything goes wrong."

"I'll be there and I promise I'll stop teasing." He hesitated. "Maybe you should take your familiars along. If we have to run, you wouldn't want them to be left behind."

I couldn't believe my ears. Evan hated my cats, didn't he?

"That's so sweet," Cat Number Two gushed. "He's worried about us."

"He just wants to get into Artie's pants," Cat Number One muttered. I ignored them both.

"I'll remember that," I told Evan.

This time, when Evan took my hand and kissed it, my protectors didn't attack. "I know we've just met, and this is very new to you. But I will do my best so no harm comes to you."

The spot where Evan's lips touched my skin tingled in a very pleasant fashion. My cheeks burned and I immediately snatched my hand away. As much as I wanted to get to know Evan better, I'd already made enough of a fool of myself in his presence.

He didn't say anything, just gave me an undecipherable look. He actually nodded at the cats as he took his leave. As my familiars jumped on me, I asked myself how I'd managed to get into this mess in the first place.

\* \* \* \*

A few hours later, a reluctant servant knocked at my door and told me I'd been summoned to appear before the Great Wizard Assembly. I made no attempt to mask my distaste for the entire affair, a fact the man seemed to interpret as evidence I was, indeed, an evil witch. He took off down the corridor, shouting something about doomsday and forces of darkness.

I shook my head and sighed, making a mental note to be more careful in the future. "Guess we should be off," I told my familiars.

My two cats jumped in one of the bags, a medium-sized sack with strong straps that held it against my shoulders. The advantage of this particular one was I could add whatever I wanted in it and it would never get full. Brew had once given it to me. He called it a rucksack. Apparently, in one of his visits to other dimensions, he'd seen similar items and heard stories that spoke of this particular variety. It had always been Brew's ambition to prove he could make the impossible work and create the most astonishing things. Case in point, my rucksack. No one would be able to tell I had two cats and my most important belongings in there—just in case I was forced to make a hasty exit.

Another knock sounded. I shouldered my pack and opened the door, smiling as I saw two guards waiting for me outside. "Hello," I said perkily. "You've come to lead me to the Assembly, right?"

The two looked dumbfounded and a little apprehensive. "Yes," one of them, a handsome brunet, said. "We've been tasked to take you there."

The brunet's companion was a man with oily hair who reminded me of a fish. "The Assembly should begin

shortly," he said.

They gestured me out and I followed them obediently, all the while keeping my very false smile on my face. "Excellent. Thank you for helping me out. It's the first time I've come here and I would've gotten lost."

Fish-Guy gulped. "Right. It's our pleasure."

I doubted that. They probably thought I'd cast some evil spell on them. The scared servant must have told everyone I was a devil who intended to bring down the monarchy, and Goddess forbid, create a new form of government. I laughed to myself at the thought. If I had to judge by Brew's tales, governments of all shapes and sizes only succeeded in doing one thing: making people miserable. Quite honestly, I couldn't wait to get out of this stupid task, finish with the ritual, and return to Brew's secluded tower. At least there, I was safe.

Of course, leaving would mean I'd never get to see Evan again. Was I okay with that? I didn't know. There were so many things that happened to me today, too many for me to be able to think clearly. I guessed I'd just have to go with the flow and see what happened.

I tried to distract myself from my glum thoughts by counting the dust bunnies and torn tapestries I could see as we walked. After a while, I got bored, and started counting scared servants instead. It kept my mind busy and before I

knew it, the guards stopped. In fact, they did so with such abruptness that I ran straight into Fish-Guy. Both he and I hastily moved away from each other. He probably feared I'd rub off my evil on him. I just didn't want the smell of fish in my hair.

The brunet gave me a tight smile and said, "It's here. We'll wait outside."

"Thank you," I replied politely. I knocked at the door, and a severe voice bade me enter. I wondered if this was general procedure for all suspects of evil witchcraft. Somehow, I doubted it.

Shrugging to myself, I followed the order. The first thing that struck me when I entered the chamber was the lighting in the room, or rather the lack of it. The windows had been covered, if they'd ever been there at all, and there were no candles. Even so, in spite of the actual darkness, it seemed to me like I'd walked into a place full of pure brightness. The magic surrounding the assembly of wizards was so powerful it replaced the instinctive desire for light.

At first, it confused me, but then my eyes met Evan's green ones. That effectively reminded me why I'd come here, and my annoyance returned with a vengeance. I took a few steps forward and bowed my head in a polite, but not submissive, greeting. All the while, I remained silent, recalling Brew's lessons of etiquette. One never



spoke to people of rank before they spoke to you, especially when invited to a formal meeting with the persons in question.

As I lifted my gaze, one of the wizards, a priestly-looking man, began to speak, "So... Arturus Penedental? Why did you come here?"

I arched a brow. "I came to honor my grandfather's duty."

"That's very kind of you," Evan said. "We just have a few questions and then we'll deal with the other issue."

The rest of the wizards didn't seem to agree with Evan. "Not so fast," a wrinkled old man said. Unlike Brew, he'd aged into a husk. I disliked him at once. "We've heard disturbing rumors, regarding your familiars. Is it true that you own two black cats?"

I nodded. "I do. They are very nice." Insofar as cats could be nice, at least, I finished to myself.

The man didn't look convinced. "Black cats are a sign of evil witchcraft. We'll have to do thorough testing and figure out if you are or are not evil."

I squirmed. I didn't like the sound of that. Last time I'd heard the words *thorough testing*, Brew had taken me to have my most intimate parts checked. I was not looking forward to any more probes or anything of the sort.

"All right," I said reluctantly. "What do I have to

do?"

A glowing sphere descended from the ceiling, hovering above me. A pedestal emerged from the floor, and the sphere landed on it. "All you have to do is put your hand on the sphere," the old man said. "If you are not entirely truthful, the sphere will buzz."

I gave the glowing orb a suspicious look. When there was no prod from my back or warning from Evan, I pressed my hand to it. It felt warm to the touch, but otherwise, nothing special. "We are not sure you are who you claim to be," Priest-Dude said.

I barely managed to suppress my shock. So they thought I'd lied about my identity? Seriously, how many witches out there had married a leprechaun and sired a pale, freckled, half-breed? My bet was not many. "That's quite offensive, you know," I said, disgruntled, "since you haven't even introduced yourself."

"Of course not," a blonde female wizard replied. "Evil witches can do a lot of wicked things if they know our names."

That sounded very ominous to me, as if they'd already decided I was evil. I mentally shrugged, putting it out of my mind. If anything happened, Evan and the cats would help out. "Whatever. Just ask your famous questions."

"What's the vilest thing you've ever done?"

Even as I thought this, I contemplated my response. I hesitated too long. "Is it really so hard to choose?" the blonde added, the sharpness of her gaze belying the sweet tone of her voice.

"Actually, it is," I replied. "I'm not sure what you mean by evil."

"You know, wicked, immoral, sinful, against the will of the Goddess," yet another wizard said impatiently. He wore dark gold robes that complemented his blond hair and Kohl-rimmed eyes. I wondered to myself if he always color-coordinated his wardrobe. "That sort of thing."

Sparkly-Boy's explanation didn't do anything to clarify my confusion. "Right." Shrugging, I scanned my memory for what I considered the wickedest thing I'd done. "My wickedest deed would be me leaving the tower the day my grandfather died."

The sphere under my hand buzzed, surprising me. "Something else you'd like to share?" the old man prodded.

Other than that, I could think of one significant misdeed and regret. "Then, probably the worst thing I've ever done was the time I destroyed my mother's first, and only, potion." It had made her cry, and I still felt terrible about it. But the damn thing was intended to change me into a girl, and I had no intention of ever growing breasts or

anything along that line.

The sphere buzzed again. "Anything else?" another female wizard asked. She looked more like a little girl than a woman, but at this point, I knew appearances could be deceiving.

"When I hid my father's pot of gold?" In my defense, I'd gotten into a fight with him that day, and I wanted to see if I could get him to grant me three wishes. Apparently, it didn't work that way with family.

Once again, the damn sphere protested my response. I was getting annoyed. Without even waiting to be pushed, I began to list things I'd done throughout my life.

"Uhh... When I accidentally scorched my cats' fur with my grandfather's latest creation?"

Buzz.

"When I threw away his runes?"

Buzz.

"When I threatened to drown my cats?"

Buzz.

This was hopeless. I got to present day with the damn thing still buzzing at my every reply. My hand began to turn numb, while I just felt exasperated. "I don't have anything left to say," I told them.

"There has to be something else," Priest-Dude said.

"Otherwise the sphere wouldn't buzz."

I couldn't take it anymore. "This is stupid and ridiculous. I've had enough."

"I'm sorry you feel that way," he said placidly. "We have to continue with the procedure."

It was humiliating and I refused to stand for it. I'd already told them three-quarters of my entire life. I had no idea what more they wanted from me, and I was not about to reveal my crushes or innermost feelings to strangers.

I snatched my hand away from the sphere, glaring at them. "No," I replied. "I've been patient and done my best. For all I know, this thing is faulty and buzzes all the time, or you make it do so. Why should I trust you? You've given me no reason to."

"Good witches are, by nature, trusting," the wrinkly old wizard said while reaching for his staff.

I ignored his threatening stance. "What a bunch of crock. There's a difference between being trustful and being stupid. What do you expect me to do, tell you everything I've ever experienced throughout my entire existence?"

They didn't reply, and it dawned on me what they wanted to do. "I knew it. You're jealous of my grandfather's power and you want to know what he did with his spells and all that. Well, fuck you. There's no way I'm saying anything."

"You'll have to!" Sparkly-Boy snarled at me, "or else we'll—"

"Enough!" Evan interrupted him. "This isn't what I had in mind for this session either."

"Arturus and Evan are right," the little girl added. "How can an inanimate decide what is evil and what is not? How can it set standards to analyze behavior? It makes no sense." Her expression was dark and foreboding. She got up, her gaze traveling across the room. "Arturus has said enough."

"Adine, you can't be serious," Sparkly-Boy told the girl. His Kohl-rimmed eyes went from me to his fellow wizard. "I expected it of Evan. After all, if the boy is really who he claims to be, he might even be Evan's son."

"Shut your mouth this instant," Evan snarled at the man.

"Why should he?" the blonde wizard said. "Everyone knows you've been pining over his whore of a mother for centuries."

At her words, I saw red. Insulting me was one thing; messing with my family a whole matter entirely. My mother may have been a bit flighty and absent-minded, but she was a genuinely good person, and I knew for a fact that she loved my father.

"You are the stupid whore!" I shot back at her. "It's

no wonder you see evil witches all over the place. The evil is inside you."

My rucksack dropped to the floor as if of its own will. My familiars flanked me, hissing at the assembly of wizards. Immediately, the wizards became alarmed. I had to wonder how I'd get out of this one. I faced six of the most powerful wizards of my realm. Granted, Evan could help out, and perhaps the little girl would stay out of it, but we were still severely outnumbered. I didn't think my cats could do much but look fierce and yowl.

Much to my shock, I felt a wave of power sweep over me. For the first time since I'd gotten here, I heard the voice of the Goddess whispering in my ear. I could swear my mother spoke to me as well, and my father's heavy, but playful, tone urged me forward.

My familiars began to shift, growing and growing, turning from tiny house cats into huge, cat-like dragons. "Oh, this is cool," Cat Number One said.

It flapped a wing experimentally, and it ended up sweeping away the table where the wizards had been sitting. Cat Number Two growl-snickered as it crushed the ball under its large paw. "There. Problem solved."

All the while, the wizards pointed their staffs at us. Sparkly-Boy gave me a look full of hatred. "This is clear evidence. You're an evil witch."

I shrugged as I leaned against Cat Number One. Its hide felt weird, both soft and scaly, reptilian, yet not. I was uncomfortable with the thought my power had created something new, a creature not of this world. The warmth of the Goddess still filled me, though, and I found comfort within it. It could not deceive me.

"Honestly, I have no idea what you're talking about," I replied. "I came here to help out with the ritual, and maybe find someone to help me learn more about my powers, if not for myself, for my grandfather." I laughed lightly. "I have to say, I didn't even know I could do this. It's quite interesting, don't you think?"

Cat Number One purred, but it came out as a low rumble. Obviously feeling threatened, the wizards began muttering spells. A bright flame emerged in Bitchy-Blonde's palm. Then her staff exploded, sending splinters of twisted white wood flying. One landed in her eye, and I winced as she started crying out in pain.

The little girl let out a gasp upon seeing the accident, and Evan cursed. Everyone seemed to forget all about me. I wanted to cry, since I hated hurting anybody, even indirectly. I wanted to help, but I didn't think my aid would be welcome. Besides, I didn't have much experience with healing ailments. I did occasionally fix the broken wing of a bird, or a scratch on Brew's hand, but those



hardly qualified me as a proficient healer.

Evan must have felt my distress, as he took a step away from his companions. "Don't worry," Evan told me. "I'll prepare a potion and it should heal just fine. The injury is not severe." He shrugged. "She's had similar injuries before, from less... warlike actions."

"Evan!" Bitchy-Blonde shrieked. "What are you telling him about me? Why are you always bad-mouthing me? I'll tell Mom!"

Evan winced, and mouthed at me, "Older sister."

I had a head-desk moment, and immediately decided to retreat. If I felt thankful for one thing in my life, it was that my parents never had a second child. Sibling rivalry scared me. I honestly had nightmares of my mother smiling and telling me, "Artie! You're going to have a little sister! Isn't it wonderful?" Uhh... No.

"Go on," Evan said. "We'll talk later. I'll deal with things here."

As the cats shifted back into their feline forms, he waved his hand in the general direction of the door. At once, guards burst in. "Is everything all right?" Fish-Guy asked. "We heard screams."

"My sister had an unfortunate accident," Evan explained smoothly. "Nothing to worry about."

There were several 'ahh's of understanding, and I

realized Bitchy-Blonde really was prone to getting injured. That made me feel better. I picked up my rucksack—where my cats were hiding again—and, after waving goodbye to Evan, I followed the guards out. A female voice stopped me from rushing out of there. "Arturus!"

I turned, half-expecting to see another enemy attack me. It was the little girl. She gave the guards a stern look and the men gave us privacy, taking up post a few feet away from us. As they did so, the girl smiled at me. "Don't worry about them," she said. "They're mostly harmless. They can't hurt you." Her expression sobered. "But be careful around Evan. He's a dangerous man."

I frowned at her, not appreciating the fact that she was insulting my only ally here at the castle. Something stopped me from uttering a scathing reply, though, and I nodded. "Thank you."

Without another word, she turned around and reentered the room where her fellow wizards still waited. I didn't know what to make of her words, but the entire thing confused me too much. Shrugging to myself, I decided to return to my room. If nothing else, it had certainly been an eventful meeting.

## Chapter Four

That evening, Evan invited me to a private dinner in his quarters. Strikingly, the cats encouraged me to go. I could swear Cat Number Two would've wiggled its eyebrows if it had any.

I hadn't brought much elegant clothing with me, just a few pairs of quality breeches and silk blouses. My mother always told me I needed to have at least one appropriate outfit in my armoire, just in case. Unfortunately, I'd worn my best ones at the meeting with the Assembly and torn the sleeves of the blouse on Cat Number One's scales. The breeches were still in a good condition, but I felt reluctant to wear the same item and make a fool of myself.

In the end, the cats helped me decide on an outfit that, according to them, complemented my body without going over the top. They told me to be careful and remember Brew's advice, which I translated as, "Don't spread your legs for Evan no matter how hard you are for him." Who knew my cats could be tactful?

Their behavior made me believe they had something up their non-existent sleeves, so I vowed to be watchful, just in case.

Another guard led me to the Wizard's Tower, where

Evan resided. Supposedly, I was to have a separate audience with the high wizard, to clarify the misunderstandings caused by the abrupt ending of our meeting. Of course, that was a lie, but I didn't particularly want to tell the man the truth. I was too busy thinking up a way to climb all those stairs without falling on my face.

Evan's tower seemed taller than Brew's, more so since the very top of my grandfather's abode was never used. For some reason, Brew had never bothered to fix the drafty, old attic, so we rarely went there. Evan didn't have the same problem, and the stairs leading to the man's quarters went on and on. I had a flashback of climbing up the stairs, dodging the wet cats, only to find Brew dead in his study, the half-eaten éclair next to him.

I stopped halfway up the stairs, my mind a bit hazy. I'd accepted Brew's death as the Goddess's wish, but that didn't make it any easier. Sometimes, I thought I could still hear my grandfather grumble at me or urge me to get off my ass and study.

"Are you all right?" a gentle voice asked from somewhere above me. The memories scattered, hiding in the back of my brain, ready to strike when I least expected them.

I looked up and realized Evan stood just a few steps away from me, giving me a concerned look. "I'm fine," I

told Evan. "Just remembered something sad."

Evan nodded. "It's difficult to lose the ones we love."

He joined me on the cold, marble staircase, and sat down. He didn't speak and neither did I. I honestly didn't know what to say. I remembered Bitchy-Blonde's words. Had he been pining for my mother all these years? And if so, where did I fit in?

Evan shot to his feet and extended his hand toward me. "Come on," he said. "I'm sure you've had enough of wizard towers."

I nodded numbly and took his hand. It felt both warm and cool in mine, the strong, dry grip comforting, yet unsettling. Evan had calluses, I noticed, probably from the nasty old staff he carried with him all the time. He'd now transferred it to his right hand, but he usually held it in the left. He was left-handed then. I'd heard left-handed people were good in bed. Or was it big-nosed ones? I couldn't remember for the life of me.

He pulled me out of his tower while I still puzzled over this dilemma, trying to distract myself from the warmth of his grip and how much I wanted to feel it on a different part of my body.

Evan led me into the courtyard and then, toward what might have once been a garden. I noted absently that

the wizard tower we'd come from seemed in a better condition, a very odd thing given the general state of the rest of the castle. "I wanted to talk to you about the ritual," Evan said after we reached the so-called garden. "As you know, it's very important that we receive the blessing of the Goddess for our realm. The crops have been poor, and with what happened before..."

"Yes, I know," I said, trying to sound as patient as possible. I felt a little disappointed Evan wanted to talk about business, but I guessed it was necessary. Besides, this was what I'd wanted all along. After all, I hadn't come to Capital to moon over a handsome wizard or collapse at said wizard's feet like a pathetic little puppet. "I'm not sure how I can help, to be honest."

Evan sighed. "Few people know and realize what I will tell you now, but originally, witches were tasked for the ritual of the Beckoning. With their power over nature, they could summon the power of the Goddess and make our land rejoice." He paused, his voice tinged with pain as he spoke. "Unfortunately, as time passed, more and more of those witches began to be consumed by their power and turned evil. We could no longer allow them to taint our communication with the Goddess, so we took over. It is hard to proceed with the Beckoning ritual without the power of witches, and despite our efforts, we don't always

succeed. It was also back then that the presence of witches near the royal castle was banned."

This revelation astonished me. Brew had never told me about it, but it did make sense. I'd never understood why my grandfather always seemed to return from Capital looking so exhausted, or why my mother showed so much distaste toward the wizards. We must've somehow gotten caught up in everything. No wonder Brew had chosen to raise me sheltered and hidden away from the world.

"I never knew about all of this," I replied.

"I guessed from the way you acted at the Assembly," Evan said. "For that reason, it's been decided for you to see the king tomorrow. He will figure out what to do."

I gulped, nervousness swelling inside me. I wasn't very happy with this development. For all I knew, the king could be just as insane as his wizards. "What if he thinks I'm evil too?"

Evan laughed, an actual, genuine laugh, which made me feel funny. "Don't be ridiculous. You don't have an evil bone in your body."

I snorted. "How can you tell? I haven't been here a day."

Evan shrugged. "I can tell." In the darkness of the garden, his eyes shone like bright gems and his smile

promised wicked delights. "Anyway... now that we have business out of the way, we can go ahead to more pleasant activities."

A wave of his staff made a blanket appear on the ground. Another muffled spell materialized a proverbial feast on it. There were pillows to sit on, and the food looked delicious. My mouth watered at the sight. If not for the barren, dry ground Evan couldn't change, it would've been an idyllic setting.

Nevertheless, we sat down, the pillows muffling any discomfort the hard earth might have caused. I realized I was famished. I hadn't eaten or drunk anything since the famous broom-expertise potion. Until now, I'd been too nervous to focus on it, but now with the meal in front of me, I couldn't wait to dig in.

Evan said a small prayer, dedicating our repast to the Goddess, then grinned at me. "Go on. Eat up."

I didn't wait to be asked twice. It was only Brew's harshly-ingrained education that prevented me from descending upon the meal like a famished wolf. With excruciating care, I put pieces of each course on my plate, all the while praising myself for my control. Finally, I dug in, bringing a piece of honey-glazed ham to my lips.

I couldn't help but moan as the myriad flavors exploded on my taste buds. With each bite, the food



seemed to get better and better. Evan poured me rich, cinnamon-scented wine, and I sipped it, the potent liquor complementing the delicious meal. And throughout it all, Evan was there, watching me with gentle eyes, occasionally grabbing a bite of steak or a baked potato.

For all my good intentions, I soon found myself getting buzzed and sleepy. I'd never been much of a drinker. In fact, my cats were perfectly right. The leprechaun line of my family ensured I got drunk pretty fast. Goddess only knew what I'd do if I wasn't level-headed.

"I s-should get back to my r-room." I swear I hiccupped and the part of me that remained rational felt very embarrassed about it. "I s-seem to have drunk a b-bit too much."

I tried to get up and tripped on my own feet. Figures. If I was a klutz while sober, why would I be graceful when inebriated?

Thankfully, Evan caught me. His arms felt warm and soft around me. He lifted me up effortlessly, shushing me. "It's fine. My fault entirely. Everything is my fault. You don't have to worry about a thing."

I should've shied away from his touch. The way he held me wasn't right, and I knew it. But it felt too good, and I cuddled in his arms. His hold on me tightened and

through hazy eyes, I saw him wave his staff at the feast he'd spread out for us. The food and blanket vanished into thin air.

With a muttered word, a portal emerged in the middle of the courtyard. Seconds later, we were in a beautiful, lavish chamber. Judging by the occasional book and potion I could spot lying around, I guessed these were Evan's quarters.

"Here we are," Evan said. With brisk steps, he walked to the bed and placed me on the mattress. It smelled like Evan, and I grabbed the blanket, wrapping it around myself.

How nice of Evan to take care of me and let me sleep in his bed when I was drunk. "T-Thanks," I whispered. "I'm really sleepy."

Evan laughed. "You really are a good witch, aren't you, Artie?" he said. "So trusting."

The words were odd, but in my state, I didn't pay much heed to them. I wanted to get some rest, maybe cuddle a bit with Evan. A hand-job would've been nice, but I wouldn't do anything sexual in this state. I didn't want my first time to be when I was drunk.

"You're so beautiful," Evan whispered. A butterfly-light kiss landed on my lips and I surrendered to it, feeling warm, safe and wanted.

As our lips parted, Evan caressed the side of my face and repeated, "So beautiful. Just like your mother."

That bothered me, just like his first mention of her had. I tried to focus my vision a bit, feeling very confused. It really was poor form to compare one with one's mother when kissing him. And quite gross. If Evan wanted to be with me, I'd have to teach him some manners. Of course, after I got a good night's rest.

And then Evan spoke again. "I'm very sorry about this, Artie," he said. "I'd have loved to treat you better. But unfortunately, I need your power, and the only way I can get it is like this."

His words didn't quite register in my head until I saw Evan start to disrobe. At some point, he'd abandoned his staff, which now lay next to his beautiful desk. He looked stunning, and I wanted to lick every inch of flesh he revealed. But the lust evaporated as I began to realize what had happened. Pain and anger swept over me. He'd deliberately drugged me, intending to bind me to him, force himself on me. I'd been used and tricked by a very disturbed man. And here I'd thought he was so gentle and nice. I recalled the little girl's words and cursed myself for not paying heed to them. How could I have been so stupid and blind?

As Evan's immaculate robes hit the floor, he was

left in only a pair of white breeches. He took those off in a few practiced motions, revealing an impressive, hard shaft. For a few seconds, I forgot about what he wanted to do to me, and yearned to touch him. But as he approached, the light from the candle illuminated his eyes and I realized what a fool I'd been. He'd played me from the start. Back in the room, he must have known I was awake and just pretended to be concerned. Then again, who knew what had been genuine and what false? It didn't even matter anymore. I just wanted to get out of here and hide in my safe tower with my cats. My poor cats. Where were they now? Had Evan gotten rid of them again?

I tried to climb off the bed but just succeeded tangling myself in the sheets even further. My carefully chosen outfit choked me as Evan raked hot, lusty eyes over me. "D-Don't touch me. I don't want this."

"You will," Evan said darkly. "I will make you come, and your power will be mine."

Evan stroked his shaft, rubbing his thumb across the leaking tip. As I watched him touch himself, I spotted a shining object at the base of his cock. It seemed to be a ring of sorts, that squeezed the shaft in what looked like a painful grip. My eyes widened, but I immediately realized the purpose of it. The ring would prevent him from coming and exchanging energy with me. I would be the only one to

find my peak, feeding my power into him.

I was pretty sure he had some other weird spell cooked up as well, but he didn't seem to be in a hurry. I attempted to find a solution to my predicament, taking advantage of his arrogance. As if guessing my thoughts, he murmured something under his breath and I found I could no longer move. An invisible force held me immobilized, and I could not hope to escape.

How powerful was Evan really? Wizards could create smaller spells on their own, but needed their staff to control more powerful ones, such as summoning elements. Controlling people would require quite an amount of energy, especially if the person in question was a witch.

I tried to summon my power like I had in the Assembly Room. Evan didn't seem at all inconvenienced by it. In fact, it seemed to please him. "You have fire. That's wonderful. Your power will be more intense."

As he spoke, he leaned over me and began to take off my clothes. My shirt disappeared first, and Evan's thumb rubbed against my nipple. I wanted to scream and break away, but I could do nothing. "You sick bastard," I spat at him. "Let me go."

Predictably, Evan ignored me, and continued his explorations of my body. As Evan unfastened my breeches, I closed my eyes and willed myself to be calm. If I killed

the arousal in my body, he wouldn't be able to steal my power. I had no idea what he wanted to do with it, but it wouldn't be anything nice. I refused to allow him to twist the gift I'd been given by the Goddess.

A warm fist enclosed around my shaft, and I unwillingly shuddered. Now more than ever, I hated Evan. I'd have preferred it if he hurt me. That way, I wouldn't be so ashamed of the pleasure I felt.

All of a sudden, Evan's presence disappeared. A terrible roar sounded, and the room filled with dark smoke. I heard curses, and then, the familiar voice of Cat Number Two said, "Thank the Goddess we got here in time. We didn't expect him to make his move so quickly."

I experimented, trying to move around, and realized Evan's spell was broken. At first, I felt confused, but then I realized my familiars had flown into Evan's tower in their new dragon form. They were right there, in front of the bed, shielding me.

Hastily, I tied my breeches and grabbed my shirt. We needed to get out of here before the wizard recovered from the shock. As I got up, I saw Evan's staff had somehow ended up in little bits of burnt ash on the floor. I couldn't see Evan, though, and I didn't think that was a good sign.

Cat Number One gripped me in powerful claws and

said, "Hang on. We're leaving."

I couldn't agree more. "Please, hurry," I said.

"You didn't think we'd leave you to this guy's mercy, right?" Cat Number Two said. Its voice sounded a bit concerned, though.

"I'm fine now. I'll be even better once we're out of here."

It felt odd to be carried by my cat-dragon, but this time, I knew I would not be deceived. "Where are we going?" I asked.

"Someplace safe," Cat Number One said. "Ready?"

As ready as I'll ever be, I thought. My last experience with flying hadn't been so pleasant. Was I destined to be drunk or drugged every time I ventured in the air?

Cat Number One took off from the window of the tower and launched itself into the air. Cat Number Two followed behind, guarding us.

Dark clouds began to gather above us. "Oh, Goddess..." I murmured. "Evan!"

The damn wizard was trying to stop us from escaping. "It would seem he had an extra staff," Cat Number One mused. "Oh well... brace yourself!"

Before I could figure out what that meant, Cat Number One sped up, beginning to fly faster. We shot

through the stormy clouds, dodging lightning bolts. I closed my eyes, praying to the Goddess my death would be swift and she'd safeguard my loved ones, cats included.

Cold rain showered over us, but my familiar held me tightly, preventing most of it from hitting me. I realized hail fell all around us, but it didn't touch me a single time. My cat-dragons moved so fast, and I hoped Evan's terrible magic wouldn't hurt them.

The storm ended just as suddenly as it began. We'd managed to get out of reach of Evan's power. My cat-dragon landed, dropping me on the grass, and I refrained from the urge of kissing the ground. "How did you know I was in trouble?" I asked Cat Number One.

"We suspected Evan had something evil planned," Cat Number One replied, "but we didn't know exactly what."

I felt a bit irritated at the implication of the words. "So what, you wanted to use me as bait to find out?"

"Actually," Cat Number Two corrected, "we took advantage of the opportunity to prepare a way out for us. You didn't realize it, but we were being watched. We monitored you as best we could, but it was harder than we expected to crack the shields around the wizard's tower without him realizing it."

The dragons turned into cats once more and jumped



into my arms. I held them to my chest, a warm feeling of connection sweeping through me as Cat Number Two began to purr and knead at my chest. "So now what?" I asked.

Out of the blue, the little girl appeared next to me. "I told you to be careful, Artie," she told me, shaking her head.

I yelped, and my hold on the cats tightened, making Cat Number Two scratch my hand. Reminded of their feline nature, I dropped my familiars.

"Careful," said One, haughtily. "And don't worry. I told you we made arrangements."

Arrangements, indeed. At the girl's scrutiny, I squirmed, more than ever aware of my appearance. She didn't seem to mind, though, and instead, waved her staff in a circle in front of us. Instantly, a portal appeared. The flash was so sudden and quick it astounded me. I'd never seen a portal summoned so fast. When I recovered, I opened my mouth to thank her. She was gone. What in the world?

Her disappearance surprised me so much I half-expected Evan to step out of it and blast us with his staff. Instead, an entirely different person walked out. My mother rushed to my side, her gaze scanning me for any injuries. "Oh, Artie. I'm so sorry about this. I never would've left if I'd have known what would happen."

Her blue eyes, so much like my own, were filled with tears, and I immediately felt the urge to comfort her. "It's okay, Mom," I told her. "You couldn't have realized what would happen." I swallowed nervously, not sure if the cats had told her about Brew. "You know... Grandfather..."

She wiped her eyes, obviously trying to calm down, but failing. "I heard. I'd have liked to be there with you." The sky began to darken and she pulled me toward the portal. "Let's go. We cannot linger."

Strangely, I could see very little at the other side. The mirror seemed clouded somehow, as if a black force prevented vision. Still, I trusted my family, so I followed my mother inside.

We passed through the whirlpool of energy and emerged at the other side in what seemed to be a cave of sorts. There were all sorts of people running around, some of whom gave us curious looks. Others just continued on their way, as if this were an everyday occurrence. "What is this place?" I inquired.

"This is our headquarters," my mother explained. "Come. Your father should have returned by now."

"Headquarters?" I repeated, wondering if I'd fallen into some alternative dimension. "For what?"

"For our operation of building a new country, a

nation for all those scorned and driven away from their homes."

I gaped at my mother. I'd never heard her give a speech so impassioned, about anything. "You mean a country for witches?" I asked in disbelief.

"Well, the wizards have a country, why shouldn't the witches have one too?" She clung to her broom, her eyes burning into me. "Too long have we cowered in fear. Too long have they blamed us for everything that goes wrong in their country and used us as scapegoats. Well, I tell you, not anymore. We will unite, and together, we can fight back. The strength of the Goddess is behind us."

She sounded fiery, and she scared me a little bit. Was this really my mother? Did I even know her at all?

She finished her little speech, then offered me a sweet smile, the smile I'd inherited from her. "How did that sound?"

I must've looked confused, because she elaborated, "It's from our manifesto. We're notifying others, calling them here, asking them to join our cause. I need to sound convincing."

I couldn't help a little sigh of relief. She was the same mother I remembered. She'd just chosen a very serious and difficult task for herself this time. "It sounded great," I told her.

"Thanks," my mom answered. "Ah, there's your father."

Indeed, I spotted a red-haired head in the crowd, and then my father joined us. He generally went by the name of Angus. No one knew his real identity, except maybe my mother. It was the reason why I'd taken my mother's maiden name as my own. My father couldn't give me his last name out of fear it would be used against him.

"Moira, I heard the damn cats came to get you," he said.

"And here he goes, insulting us again," Cat Number One muttered. I realized they were also with us, sitting on the cave floor and giving my father an ugly look.

Angus ignored them. Much like my mother, he scanned me from head to toe. "Are you all right, Artie?"

"I'm fine, Dad," I answered. Their concern surprised me, given that they'd basically left me with Brew for so long.

Strong arms wrapped around me. My father smelled like clover and green grass, and I found his hold comforting. "What happened, Moira?" he asked my mother.

"What we knew would happen," she replied. "We never should have agreed to it."

I broke away from my father, my mind whirling. I felt like one of those people who accidentally skipped a

chapter from a book and didn't understand what was going on. "Could you please explain to me what in the world you're talking about?" I yelled.

"Please, don't shout," a new voice reprimanded me. I turned toward the source of the voice and saw a tall, dark man approach. Like Evan, he had black hair and green eyes, but that was where the similarities ended. While Evan's build had been rather slim from a life mostly dedicated to study, this man looked like a warrior. His shoulders went on for miles and his sheer presence occupied the entire cave. The way he walked, a predatory, soundless gait, spoke of an existence spent on the battlefield. It almost made me take a step back. He had a staff in his hand, but he didn't seem like a wizard or a witch to me.

"Everyone keeps shouting here," he continued. "It gives me a headache."

I couldn't even manage to muster enough confidence to reply. I might have meeped, if my felines' chuckles were anything to go by.

"Oh, Tristan," my mother said. "You're here. I wanted to introduce someone to you. This is my son, Arturus Penedental. Artie, this is Tristan Sinclair."

The man offered me a neutral smile. "Welcome, Arturus. I'm certain you'll like it here. And if you'll allow

me, I will clarify the situation."

"Tristan keeps this place organized," my father offered. "Your mother and I are kind of airheads, so we couldn't do it without him." His words sounded kind, but his voice was definitely not. My mother seemed just as cold to him.

Tristan shook his head. "I told you a million times, my friend, don't belittle yourself. And I know you are angry at me, with good reason."

"We told you sending Artie to Capital was a bad idea," Angus said. "I just knew something bad would happen."

"You didn't send me there," I piped in. "I went on my own."

"Well, Artie," Cat Number One said, "your parents wanted to bring you here when Brew died. But Tristan and the others were against it. He insisted you should go to Capital and look around. Brew had been spying for them for quite a while now, but with him gone, there was no one we could turn to."

"Thank you," Tristan said, nodding at my familiar.

"You understand my cat?" I asked the man.

Tristan shook his head. "I understand familiars. They are spirits, and my affinity is toward them."

"Tristan is a necromancer," Cat Number Two

explained.

My eyes widened. Everyone feared necromancers, and for good reason. In order to be one, a person needed to go to the other side and return. That was against nature, against the rule of the Goddess.

I forced myself to breathe evenly and not run out of here screaming. Judging by appearances and making hasty decisions had almost gotten me raped. Even with my parents, I knew so little about them, because I never bothered to fully understand their motivations for leaving me behind in Brew's care.

So, instead of hiding under a rock like a part of me wanted to, I turned to Tristan. "A necromancer, huh? That explains it. You don't look like a witch, or a wizard."

To my great satisfaction, I caught a flash of surprise in Tristan's eyes. "Indeed," he replied. "I have a very varied background." He cleared his throat and changed the subject. "But enough about that. You wanted to know about this place, and why you were in danger. Please, walk with me."

I left my parents' side, for once knowing they had my back. And also, if something happened, my familiars would sense it and come running. "This little project dates back many years. Your grandfather and I started it, and when he aged, your mother took over. We all thought it

was unfair witches were blamed for the fiasco. That's why he left, all those years ago."

"What really happened?" I asked. I very much doubted I could trust Evan's words to be true regarding this, or anything, for that matter.

"It's actually quite easy," Tristan replied. "There were indeed some witches involved, but the wizards weren't quite as innocent as they claimed."

I held my breath, eager to hear the true story. "Basically," the necromancer said, "the year before it happened, crops had been particularly good. So the Assembly decided to whisk some of it away. After all, they have their own families to feed, mistresses to house and clothe, and so on, and so forth. They figured next year's crop would cover what wasn't there. Only, the next summer, a terrible drought came. Everything withered and died. People looked toward the wizards to give them the previously stashed grains, which had already been cashed in and turned into silks and jewelry. A responsibility war ensued, and the witches lost. Since they do have a history of sometimes turning evil, it was very easy for the wizards to use them as scapegoats."

I couldn't believe my ears. I'd expected something magical, less petty and cheap. I had no doubt Tristan was telling me the truth. Still, it left a bitter taste in my mouth,



especially when I realized I'd also believed Evan's tales of evil witches.

"It's all right, Arturus," Tristan said. "The best lies are those with some truth in them. I'm sure those witches involved with the Assembly at that time weren't completely innocent either. We just have to understand we mustn't fall into stereotyping people because of our prior experiences. Not all witches are evil, and not all wizards are bad."

And not all necromancers are twisted maniacs, I could almost hear him say. I didn't know him well, but I found myself replying. "Call me Artie. We're in the same boat now."

"Artie," he repeated, as if getting used to the sound. I almost melted into a puddle at the way his powerful voice swayed over the two syllables and cursed to myself.

"Let's go back inside," I told him. "My parents are probably still nervous."

It was an excuse, but if he realized it, he didn't comment. I thanked the Goddess for it, and for the fact that he seemed to miss I was hard.

## Chapter Five

Soon after my conversation with Tristan, I fell asleep in a bed provided by my parents. I woke up feeling groggy and hungry. My bladder was full and a terrible headache pounded at my skull.

"You look terrible," one of my cats said. I couldn't identify which of them, since my head hurt too much.

"Shut up," I told it. "Leave me alone."

I tried to get up, intending to empty my bladder and then collapse in the bed again. I'd been very excited about reuniting with my parents and the project of building a nation for ourselves. Now, however, I couldn't even remember why I'd loved the idea so much. I thought I enjoyed the prospect of revenge against Evan more. Damn high wizard, drugging my food. It was all his fault. I pushed aside the dark thoughts that came with the memory. I'd been stupid and trusting, but no longer. From now on, I'd forget the wizard's very name, and I'd make it my business to avenge my honor. He didn't deserve to have an identity.

But first, I had to deal with more practical issues, such as getting past this terrible headache and finding a bathroom. I got up and managed to take a few steps before

swooning and losing my balance. I would have fallen down on my face, but a strong pair of arms saved me.

"You look terrible," someone repeated. This time, I identified the voice as Tristan's. Did he enjoy copying my cats in his free time or what?

"So I'm told," I replied acidly. Of course, I would have sounded much more intimidating if I wasn't in his arms. Was I destined always to land in the hold of dubious individuals with mysterious purposes?

He smiled at me, the vitriol in my voice apparently not affecting him in the least. His expression sobered. "How do you feel? You've been out for quite a while. Your mother was worried, but between your father and me, we managed to convince her to get some sleep."

"Seriously?" I asked. "Wow..."

"I didn't realize you'd been drugged. I'd have given you something to counter the effect last night."

I had a feeling Tristan rarely apologized, and even now, he didn't outright say he was sorry. Still, knowing people cared about me here meant a lot to me. "It's all right. I would be grateful for something now. My head is killing me."

"I figured that might happen," Tristan answered. He offered me a glass full with what looked like a clear red liquid. "Drink up. It will make you feel better."

I wrinkled my nose at the smell of the brew. Tristan practically lifted it to my lips and I was reminded of a different scene, when my familiars had been the ones insisting I drink a certain concoction. I hoped this would end better than that particular episode.

I might have protested, but in Tristan's hold, I couldn't muster enough strength to do so. He annoyed me but also made me feel a peace I hadn't experienced in a long time. So, in the end, I drank his potion.

Tristan smiled at me as I finished the liquid. His lips seemed as red as the potion, or perhaps they just seemed so because they were so close. "Come," he said. "I'll show you to the bathing chamber and then we'll deal with the rest."

Tristan lifted me in his arms and I understood what my father meant when he'd said Tristan organized things for their little scheme. I could already tell even by our limited exchanges the man was a control freak.

I felt uncomfortable with this realization, particularly since I'd just gotten away from one power-hungry maniac. What's more, the heat emanating from Tristan's body woke something inside me, something not even the-wizard-who-shall-remain-nameless had managed. I couldn't fall for somebody else, especially not so soon. I didn't have such a shallow nature so as to love the first man who offered to fuck me hard. Okay, maybe I did, but I'd

learned my lesson.

I was so lost in my musings it took me a good few minutes to realize we were no longer in the cave. In fact, we were walking through a lavish, elegant hallway, adorned with tasteful engravings and beautiful paintings. "What is this place?" I asked, knowing I was repeating my confused inquiry from the other day.

"This is my home," Tristan answered. "I insisted you stay here, since it is largely my fault you were injured in the first place. Your parents are also here."

I nodded as he carried me. The whole setting looked so incredibly different than the one at the palace. Everything seemed well tended to, and yet, there were no servants rushing around. I supposed people would be reluctant to consort with a necromancer, but who took care of Tristan's home? Did he have spells to clean everything up?

I got my answer when the figure of a handsome young boy floated through a wall and into the corridor. "Hello, Master Tristan. Everything is as you ordered. No one can get inside the house without us knowing."

"Good job, Will," Tristan replied. I could hear the 'but' before he even said it. "But how many times have I told you not to float around when we have guests in the house?"

The boy winced and gave me a put-out look. "Sorry about that. I just thought everyone was sleeping."

"No worries," I answered, but I heard the slight tremble in my voice. There was a dead person in front of me, an actual ghost. Dealing with a necromancer was one thing. Meeting and talking to dead people was quite another.

Still, young Will looked genuinely regretful. In fact, I thought he would burst into tears if I said something mean to him. I figured being dead was hard enough without being discriminated against. "It's fine by me," I finished with a smile. "My mom and dad might get a bit creeped out, though." To make the little reprimand sound lighter, I added, "Anyway, are you the one keeping this place clean? If so, I have to commend you on an excellent job."

My efforts to socialize with the ghost were rewarded when Will beamed at me. "I help out sometimes, although I mostly deal with security when Master is not around."

By that, I gathered there were other ghosts here. Curiosity sparked inside me, but I didn't get the chance to ask. "Run along, Will!" Tristan said. "We'll talk later."

"Yes, Master." Will waved at me and melted through the floor.

Tristan sighed in irritation and started walking

again. "I'll never get that boy to behave," he muttered to himself.

I wanted to ask more about the mysterious Will, but soon Tristan put me down in front of a door. "Here we are. The bathroom."

As soon as Tristan said the magical words, a switch was flipped inside my head. The ghostly interlude had made me forget about my urgent need to go to the little witch's room, but it now returned with a vengeance. I burst inside and slammed the door in Tristan's face.

The headache had begun to dwindle a bit, and I mentally complimented Tristan for his potion. In spite of my improving condition, as I scanned the room, I couldn't for the life of me identify the toilet.

As if guessing my predicament, Tristan shouted at me, "The toilet is the short, white thing next to the tub. Do you need help?"

"No," I shouted back. "I'm fine."

I'd never seen a toilet like that in my life. It looked a bit familiar, and I distantly recalled Brew had once showed me the sketch of an item that resembled it, suggesting we make the addition to the tower. I had been horrified at the monstrosity, and Brew had agreed with me, subsequently muttering something about "plumbing" and "too old for this".

Those distant memories helped me figure out how to use the damn thing without making a fool of myself. Even so, it took far too long, and I made a mental note to retrieve the enchanted chamber pot in the tower. Sure, it had its drawbacks, but at least it was easy to use, without all this complex system of pulleys and what-not's. I understood magic, not mechanics.

I washed my hands in the provided basin and left the room, feeling a bit disgruntled. Tristan waited outside, looking calmly amused. "Your grandfather built it for me," he said.

"What?" I asked, confused.

"The toilet. Since I was willing to let him experiment on the house, he installed it here. There are a lot of things he built, modeled from his travels to other dimensions."

I couldn't explain the feeling that passed through me at his words. First of all, I realized Tristan and my grandfather had been genuinely close. Then, I understood that in my selfishness, I'd denied Brew something he'd wanted, the desire to invent that always itched at him. And finally, the same deep feeling of loss that sometimes gripped me returned. "Thanks," I answered, "for letting him tinker with your place. He might have done so in the tower, but I was there."



He cleared his throat, as if uncomfortable. "It was no problem. I'm the only living being here anyway, and this place is huge."

His words reminded me of my previous curiosity. "About that... can I ask...?" I looked in the general direction of the hallway, where Will had disappeared.

"That's Will. He's an orphan who died the night I did. For some reason, when I returned, he came with me and adamantly refused to leave my side. In time, others joined him. Some are spirits waiting for their loved ones in order to go to the great beyond. Others are simply troubled souls who have nowhere to go. But they're harmless." He paused, took my hand and squeezed it. "Thank you for being so nice to Will. Most all the visitors I bring here are spooked by them. I hate being strict with them when they're so helpful, but it's better than having a witch run screaming the other way. I know you must've been freaked too, but you didn't show it."

I'd just heard him speak so passionately about our cause, and my heart squeezed at the realization of just how hard things must be for him. The way he held my hand didn't help. My face heated and I had to fight not to look away from him. He wouldn't want my pity or my misguided crush, and I didn't want the complication of emotions. We had a job to do, and a nation to create.

So I shrugged his praise away and said, "Come. I want to hear more about this plan of yours. I want to help."

He took a few steps forward until our bodies were nearly touching. Once again, I could feel his warmth, burning me in spite of the two layers of clothing between us. I wondered how it was possible for a necromancer to be warm. Shouldn't he be surrounded by the chill of death?

Tristan cupped my cheek and I licked my lips. He was definitely not cold at all. "You're all flushed," he said huskily. "You should go back to bed."

Your bed would be preferable, I wanted to say. But his eyes were so green and I was reminded of another man, a man who'd nearly stolen my virginity and my soul. I couldn't help but tense and Tristan immediately backed off. He looked like he wanted to say something, but a male voice interrupted him.

"Master! Master!"

For the first time since I'd met him, Tristan looked a little terrified. "Oh, no!" he said. "Artie, hide, before he sees you!"

I half thought we were being attacked by some sort of wicked undead creature, and I was half right. A transparent, willowy old man floated toward us and gave Tristan a reprimanding look. "Master," the unknown ghost said, "you didn't tell us what our guests would like for

dinner." He tsked. "I've told you a million times we need to be informed in advance. It's not easy to procure the necessary items."

"I know that, Giles," Tristan answered. "It slipped my mind."

Giles hummed, obviously displeased. His gaze then fell on me. "Oh, you must be Master Tristan's guest. Young Will was talking about you earlier."

"Was he?" I said with an uncertain laugh. "I hope he said good things."

Giles gave me a neutral look that made me identify him as a butler. "Of course, Sir," he answered. "May I ask if you have any preferences at all regarding the meal?"

I considered the question, struggling to ignore the fact that Giles had taken out a notepad as ghostly as he was. Did notepads die as well? How did ghosts get clothing or other items they used? I'd have to ask Tristan.

"Anything would do for me," I answered, "but my mother is a vegetarian. So, make sure you have some sort of cooked plant-life for her. Oh, and my father and I get drunk fast, so don't add wine or any type of alcohol to the food."

Giles was making quick notes, glancing at me with interest. "Anything else?"

I shook my head. We were already bothering this

peculiar household enough without making weird demands for food. "Thank you, no. I appreciate all the effort."

Giles turned toward Tristan. "Will you be eating in the dining room, Master?" he asked.

Even behind the polite question, I sensed longing and a sort of excitement. Tristan gave me an inquiring look. "Artie? What would you prefer?"

I followed my instinct and answered, "If it wouldn't be too much trouble, I would love eat in the dining room."

The smile Giles gave me seemed to make him alive. "Excellent, Sir," he said. "I'll get on it right away."

As Giles disappeared the same way Will had, Tristan chuckled. "You do realize you just made the entire household love you, right? These people have no occupation half the time and a large dinner is a Goddess-send."

I wanted to ask if 'the entire household' included Tristan as well, but refrained. "They seem nice, and I figure it can't hurt to get to know them. Besides, you'll be there if anything freaky happens."

I only realized how much trust those words implied as I spoke them. It made no sense and it scared me more than Giles and Will's ghostly nature ever could. I had to stop slipping into things like that. My heart couldn't take another disappointment so soon.

"I will, indeed," Tristan told me. "Now, I do believe you promised to go back to bed."

I had promised no such thing, but I didn't correct him. Instead, I allowed him to lead me back to my room. I needed time on my own to think, to try to make sense of everything that had happened in the past few days.

My cats were waiting for me on the bed when we came in and I could almost see their smirks. "Get some rest," Tristan said. "Take care of him," he told the cats.

My familiars didn't reply, but I sensed their acquiescence. With a final gaze in my direction, Tristan left the room. Immediately, the cats pounced on me. "So? Spill! What happened?"

Unlike in Evan's case, they seemed excited. I wasn't sure when they had been nosier and more inquisitive, back at the royal castle, or now. "Nothing happened. Besides, we've just met."

"Didn't stop you with you-know-who," Cat Number One muttered.

I should've been pissed, but in fact, that was exactly what I'd been thinking. "No, it didn't," I replied. "If I had been more careful, I wouldn't have gotten in such a situation in the first place."

The cats remained silent at my answer. Finally, they crawled into my lap and started to purr. "Don't let Evan

make you lose yourself, Artie," Cat Number Two said. "You're a giving, affectionate person."

"Maybe naïve and foolish," I told it with a sigh, "and horny."

"That, too," Cat Number One added. "But it's normal at your age. Mistakes are normal. It's good you're learning from them, but be careful to learn the right lesson."

What was that supposed to mean? I didn't know and I was afraid to ask. In the end, I just lay there, with the cats next to me, until I fell asleep once again.

\* \* \* \*

The dinner went well, better than I expected. My mother and father took everything in stride. Apparently, they were used to Tristan's oddities and were not judgmental people in the first place.

The staff was ecstatic. For all Giles' claims of the difficulty of finding food, they had prepared a feast worthy of a king. Everything tasted delicious, from the herbed halibut and roasted pig, to the creamy pecan pies and my favorite, the decadent chocolate cake. My father ended up getting a little buzzed from the wine placed within our reach, and he somehow managed to make a tiny skull out of

his piece of the cake. My mother and I burst into laughter, knowing his propensity for pranks, and even the ghosts seemed amused.

After the delicious feast, we retreated to Tristan's study to have our long overdue discussion over the situation with the hateful high wizard. I tried not to reveal too much about what happened to me while in Capital, but I suspected I failed abysmally. Just great. Well, Tristan would've found out sooner or later, and I'd already established I wanted to slow down and focus on my professional life, so it didn't matter. Still, having to discuss the experience in front of him was very humiliating. My parents' presence didn't help, as the very thought of discussing anything remotely sexual with them terrified me. On the whole, it turned out quite a traumatizing experience.

The hardest thing was, however, going over Brew's death. "Do you think it's possible he may have been killed?" I asked.

Tristan considered the question for a few moments. "I have not talked to him so far and his spirit has not called out to mine. I did not want to disturb his rest. If you like, I could try to find out."

I shook my head. "No, if he is with the Goddess, there is no sense in it. He is happy now."

"But with him gone, what will the Assembly do?"

my father asked. "They cannot hold the Beckoning ritual on their own."

"I suspect they may begin a proverbial witch hunt. If they couldn't get Artie's power, they'll want to steal the magic of other witches."

"Is that possible?" I asked, horrified.

"Many went into hiding after the accusations, and some left the country altogether. But it's definitely not impossible."

"He might have started doing so already before you showed up, son," my father offered. The slight drunkenness seemed to have vanished completely. "With everything going on, I wouldn't be surprised."

I felt a little sick to the stomach at the thought and had the sudden urge to run away. This whole thing scared me. It seemed too big for me, a good witch with erratic powers. I'd have liked to retreat to the bedroom and cuddle up in bed like I used to as a child. Often times, when I remembered my parents abandoned me, when I faced my own inability to cast spells, I'd fall into a fit of depression. Brew would bring me sweet juice to coax me out of bed and wipe my frightened tears. Only, Brew wasn't there any more. I had to stand on my own two feet now.

And then, Tristan was by my side, discreetly supporting me, as if sensing my distress. It was very likely



he did, indeed, know. He always seemed to see straight through me, an unsettling thought on its own. Even so, I appreciated the fact that he allowed me my dignity and didn't emphasize my weakness in front of my parents.

"Artie," he said all of a sudden. "I may require your assistance with something."

"Me?" I asked, surprised. I didn't know what Tristan could possibly ask of me. If he needed a witch, my mother was there. I doubted my father's power would be of any use to him, not that I'd inherited much of it. "What can I do?"

Tristan forcibly turned me around and met my eyes. "We need to find out where Evan is now and if he's already gone to hunt another witch. I can trace him using the power of the spirits, but I need to get a lock on him first."

"And how can I help?" I asked, already fearing the reply.

"You're the one who had contact with him last. I'd try with the cats, but they are spirits in themselves, and they do not register magical signatures as we do. I wish there were some other way..."

I shrugged and waved away his apology. "I'll do it. How hard can it be?"

How hard can it be? Famous last words. I should've known this entire endeavor would imply something humiliating and/or scary for me. I never learned my lesson.

Of course, I didn't realize this until Tristan led me to his Summoning Room. I could hear the capitalization of the letters when he spoke the words, and I wondered what was so special about it. The Summoning Room turned out to be a dark laboratory built in the most peculiar style I'd ever seen. It was fashioned to look like a perfect circle. Everything was polished black marble, and in the middle, a sparkling pentagram lay, as if waiting for us.

Tristan didn't provide chairs or anything comfortable to sit on. He gestured for me to sit in the center of the pentagram as he drew another circle around it and began to set runes around us. He placed his staff on the floor next to me, although as far as I could tell, he didn't need it for this particular ritual.

With every step he took, pedestals and shelves emerged from nowhere, offering him the tools he needed. When Tristan finished with each task, the shelf and item in question vanished as if they'd never been there in the first place.

I kept my mouth shut, knowing he needed to concentrate. Even if I was no necromancer, I recognized a protection rite when I saw one. This was meant to shield us if anything went wrong and if the spirits summoned got violent.

At last, Tristan finished with his preparations and

joined me in the middle of the pentagram. He sat down next to me, and much to my surprise, pulled me onto his lap. His cock ended up nudging against my crease and I had to bite my lip to suppress a whimper. To a certain extent, it also made me uncomfortable. I felt so out of it and confused, and while I wanted Tristan to touch me, I didn't know if I could handle it—physically or emotionally. And what about Tristan? What game was the necromancer playing at?

"We have to be close for this to work and you to be safe," Tristan murmured.

"Oh, all right," I said, half relieved, and half disappointed. So it was for the ritual. "There's one more thing," Tristan continued. "We need to have a strong bond to resist the spiritual assault."

My eyes widened. He couldn't possibly mean what I thought he meant. As much as I liked Tristan, I refused to fuck within view of any libidinous ghosts. "A kiss, or a drop of blood would suffice," Tristan hastened to clarify. "Your choice."

Was it my imagination or had his voice gone a bit husky? I certainly didn't imagine the hard cock against my ass. "The kiss," I said. Who in his right mind would give up a drop of his or her blood? Blood wasn't as powerful as sexual liquids in magical transfer, but it got close. And besides, kissing Tristan would be no hardship. When

Tristan talked to me like that, I couldn't even remember why I'd want to refuse.

When our lips met, I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. He demanded entrance and I gladly gave it, surrendering to his onslaught. Tristan took possession of my mouth with a hunger that belied the supposed reason for our kiss. He explored every inch of my palate, massaging my tongue with his own. There was so much longing and lust in the kiss that I forgot my entire reason for being there. Tristan seemed to be everywhere, his scent, his taste, his warm, large hands. I wanted to be in his arms forever.

All too soon, we were forced to break apart. I melted against him and cuddled close. He was so much taller than me that even in our position, I could rest my head on his shoulder.

"Ready?" he asked gently.

At first, I wasn't sure what he meant, but then, I realized where we were and why we'd come here in the first place. Strangely, it didn't bother me anymore. Perhaps Tristan had insisted on a brief bonding for this exact reason, to calm me down and allow my mind to clear of all fears.

In his embrace, I felt safe, so I nodded. "I'm ready."

"Just think back to when you last saw Evan," Tristan said. "We'd be able to grasp the magical signature

best from that moment."

I shuddered involuntarily, but forced myself to recall my last encounter with *him*. I doubted I'd ever forget it. If not for my familiars, I'd have been raped.

The thought brought back the horrid scene so vividly that I almost screamed. Thankfully, Tristan's strength and scent anchored me, reminding me I'd gotten through the nightmare unscathed.

I gritted my teeth and focused to help Tristan out. Remembering the nauseating moments was necessary, and I'd do it, damn it. Besides, why did I insist on making such a big production out of this? Tristan had died, for crying out loud. And if he was, indeed, a friend of my grandfather, he'd lost many to death and old age as well. I doubted my experience could compare to that in any way.

Tristan held me even tighter, whispering softly in my ear. His regret and the desire to stop this were almost tangible. For some reason, it made things easier, and I let the memories flow through me.

They were painful and humiliating, but it hurt more when I belatedly realized Tristan could see them as well. Yet again, I'd been an utter fool. I would have fled in the acknowledgement of my shame, but the pentagram began to glow around us. Tristan's body went rigid in my arms and I soon understood why.

Ghostly forms began to appear all around us, floating throughout the room in an apparently random formation, but trapping us nonetheless. These were not like the good, honest souls of the servants. I could sense hostility coming from them, and most of it seemed to be directed at me.

"Why do you call us here, Necromancer?" a woman with milky eyes said. She didn't look frightening per se, and if not for the great hole in her chest, I might have thought she were a real person. Then again, her solidity seemed to vary, much like that of the other ghosts in the room. "What do you want with us?"

Tristan pushed me off his lap and got to his feet to face her. I followed his example, his height already intimidating enough without me being draped at his feet. I leaned against Tristan, but he paid me no heed. "You know what I want," he told the woman.

"Ah, yes, the high wizard," a man said. He had a big slash across his neck, making it clear his death had been violent as well. "You can count on me for finding him, but not if the boy is involved."

A brief pause followed, and the man's words finally registered in my brain. The boy was me. "I'm sorry?" I said, unable to keep my irritation from my voice. "Did I do something wrong?"

"Oh, so he speaks," another man said. "Interesting. And my friend here is right. We all felt your desire for Evan."

"That's a lie!" I shouted. "It was a memory of what happened in the past, before he... hurt me."

"And yet, we sensed the lust," the first man said. "Care to explain that?"

The word lust brought to mind the incredible kiss I had shared with Tristan. I blushed once again, and not even the knowledge the ghosts might notice could drive the embarrassment and incipient arousal away.

It wasn't that I wanted to jump Tristan right then and there. I didn't, of course. For all my lustful ways, I held no love for voyeurism. And yet, I couldn't help but lean just a tiny bit closer, telling myself that surely, no one would realize it.

Of course, since my life always sucked, the ghosts did notice. "Oh... so that's how it is..." The woman tsked. "Necromancer, you should know better than to get involved with mortals, especially with ones who are so fickle."

Under normal circumstances, I'd have said I wasn't fickle. Truth be told, she hit the nail on the head. First, I'd rashly wanted to jump into the arms of the high wizard. I almost laughed to myself. For all his wisdom, my foe hadn't been very smart. Why had he gone to all that

trouble? He could've simply asked and I'd have melted in his arms, convinced of his affection for me.

Then, I fell for Tristan, and ached for the man so badly I braved an army of ghosts. Everything about Tristan drove me crazy with desire. What did I want?

Thankfully, Tristan changed the subject. "Mind your own business," he said. "Do you or do you not want revenge on Evan?"

The woman's expression changed. "We would not have come otherwise."

"Revenge?" I murmured softly, hoping not to fuck up again. The ghosts already disliked me without seeing me as a meddler.

"Evan has more skeletons in his closet than I do," Tristan whispered back.

It would have been funny if not for the seriousness of the situation. These people could have been killed by *him*. The chances of my grandfather's death not being an accident seemed to be increasing by the second.

"Do you really think it's that easy?" the first man said. "Even if you do find the wizard, he'd just kill you too, and maybe even steal your power."

I found myself replying to the ghost's disheartening statement. "If we don't try, we don't know if we can do it or not. Besides, we have you guys."



"Presumptuous little mortal, aren't you?" another ghost said.

The first woman—who seemed a leader of sorts—waved her hand and said, "Fine. Have it your way. We'll help you find Evan, but from then on, you're on your own."

A hum began to sound in the room, chilling me to the bone. "Cover your ears," Tristan said. I gladly obeyed. I'd done my part, and with luck, we'd find our enemy and get rid of him.

A peculiar light invaded the Summoning Room, eerie, dark rays that held no warmth. They formed a pool on the floor in front of the pentagram. It slowly morphed into a portal-like opening, more of a window through space, rather than an actual gateway.

Through it, I could see the high wizard. He was no longer in his tower, or in any familiar setting for that matter. Our suspicions were confirmed when we saw the high wizard sitting on a blanket with a pretty girl, much like he had with me a few days back. I wanted to throw up. Just how many people had the man fooled?

I distantly heard Tristan say he'd caught the wizard's signature, and the image began to dwindle. "Remember, Necromancer," the woman said. "You owe us, and we want our vengeance."

Tristan didn't answer, but I guessed they must have

made a pact of sorts. It unsettled me, as I didn't want anything to happen to Tristan. This was so very odd. I oscillated between sorrow for Brew's death, disgust at the high wizard, desire for Tristan, fear at everything going on around me, and above all, uncertainty at my own feelings.

Thankfully, the room soon cleared of the ghostly presences and I could fall apart without the spirits looming over me. I collapsed to my knees, leaning against Tristan's thighs. I was so angry, so frustrated with myself. Why couldn't I figure out an emotion I wanted to feel, and stick to it?

Tristan knelt next to me, and lifted my chin to look into my eyes. "Artie?" he asked. He seemed puzzled. "What's wrong? I thought you were crying."

I wished I could cry. That would mean I'd decided on sadness, which would be better than this eternal uncertainty. "I'm fine," I lied. "Just a bit confused."

Tristan's green eyes lit up with comprehension. "Come on. Let's get you to your room. This place must be scary for you with all the ghosts running around."

I refrained from pointing out the entire house was invaded by ghosts. I liked Tristan's idea very much as, in spite of my restful prolonged nap, I suddenly felt very tired. I didn't know if I'd be able to sleep, but maybe I could talk to the cats and ask their opinion on this.

Thankfully, Tristan didn't try to carry me. It might have been a bit difficult, given that his hands were busy with his staff – but it was far better this way. I could focus on the physical action and put my thoughts in some order. If he said anything else, I thought I might burst into either hysterical laughter or depressed tears. Knowing me, I wouldn't be able to decide, and do both.

Tristan led me to my room and smiled at me as I opened the door. "Remember," he said, "we are allowed to make mistakes. Don't let it trouble you so much."

I nodded, appreciating the warmth in his voice more than the actual words. "Let me know when we're going after the high wizard."

He didn't reply, and I had a sneaking suspicion I knew why. "Tristan?"

It was perhaps, the first time I'd called him by his name, and he seemed taken aback. In a flash, however, he recovered. "Your parents are coming with me, but you should stay here. This place is shielded by my power, and that of the ghosts. Evan can never find you."

I frowned at him. "You speak as if you doubt our success."

His green eyes went so dark they seemed almost black. "I've gone against him before. He is resilient." He took a step toward me and cupped my cheek. "I've always

hated him and everything he represents. I never thought I could loathe him more I already did, but somehow I do, because he stole your naiveté."

He was clearly not referring to the physical aspect, but to my heart, to the wound the wizard had inflicted upon me. Why was I being so stupid? In this, there could be no hesitation. Perhaps I did not feel ready for the emotions Tristan awoke in me, but I refused to let him go out there and fight the high wizard on his own, especially since this was my battle.

"That's all well and good," I answered, "but I'm still going with you. Deal with it."

Tristan's soft gaze turned into a near-glower. "Don't make me force you to stay behind, Artie. I'll do it if it's for your safety."

He seemed serious and I knew I had to pull out the big guns. I smiled widely at Tristan, all the while clenching my fist so hard it hurt. It made my eyes tear up, creating a devastating effect. "Tristan..." I said. "I just want to help."

Tristan swallowed, his adam's apple bobbing in a hypnotizing motion. It was the only sign he gave that my smile even affected him at all. "You're a very wicked boy," he said. "You shouldn't blackmail people into getting what you want."

He moved faster than I could even see, and pushed

me in the room, following me inside. The door closed as I landed on my behind on the floor. "How much restraint do you think I have?" Tristan asked. I opened my mouth to reply, but he lifted his hand. "Never mind, don't answer that. I've wanted you since I first saw you, Artie, and I know you're attracted to me."

My heart began to race as I wondered what he'd say next. "But I know we can never be together. I made a mistake in kissing you, yes, but you're not making things easier either."

I didn't know which of his self-serving statements I should address first. I chose the one that hurt me most. "What do you mean about never being together? Now may not be a good time, but in the future."

Tristan shook his head with a vehemence I couldn't hope to fight against. "No. Now, please, stay here and let us deal with this. I promise you Evan will be defeated."

I didn't even have the time to get up before Tristan left the room. I just sat there on my rump, wide-eyed, as the man rushed out, the door closing behind him. The click of a lock told me he was very serious about keeping me safe, even against my will. While I appreciated the thought—it was definitely better than my last crush who'd tried to rape me—I disliked the forcefulness and presumptuousness of it. Besides, I wanted a piece of the high wizard too, and more

importantly, I couldn't let all my loved ones go into danger while I stayed behind.

"A stubborn one, the Necromancer," Cat Number One said behind me.

My familiars! Oh, bless their sweet feline hearts. Perhaps they would be able to lend me a proverbial paw. Turning toward my cats, I gave them my best pleading look. "I can't let them go alone. Please, guys, help me out."

I could swear Cat Number One frowned. "Actually, I'm not a guy. I'm a girl."

I almost squeaked at the suddenness of the statement. "You didn't know that, did you?" Cat Number One said icily.

"In case you're wondering," Cat Number Two continued, "I'm a boy. But you probably don't care. You never bothered to ask so far."

Of course, they were right. I'd basically lived with them for five decades. How could I possibly miss their gender?

Truth be told, it had never even occurred to me such a thing was important. Usually, the cats came and went when they needed to breed—or so I'd always assumed. I hadn't spotted any significant differences between the two of them, and never had the interest, or courage, to actually check. The timbre of their voices was also similar, leaning

toward the androgynous, rather than to a particular gender.

Of course, once they'd become my familiars, I should have at least found out that much, and maybe given them names rather than continuously calling them Cat Number One and Number Two.

Still, this was a particularly bad time for the familiars to get angry with me on account of my unfeeling behavior toward them. "I'm sorry," I said. "I am. I promise I'll make it up to you once everything is better."

I must've failed in sounding genuinely repentant, as the cats just gave me disgruntled looks. "The thing is, Artie," Cat Number One said, "we have a little problem. Through Tristan's power, this place is at the boundary between life and death, between the real and spiritual world. As it is now, we can't use our powers or else we might fall into the spirit realm and never be able to come back."

"Also," Cat Number Two grumbled, "we can't get out of here either."

Ah, so that was the problem. No wonder they were grumpy. At this time of the year, they should have been out making little kittens. I wondered why they didn't hook up with each other if they were of opposite sexes. Perhaps they were siblings. I'd have to remember to ask later, when the cats weren't so angry with me. If I reminded them of my

lack of knowledge on their identities and lives, they might even refuse to help, in whatever way they could.

"So now what?" I asked them.

"Now, we wait."



## Chapter Six

I sat on the bed, absently staring at the walls, counting the seconds and minutes. Knights-in-shining-armor were highly overrated. Who wanted to just wait for the handsome hero to come to their rescue? Sure, I was all for having him in my bed, but the chances of that happening seemed to be increasingly slim. My hero had locked me up in his castle, as if I were some princess, and run off to face the high wizard with no regard to my feelings.

The cats were useless, hissing at each other as if they were enemies. I concluded they were, indeed, siblings, as it would more than explain the not-so-gentle scratching Cat Number One inflicted on Cat Number Two. Her pheromones didn't actually affect Cat Number Two, but he still sulked, obviously wishing he were any other place but here. Perhaps he wanted to find another kitty in heat, one not related to him.

Unfortunately, their bad mood left me out of options. I'd tried to break the lock only to have the ghostly butler float in and scold me. "Now, young sir," he'd said. "Please, be obedient. Master Tristan knows what he's doing."

This left me under the watchful eyes of a mansion full of ghosts, with only two horny, angry cats for company. I would've been pissed off had I not been so worried.

What was going on with Tristan and my parents now? Had they found the high wizard? If so, had they managed to defeat him? Goddess, I hoped Tristan came back alive from this little expedition so I could kill him myself.

"Young sir!" An alarmed voice said all of a sudden.

Giles shot through the floor, and even the cats stopped their angry hissing.

Giles was panting, and I had the distant thought that such a reaction made no sense for a ghost. What could have made the butler so upset?

"Young sir," Giles said again, "you need to take refuge."

"Take refuge?" I repeated in confusion. "Why?"

"The high wizard has somehow managed to break through our defenses," Giles said, eyes wild. "We must get you out of here."

The entire point of me staying behind had been to ensure my safety. According to Tristan, the power of the ghosts could keep *him* at bay. Apparently, he'd been wrong.

As I got up from the bed, I felt a tinge of panic. This

time, the cats would not be able to use their power of familiars, and my family and Tristan were not here. The ghosts represented my only defense, but if Giles was panicking, they wouldn't be much help.

I ruthlessly quenched the feeling of fear. This would be my chance, the chance to give the damn wizard a lesson he'd never forget. In the process, I might teach Tristan a thing or two about how to save the day.

"Don't worry," I told Giles. "We'll be fine."

Giles didn't look convinced, and I didn't blame him. A part of me screamed I was a fool and my pathetic witch powers could in no way compare to the high wizard's. But I refused to cower and hide in front of *him*. After what he'd done to me, he needed to pay.

"Where is he now?" I asked the ghostly butler, proud when my voice didn't shake.

"Just outside. He somehow summoned a portal that brought him into Master's lands. For now, he cannot enter the mansion, but it is only a matter of time. He seems to have boosted his abilities somehow."

Memories of the brief vision in Tristan's Summoning Room came to me. Tristan must've been unable to find the man in time. What had become of him and my parents? Stupid necromancer. Just like Brew. No wonder they'd been such good friends.

I pushed aside the glum thoughts. The fact that the wizard was here didn't mean my loved ones had come to harm. I had to take heart and protect Tristan's home, my familiars, and of course, myself.

My cats were staring through Giles straight at me. Apparently, ghosts got even more transparent when nervous. Ignoring Giles's panicked expression—probably not a very polite thing to do—I grinned at my familiars. "Ready to kick some ass?"

I could swear my cats grinned back. I could almost feel their excitement, their desire to sink their claws into something. "Oh, definitely, Artie. We'll show the bastard not to mess with us," Cat Number One said, lifting its—her—paw in a gesture that reminded me of my mother's manifesto display of dedication.

Cat Number Two gave me a slightly placid but wicked look, the gaze I identified as spelling trouble. "Count on me," he said.

Feeling slightly better, I began to prepare a battle plan with my trusty feline sidekicks. Eventually, the ghosts also joined in. Even if they didn't seem very optimistic, at least they calmed down and solidified a bit. I felt relieved since the entire see-through thing was beginning to creep me out.

Still, they were trying to be strong for me and I

appreciated it. After all, the high wizard couldn't touch them with the power of the elements, and even witchcraft could not harm them. I, on the other hand, was a different story.

And then, the rumble of thunder sounded outside, and a lightning flash illuminated the sky. The house began to shake, making a ghostly servant girl let out a scared whimper. "Calm yourself," Giles said. "We must keep up the shields."

Gradually, the servants vanished, taking up stations to defend the mansion. If the spell protecting the mansion was breached, we'd go to plan B, and attack.

Honestly, it would have been much easier if my ghostly friends had been soldiers in their past lives, but they were simple folk, maids and stable boys who both feared and worshipped magic. Some things never changed, even after death. I had no idea what kind of damage they would've been able to cause, but it didn't matter. They were pure souls who didn't know how to hurt others, and I liked them that way. The most I could ask of them was to use their spiritual abilities to stall.

But there were others who had a bone to pick with the high wizard. Using the Summoning Room without Tristan there was risky. I didn't have necromantic powers and I couldn't control the ghosts. But I doubted Tristan

would show up in time to save my ass, and I had no intention of unleashing the avenging spirits.

Together with Giles, I sneaked into the Summoning Room. It looked even eerier without Tristan by my side, and I swallowed around the sudden knot in my throat. If we ever got out of this thing, I'd somehow fix things with Tristan and try to start over. Life was too short to waste on fears and regrets.

These thoughts gave me courage to browse around the scary, circular chamber. Giles helped me. He seemed fearful and reluctant, but he acknowledged the necessity of what I had in mind. Following my brief memories of Tristan's preparations and Giles's indications, I managed to create a pentagram—quite adequately drawn if I do say so myself—with a circle that ended up a bit oval around it. I'd have tried to fix it, but we didn't have the time.

"Okay, Giles," I told the ghostly butler. "You get to summon the ghosts now. Do you remember what you're supposed to do?"

Giles nodded. "I've seen and heard Master do it many times."

I took a deep breath and smiled at him. "Here we go."

Our plan was crazy and foolhardy at best. We would allow the high wizard to enter the mansion. From

there, it would be my job to draw him to the Summoning Room, while the cats and the servants distracted his entourage.

It didn't take long for the high wizard to make his appearance. The house shook with the power of his attacks, until finally, the shield around it collapsed. I waited at the top of the staircase, trying to hang on to my last threads of confidence. We could do this. Together, we'd manage.

My cats took position in the foyer, ready to pounce like the beasts they were. And then the front door burst open, and in walked the high wizard, followed by his sister and a few other wizards I recognized from the palace. I distantly noted the little girl wasn't with them and I hoped the high wizard had not hurt her.

I waved at the group, smiling as if I were welcoming a friend, not meeting an enemy. "It's nice to see you all so well," I said. "I do love surprise visits."

The high wizard arched a brow at me. "Thank you for the warm welcome. I have to admit, I'm surprised at the company you keep these days."

For the first time, I realized the wizard's entourage looked a little worse for wear. Tristan must have set some traps to guard the mansion. I suppressed a smirk of satisfaction and replied, "Funny thing. I think the quality of my companions has improved greatly."

The high wizard chuckled at my jab. "You would. You never were very smart."

It was an absurd statement, since he knew very little of me to judge. Nevertheless, it irked me to have him make fun of me, more so since I myself acknowledged the stupidity of my own actions where he'd been involved.

"Enough of this," Bitchy-Blonde said. Her staff began to glow, and I ducked just in time to avoid a powerful fire bolt.

"That was just mean," I threw at them. "I'm going to have to leave you now." I sneered at the high wizard. "Come on, find me if you can."

I took off down the corridor. I heard footsteps rush after me, and surmised the wizards were chasing me. Then, I registered a warrior-like yowl, and I dared to look back. Through the corner of my eye, I caught sight of my familiars attacking the wizards. It was almost entertaining to see Cat Number One embed her claws in Bitchy-Blonde's back, but I didn't have time to enjoy it.

Chandeliers fell as I ran through the house, furniture launching itself at the intruders. In this way, Will and the others somehow distracted Sparkly-Boy and the rest of their group. The high wizard, however, would not be thwarted so easily. He unerringly dodged the projectiles, following me with an almost relentless focus.



I didn't know how I succeeded in reaching the Summoning Room unscathed. The important thing was that I did, and I burst inside the previously prepared chamber panting hard. I took position at the other side of the room. The high wizard sauntered inside, looking completely unruffled and unfazed at my efforts to escape him.

"Well, well. Here you are, Artie."

I frowned at him. "Don't call me Artie. Only my friends get to call me that." Never mind I'd been the one to tell him to use the small version of my name, because the long one sounded irritating and formal. The circumstances had changed since then.

The high wizard sighed theatrically and placed a hand against his chest. "You wound me greatly."

I didn't reply, unwilling to continue the charade. I'd gotten him here, so we could go ahead and trap him with the magic of the Summoning Room. Ever so slowly, I took a few steps backwards until my back hit the rounded wall. The wizard echoed my motions. He didn't seem to notice the pentagram and runes in the room, or any of the other preparations we'd made in advance.

At last, I was satisfied my enemy had reached the optimal position for the spell to work. "Come on, Giles," I whispered, knowing the butler could hear me. "Now."

Nothing. The wizard took one step closer and I

became increasingly alarmed. "Any moment now, Giles."

Still nothing. "Giles!" I shouted, uncaring He would hear me. "Where are you?"

There was no reply. The high wizard gave me a bemused look. "Did you really think a mere butler could create a complicated necromantic spell? It's a good thing you have looks, because you're definitely not too endowed in the brains department."

Drat. I was on my own. I had no chance to beat *him* in a fair fight, so I lunged for the door. Something—I hated to accept it as fear—gave me a speed I'd never had before and I managed to reach my target.

I ran outside the Summoning Room, narrowly avoiding a lightning bolt. As I sped down the corridors, I wondered where the others ended up. If the plan failed so abysmally, were my familiars safe? What about the ghosts? The high wizard seemed to know quite a lot about Tristan's household, so I wouldn't be surprised if his lackeys somehow hurt the gentle souls as well.

To my utter terror, the mansion seemed to have emptied of all allies. As much as I tried to find a trace of my friends, I could not. Instead, I ran into the group of wizards who had clearly recovered from our previous attack. This didn't seem very promising, indeed.

Anger mixed with fear and frustration inside me. I

wished I knew how I'd turned my cats into dragons. I wished I was not a good witch, and I could blast these intruders all the way to their stupid, shabby castle. Instead, I found myself forced to retrace my steps and go back the way I'd come.

Naturally, this led my path to cross with the high wizard. I rushed in the first room I could find, knowing I could no longer delay the confrontation. Perhaps I'd at least be able to find some sort of weapon conveniently lying around. It was doubtful, but I didn't have any other ideas.

As I took a quick look around, I registered the fact that I'd invaded some sort of bedroom. The deep tones of dark blue and black dominating the walls and furniture spoke of a masculine inhabitant, and I hoped that would mean I'd find a sword or halberd around. No luck. There were a couple of expensive-looking ornaments, but I quickly discarded them as useless for what I had in mind.

At last, my eyes fell on a sort of spherical lamp. It seemed bulkier than the rest of the items. Indeed, as I picked it up, I judged it heavy enough to cause quite a bump on the hardest of skulls.

Outside, I heard the high wizard mutter curses and spells. I wondered why he didn't just come in. I hadn't experienced any trouble. Perhaps Tristan had a spell on the room. It made sense, although I still didn't understand how

I'd managed to bypass it.

It occurred to me that while the wizard was busy trying to dispel Tristan's wards, I could maybe take him by surprise with my impromptu weapon. This plan would probably fail, just like my first one, but it beat waiting around like a scared rabbit. After all, my enemy would manage to make his way through eventually. As much as I wanted to believe Tristan would come back by then, I could not miss this chance.

Perhaps it was recklessness, or perhaps the stupidity the wizard pointed out just minutes before. Regardless of the reason, I gripped the handle of my heavy lamp and made my way to the door. Before I could change my mind, I opened the door and faced the high wizard dead on.

For a brief moment, I experienced an almost surreal sensation, like a deer staring at a wolf, knowing its life would end in mere moments. I couldn't even explain what made me move. It was as if my body acted without me consciously ordering it to.

The entire thing lasted maybe a second, and it was strangely anticlimactic. The high wizard had the time to open his eyes and give me a confused look. In a flash, I bonked him in the head with my weapon. The sphere-shaped lamp broke and the man fell into a crumpled heap to the floor.

Of course, I had never expected to defeat *him* so easily. I half-thought my attack would just bounce off him, and he'd give me a bored glance like my familiars used to when I screamed at them to stop scratching the furniture. He didn't look very bored. In fact, he looked unconscious. See, here was another thing the books always got wrong. I could be a hero without having a remarkable power.

I realized then the remnants of what I'd previously identified as a lamp glowed softly. Several things happened at the same time, and I found myself propelled against the wall by an unknown force.

All color seemed to drain out of the world, sucked into my impromptu weapon. My own vision darkened, until I could no longer see anything of the real world. The room vanished, as did the high wizard's still form. I floated in a shapeless void, unable to move a muscle. But it seemed warm, and smelled like freshly cut grass.

Was I dead? I didn't feel dead, or even afraid. Of course, I'd never been at the border between realms before, and maybe I just didn't grasp the seriousness of the situation. How could I? This place seemed so safe, so familiar and comfortable. Perhaps the Goddess was finally calling me to her.

But as much as I wanted to obey Her will, I couldn't find it in my heart to accept my demise. And then, a voice

spoke to me, filling the nothingness with a familiar feel. "Come now, Artie. It's not your time yet."

I would say it wasn't. I didn't want to die. Hell, I was still a virgin, and, in my opinion, no one deserved to die before experiencing at least once the pleasures of the flesh. Of course, it would be ironic for me of all people to become a martyr when I hated death so much—perhaps even more ironic than me liking a necromancer.

"Hang in there," the voice said again. "People still need you. You have to go back."

Somehow, I managed to clear my vision and I found myself surrounded by blinding white-green. It was a peculiar, indescribable shade, almost translucent, and I could not have defined it to save my life. (Poor choice of words, isn't it?)

But the thing shocking me most was that in front of me hovered Brew, or at least so it seemed. He no longer looked like the shabby old man I'd known for almost my whole life. Instead, his entire being shone so bright it would've made my eyes hurt had I been in mortal form. The handful of times I'd seen Brew's power at work never prepared me for this, not that it mattered. Joy and sorrow swelled inside me at the sight of my beloved grandfather.

Without hesitation, I pounced and wrapped my arms around Brew in a tight embrace. Ours had never been a

relationship of open affection, especially after I stopped being a child and became a man. In that moment, though, I realized just how much I'd missed him. It would be so easy to let go now. I'd be safe at Brew's side, and never have to suffer from heartbreak again.

Brew held me, murmuring soft words of comfort, as he once did when my parents had first left. Not a man of many words, my grandfather, but he did know exactly what to say or do at the right moment.

I managed to break away from him when I realized the true extent of my predicament, and of this chance. I could move again, and, judging by Brew's words from before, I could still go back. Did I really want to? This was so confusing,

"Of course you want to," Brew replied, having obviously guessed my thoughts. "You're just afraid. But Tristan is a good man. You needn't fear betrayal."

Tristan. If only I'd met him before... But he didn't want me. He'd said so himself. Maybe he would miss me, and so would my parents, but they'd get over it eventually.

"They don't need me," I told Brew, "not really."

Brew's expression darkened, his eyes turning stormy. I knew that look well, since I'd been its recipient many times in the past, when I'd said or done something particularly stupid. "Stop feeling sorry for yourself," Brew

snapped at me. "You don't want to die. Besides, everyone's rooting for you and Tristan. You can't disappoint them."

"Everyone?" I asked in confusion.

"Surely you can feel them," Brew said with a frown. "They're watching you now, holding their breaths to see what you will do. And they won't accept any more whining from their hero, no matter how cute he is."

I had no idea what he was referring to, although now that he mentioned it, I did have a feeling of being watched. It should have felt invasive, but instead, it encouraged me. Perhaps I really could make things work with Tristan.

"That's my boy," Brew said. "Now go on. Go back. And in the future, avoid using necromantic spheres as weapons."

So the monstrous lamp had been a necromantic sphere. No wonder I'd suffered from such a shock. Its power must have propelled me into this realm. Perhaps I'd have been trapped here forever, if not for Brew.

I wondered what happened to the high wizard. When I'd hit him with the sphere, he'd immediately collapsed. If his experience resembled my own in any way, he'd meet some of his dead acquaintances. Thinking back to Tristan's ritual in the Summoning Room, I shuddered.

But with the memory of the high wizard came



something else, a desperate thought plaguing me. "Did he kill you?" I asked, even now reluctant to say the wizard's name.

Brew gave me a sheepish, yet disgruntled, look, and yet again, I was transported to the many times I'd seen that expression in the past. "I'm afraid it was just the éclair," Brew said with a sigh. "I wish I could've been more heroic, but alas, in the end, I succumbed to my own appetites."

I didn't know if I felt relieved or put out at his reply. It made me glad the wizard had not tortured Brew, and my grandfather's death had been more peaceful. But deep feelings of guilt returned with Brew's answer, and I once more wished I'd never left the tower that day.

"It was meant to be," Brew said with a smile. "I am happy here, and you will be happy and safe with Tristan. Now go."

Brew's words gave me focus, and I reached out, knowing I still had many things to do in my own realm. Once I'd made that decision, I began to drift away from my grandfather. I threw another look toward Brew, who ushered me forward with a familiar frown.

I felt a tinge of regret at having to abandon him here, but he was right. We belonged to different worlds now. Perhaps I could convince Tristan to arrange another meeting for us.

Of course, I was operating on the assumption Tristan would come back to me, that he hadn't been injured while trying to catch the high wizard, or rather, Evan. I smiled glumly to myself. I no longer feared Evan, but what would be the price for that accomplishment?

I found it quite easy to navigate through the previously shapeless void. It took the form of a pathway, leading me back. I advanced more and more, eager to return to Tristan's side. Even as I trusted Brew's words, panic returned with a vengeance.

All of a sudden, the weird path in front of me vanished. A strong, powerful presence pulled me forward, propelling me through the ethereal world of the spirits back into my own.

The first thing I felt as I came to was the sensation of whiskers tickling my face. Warm hands caressed my chest, and I thought I could hear a woman crying in the background. "I think he's recovering," Cat Number One said.

A yowl of protest followed as Cat Number One was not-so-gently removed from my proximity. Strong arms wrapped themselves around me, lifting me up. The embrace surrounded me in the intoxicating scent of dark spice, and I cracked my eyes open, immediately recognizing the fragrance. "Tristan?" I asked.

"Hush," my man said. "You're safe now."

Just like that, the remaining tension drained out of me. Tristan's voice sounded so soothing and affectionate I fell just a little more for him. As my vision cleared, my eyes met his concerned ones, and I offered him a smile. "Thanks."

The sobbing around me stopped, just as I recognized its source as my mother. "Artie? Oh, my baby, are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Mom," I answered, reluctant to break away from Tristan, but worried about my parents, regardless.

I had so many questions, mainly revolving around where the hell they'd been when the wizards began their assault on the mansion. But it didn't seem to matter anymore. I just wanted to rest in a warm bed, preferably with Tristan by my side. I wanted to make sure he was safe and alive and nothing had happened to him while we'd been apart.

My dad joined us and scanned my face, as if searching for a trace of deception. "We were so worried," he said.

"I'm really all right," I assured him. I did my best to sound as strong as possible, but I didn't think I succeeded.

"I'm taking Artie to his room to rest," Tristan

declared. "Can you wrap things up around here?"

I thought I sensed a touch of tension between my dad and Tristan. Thankfully, my familiars intervened. "We can handle it," Cat Number Two said. He leaped on my mother's shoulder and gave me a mysterious look. "Go on."

I could have kissed my familiar, but of course, I didn't. Other than the fact that I might get a mouthful of fur, I could think of better uses for my lips, and I intended to set my plan into action as soon as I got Tristan alone.

As Tristan carried me out of the room, it occurred to me I couldn't see Evan anywhere. I was reluctant to bring it up, though. I felt too comfortable in Tristan's embrace, and I wanted to revel in his warmth and manly scent. I could not, however, forget about my ghostly helpers. They'd been kind to me and I hoped no harm had come to them. Then there was the witch Tristan had gone to save. Had they failed?

As I mused over how to broach the topic, we finally got to my assigned bedroom. Tristan opened the door with astounding ease, given that he still carried me. He entered the chamber and placed me on the soft mattress, each motion seemingly designed not to jostle my body.

Once he had me safe on the bed, he took my shoes off and began to tuck me in. I stopped him while he attempted to cover me with the warm quilt. "Where are

Giles, Will, and the others?" I asked. "Are they all right?"

Tristan arched a brow at me, looking almost amused. "They're ghosts, Artie. What can possibly happen to them?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. I just wanted to make sure. I didn't want them to get hurt."

"You're too nice," Tristan's expression darkened. "I entrusted your care to Giles, and this is what happened. I'm very disappointed."

I shook my head. "Don't be. I asked too much of them."

I should never have expected Giles to know how to create necromantic magic. Sure, he was a ghost, but in the end, he didn't have Tristan's magical expertise. I wasn't sure he even had untapped magic like me. It had been a stupid thing to base my entire plan on, just like Evan said.

"You could have died," Tristan answered, no longer even making the attempt to sound aloof. If anything, his gaze turned almost wild and desperate, and I realized how stupid and shallow I'd been to even consider leaving him and my parents behind. And how could I have ever thought his eyes looked like Evan's? They were nothing alike. "I could've lost you."

My vision clouded with unshed tears, and I angrily wiped at my eyes. I would not cry. I had no reason to. I was

safe, and the most handsome man on this world wanted me. I saw his need so clearly in his eyes, so raw it almost hurt.

The experience I'd just been through had taught me one thing; I needed to live in the moment. Caution was indicated at all times, but I could not allow it to turn into unreasonable fear. I could not let the shadow of doubt cloud everything. I'd been given a second chance at life and love, and would grab it with both hands.

Without giving Tristan a chance to make his escape once again, I pulled him on top of me and crushed my lips to his. If our first kiss had been initiated by him in such peculiar circumstances, this one turned out entirely different. I knew little of kissing, but I followed my instincts and molded my mouth to his. At first, he seemed surprised, but he soon got over it. I almost feared he would pull away, but instead, he gave as good as he got, tasting me, exploring me, just like I'd dreamed.

Regretfully, we had to break away to breathe, but I took advantage of the moment to say what I'd been meaning to through my kisses. "But I didn't die," I told him as our lips parted. "I won't ever leave you."

It was a daring promise to make. We'd only just met, and I knew so little of him. But I couldn't bring myself to care. Tristan would not take advantage of my youth and yes, my foolishness, for his own personal gain. Even if

Brew hadn't given me his advice, I had always known it, in my heart.

"You can't say that," Tristan said, voice strained and gruff. "It's too much."

True enough, I had no idea what tomorrow would bring, but over-thinking never brought me anything good. Clearly enough, Tristan was afraid of his loved ones dying. I couldn't do anything about it, but we'd deal with it when the time came.

"I know I'm selfish," I whispered to him, "but we can't throw this away. Anything can happen. For all we know, the world could end today. The only thing we can do is enjoy and take advantage of the time we do have together."

He didn't seem convinced by my argument, but neither did it leave him completely unmoved. I wrapped my legs around his waist, effectively stopping him from moving away. "Please, Tristan. We can't know if this is going to work until we try. And if we don't make the attempt, we'll always wonder 'what if'."

Just to make sure I had him, I began to rub against him in slow, languorous motions. I could tell Tristan's mind still feared getting too attached to me, but his body was very willing.

He groaned, grinding his cock against me. "We

really shouldn't do this," he said. But his actions contradicted his words, and, in the end, he stopped fighting it. He attacked my mouth once more, tasting me greedily, like a starved man would a feast.

I lost myself in his explorations, allowing him to take what he wanted. His hands worked at my clothing, deftly getting rid of my shirt and breeches. I found that once he got over his initial misgivings, Tristan was quite relentless and quick in eliminating the barrier of material between us. Before long, he had me naked and wanting under him.

This time, I didn't feel any of the reluctance or apprehension I'd experienced before. Tristan's kisses and touches drove all thought out of my head. My entire world became Tristan and my desire to be one with him.

I registered Tristan rummaging through the nightstand. His height made it possible for him to reach into the drawer and keep touching me at the same time. I had no idea how he managed to keep his motions coordinated, but I couldn't care less. I just wanted more.

When his slick finger invaded my ass, I pushed back, loving the feel of the slight penetration. Of course, I'd played with myself in the past, but my own explorations couldn't even begin to compare what I now felt at Tristan's talented touch. The digit unerringly found my special spot,



and sparks exploded in my vision. Oh yes. Just like that.

Another finger joined the first, expertly stretching my channel. I moaned and writhed, quickly losing touch with reality. Tristan's mouth traveled all over my body, his tongue dipping in the hollow of my neck. He had me bent over at the middle, and it should have been at least a bit uncomfortable. But I loved every moment of it, every teasing nip and touch.

When his mouth enclosed around my nipple, I arched against him, crying out. My cock throbbed, aching with the need to come. I was so close, so very close. But Tristan held me down, torturing me with his sensual exploration. All the while, he continued to prepare me, thrusting his fingers in and out of my willing body.

I grew hoarse from all the moaning and begging I did. At last, he deemed me ready. He retracted his fingers and steadied my trembling body against him. His cock nudged against my hole, and I whimpered, aching to feel him inside.

Tristan didn't leave me waiting. One sure push and he entered me. I actually felt the head pop through as he breached me. For the first time I realized that my ass might not be able to take all he intended to put inside it.

I didn't know what I'd expected, but it definitely hadn't been this. I'd heard stories that actual intercourse

between two males hurt, but I had disregarded them as false, or at least exaggerations. Tristan's cock split me in two, burning me from the inside out. I thought that surely I could not take more, but he kept going, until he was fully inside me. He stilled, our bodies flush against each other. I clung to him, doing my best to relax when all I wanted was to push him away and hide in the bathroom.

But Tristan's green eyes held me captive, and as he leaned over me and pressed his lips to mine, my body melted. He moved in shallow thrusts in and out of me. The pain began to ebb, turning into mere discomfort. And then, with each motion, the burn turned into pleasure. Tristan's cock hit my hot spot, and my eyes widened in shock. If his fingers felt good, this was just amazing.

Gradually, Tristan increased the strength and speed of his thrusts. The agony I'd experienced just seconds ago turned into ecstasy, and I pushed back against him, aching for a deeper penetration. Tristan pounded into me, his hard cock filling me to the brink. Sweat dripped down his forehead. Dark, wet hair clung to his skin. He was so handsome, and I wanted this moment to last forever.

And then, Tristan's lips twisted in an almost-grimace, and his eyes widened. It was as if something snapped inside him, and I almost heard the remnants of his control shatter. From that moment, everything became a

fuzzy blur of sensation. He simply owned me, invading my every pore, taking control of each and every part of my body. I measured every breath against his, and I forgot my own name in the onslaught of passion.

With Tristan branding me as his, I could no longer hold back. My orgasm swept over me like a tidal wave, and I actually blacked out for a second, unable to withstand that much pleasure. Then I distantly felt Tristan push inside me one last time and fill my channel with his seed. At the knowledge of my new lover's climax, the fire of bliss burned, sizzling over my skin. His energy flowed through me, and my own magic entwined with his. The extent of the connection surprised me, reaching to my very soul, prolonging the ecstasy.

I didn't know how long I just rode the afterglow, but when I finally cracked my eyes open, I saw Tristan looming over me. He caressed my cheek and gave me a concerned look. "You all right?" he asked breathlessly.

I blinked away the dizziness and, after a few seconds, managed to answer. "Let me get back to you on that, after I sleep for like, a week."

\* \* \* \*

Naturally, I didn't get to sleep a week. In fact, I

didn't get to sleep an hour, because my cats promptly invaded our oasis of hot lovin', demanding attention from me and claiming they could no longer keep the house from crumbling on top of us. Of course, part of it was all drama, but I did admit the necessity of us getting our asses out of bed and into the real world.

I decided the first item on the order of business would be to find out what happened to Evan. Even if I loathed the man, I didn't want to have my hands stained with his blood, and I didn't feel comfortable with the idea I'd killed him.

Tristan clarified the situation for me as we struggled to clean up and pull our clothes. "I ordered Evan to be placed in the Summoning Room," he said. "The shattering of my necromantic sphere propelled his spirit somewhere between this world and the next, and I don't want him haunting my home."

My eyes widened. "So is he dead?" I asked, unable to keep the tremor from my voice.

"Comatose," Tristan replied. "I'm going to try and find a permanent solution for his situation." Tristan paused, as if searching for words. He separated the distance between us and wrapped his arms around me. "Goddess, Artie, do you have any idea how lucky you were? The sphere should have broken you as well."

I cuddled against his chest, absently thinking that at this rate, we would never get to deal with the aftermath of the wizards' attack. "Well, it's partially your fault," I said. "You shouldn't leave items like that lying around."

I was only teasing, trying to skirt around the subject and make light of the situation. I realized all too well what could have happened, but I didn't want Tristan to dwell on it too much. This wasn't my idea of post-coital conversation, but at least I felt better about the entire thing. In fact, I now understood the importance of choosing one's partner well and realized how lucky I'd been. I even considered convincing Tristan in a quickie.

Tristan, however, took my words quite seriously. He broke away from me and met my eyes, giving me a serious look. "The room was warded, Artie," he answered. "I have no idea how you got inside."

Well, that confirmed my guess on why Evan had been unable to follow me. Perhaps if I hadn't decided to open the door and bang Evan in the head, Tristan would have just come in and wiped the floor with the wizard. Yes, I was reevaluating the idea of knight in shining armor. Who wouldn't?

I still wondered how I'd managed to enter Tristan's bedroom if it had been shielded. As if guessing my dilemma, my impertinent familiars piped in, "Clearly, Artie

is immune to your spells, either because of the way you feel about him or due to the ritual you performed together," Cat Number Two said matter-of-factly.

I could swear Tristan blushed, and I myself felt a little fuzzy on the inside knowing his magic recognized mine. It was clearly a sign we were meant to be. Well, that, and my ass still hurt from the way Tristan had ridden me.

And then, a loud screech sounded from somewhere outside the room, echoing against the walls with an eerie intensity. My pink bubble of love burst, and I was propelled back into reality. No, we did not have time for a quickie. Bleh.

Strangely enough, I felt no fear at the source of the sound. Tristan was by my side, and he'd protect me if I ran into trouble. Judging by what he'd mentioned before, I guessed this had to do with Evan's spirit in some way. We needed to deal with that sooner or later, and I preferred to do it sooner. I wondered what Tristan had in mind. Would he want to return Evan to the world of the living or permanently send him to the realm of the dead? A difficult choice, indeed.

We rushed to finish our tasks and get dressed. In spite of our effort to make haste, we ended up making out at one point, and it took the combined effort of my familiars to draw us apart. Damn cats. I really needed to

remember to cut their claws one of these days.

On a positive note, their intervention gave us a bit of focus, and we soon found ourselves heading toward the Summoning Room. From Tristan's arms, Cat Number One explained, "So far, Evan's spirit is contained, but we need a specialist."

Cat Number Two kneaded my shirt and began to purr. I stroked him, finding comfort in the soothing noise, especially when another screech came from in front of us. "You should stay outside, Artie," Tristan said as we reached the Summoning Room. "I don't want you in any sort of danger."

I smiled at my knight. Even if he wanted to protect me, I still wasn't a damsel in distress, and I wanted to help out, in whatever way I could. If nothing else, my presence would distract Evan, and would make it easier for Tristan to deal with him.

"No can do," I told Tristan. "I'm coming with you."

I almost wanted to remind him the last time he'd tried to leave me behind hadn't worked out so well, but that would be a low blow. I didn't blame Tristan for what had happened, but he just might blame himself. In the end, he must have decided it was safe enough for me to join him in the Summoning Room, as he nodded. He handed Cat Number One to me and stood with only his staff in his

hand. I didn't know where the magical item had even come from, since Tristan didn't have it when we'd come here. One of his ghostly underlings must have dropped it off. Or perhaps even the familiars. At this point, I didn't put anything beyond them.

"If things get messy or in any way out of control," Tristan said. "I want you to get out of there."

He wasn't looking at me, I realized, but at my familiars. Apparently, their duty would be to guard my reckless ass and keep me from doing anything stupid. I could deal with that. At this point, I had no qualms in accepting it was only by sheer, ridiculous luck—maybe inherited from my father's side of the family—that I'd stumbled through life all these years without being hurt. And so, even if Tristan hadn't directed his order to me, I nodded obediently.

Tristan looked at me with suspicion, as if judging the extent of the mischief I could get into with him there. Another howl from inside made us both cringe and increased the urgency of us—or rather, Tristan—dealing with the issue once and for all.

Tristan let out a heartfelt sigh and opened the door to the Summoning Room. I walked behind him, tentatively stepping inside and scanning the room for any foes. I spotted Evan's body, situated in the middle of the



pentagram I'd previously drawn for the purpose of enlisting some additional ghostly assistance. Over the prone form, a transparent high wizard hovered, glaring at us. "You!" he said. "What in the world did you do to me? Fix this at once!"

"You're not in any position to give orders," Tristan answered.

From my arms, the cats purred louder, as if in satisfaction. "You did well, Artie," Cat Number One said. "For now, he can't escape the confinement here, although there's no telling how long it'll last."

Evan didn't understand that, and I almost wished he did, just for the laughs. It was cruel of me to think so, but seeing him soar helplessly in place somehow became a suitable punishment.

Evan continued to spout various insults at us, while Tristan seemed to consider our options. After a few seconds, he proceeded to find some items I'd never seen before. Apparently, my pentagram had been good enough to hold Evan, but the rest of what I'd done was useless.

I didn't ask what Tristan had planned. Judging by his calm yet glum expression, I already knew. He couldn't in good conscience just exorcise Evan's spirit and be done with it. That would be as close to murder as a necromancer could get. Besides, Evan still had accounts to settle with the

living. I hadn't forgotten about the way he'd taken over and abused his position of high wizard.

I had no idea at what point Evan realized what Tristan was doing and to what extent he understood Tristan's spells. Regardless, the wizard ceased his jeering. "You'll never get rid of me, you know," he said.

"We'll see about that," Tristan replied.

Tristan began to chant under his voice. I took a few steps back, clutching my cats to my chest harder than was probably necessary. The sight of the entire thing took my breath away, and not in a good way. My blood froze in my veins as I watched Evan's spirit clash against an invisible barrier, wiggle around, and wail like a mad thing. Dark power swirled around Tristan, his skin glowing now, translucent, almost like a ghost's. I regretted not staying outside as my lover had wanted me to. The first time Tristan used the Summoning Room hadn't been like this. Was this a more demanding ritual?

At last, Evan slipped back into his body. He didn't open his eyes or move in any way, but he seemed to regain a bit of color. Tristan returned to normal, and I immediately rushed toward him. Dumping the cats unceremoniously, I hugged him and panicked when I realized how cold he felt to the touch. "Are you all right?" I asked him, rubbing his hands between mine and completely ignoring the way I

jostled his staff.

Tristan smiled at me, his eyes full of the warmth his body lacked. "I'm perfect."

I wanted to say that, yes, he was, especially for me. He didn't mean it as a boast, though, but as assurance. I realized how he must've felt when I'd been out for the count. Sure, I'd been worried while he'd been away, but it was only now that I truly grasped how much I could lose, and how much he meant to me.

"Aww, isn't that sweet?" a raspy voice spoke from behind me. "You're going to make me hurl."

I turned toward Evan and glared at him. The man couldn't even stand and he still managed to be snarky. What a jerk. I wondered how we were going to keep him from escaping and causing further trouble.

Tristan didn't seem to have the same problem as me. "Don't worry. You have other things to worry about."

As if on cue, Evan turned a little green around the gills. "W-What did you do to me?" he asked in a choked voice.

"Nothing much," Tristan replied, sounding amused. "Just bound your spirit to my will. You'll find it quite difficult to use your magic until... well, until I say so."

"Tristan..." Evan whispered my lover's name almost pleadingly. "You have no idea what you've done."

Without my magic, I'll..."

"You'll age," Tristan cut him off. "Yes, I know. I'm afraid you should have thought about the possible consequences when you invaded my home."

Evan tried to struggle to his feet, obviously intending to protest further. Tristan muttered an incantation and the high wizard fell back against the floor. "Just stay there and don't cause trouble. I might reconsider."

Tristan took turned around and walked toward the exit. I followed, leaving the very distraught Evan behind.

Once the door to the Summoning Room closed behind us, I immediately pulled Tristan toward my room and privacy. I had so many questions. I gathered that the ritual he'd just gone through had been very difficult and dangerous. Otherwise, he couldn't have possibly bound Evan's powers. I wanted to kick his ass for risking himself like that. Nothing was more important than his health and wellbeing, nothing.

"Artie?" he asked, voice undeniably tired now. "What are you doing?"

"You need to get some rest. You've strained yourself too much." I would bet my familiars he'd also fought the other wizards and sent them away. Not even a powerful necromancer like Tristan could go on using such spells over and over.

Perhaps I didn't know a lot about necromancy, but I did realize death magic was very dangerous and difficult to manipulate. The thought that I could lose Tristan scared me out of my mind.

Tristan didn't say anything else. He allowed me to fuss over him, much like he had done earlier with me. A few minutes later, in my room, he fell asleep in my arms. As I heard his breath even out, I wondered how much death Tristan had seen in his life, and how he'd managed to stay sane through it all. Perhaps my knight in shining armor needed a knight of his own.

## Chapter Seven

The next morning, we woke up to yet another taxing predicament. And no, I wasn't referring to the hard-on that naturally demanded attention. Rather, it became quite obvious that, in my concern about Tristan, I'd forgotten several important issues. I still had no clue what had become of the witch whom the high wizard seduced. And of course, another important item on the agenda—the very reason I'd met Evan in the first place—was the stupid ritual of the Beckoning.

By now, the time for it must've passed, and without Evan or me around, it couldn't have taken place. In spite of my resentment toward the wizards, the people were not to blame for this conflict. They'd been manipulated and taken the words of their powerful rulers at face value. I didn't like it, but neither could I abandon them to starvation.

We gathered around in the main foyer, at which point I noticed that, miraculously, Tristan's door had been fixed, showing no sign of ever being broken. Tristan himself looked completely unruffled, as if the binding of Evan's powers the day before had never happened. I kept my mouth shut, deciding it would be best to choose my battles. I'd have preferred it if Tristan took it easy for a

while, but I could hardly lecture him when I just as stubbornly insisted on accompanying him all over the place.

Tristan led us—me, my cats, and my parents—into the dining room. We sat around the table, whereupon the ghosts flitted about, bringing trays laden with food. This time, the meal was not a comfortable affair. I barely touched my breakfast, too busy worrying about what would happen.

The only ones who didn't seem very concerned were my cats, who'd been given a separate position under the table. From time to time, I slipped them bits of food, their purrs of contentment casting away the ominous feeling.

"We found Evan's witch yesterday," Tristan began. "Fortunately—or unfortunately—we were wrong about the circumstances. It would seem she was well aware of Evan's goals, and she intended to help him."

"An evil witch?" I asked in horror. "But why? I don't understand."

Tristan sighed. "Insofar as I could tell, they were using each other. She's young and doesn't realize how much she was risking."

"She seemed familiar to me," my mother added in an almost absent voice. "I wonder where I've seen her

before."

When she said nothing else, Tristan continued, "For now, she's locked in her tower, but it won't hold her."

"Excellent," I muttered under my breath. Just when I thought we'd gotten rid of one enemy, another popped up. "So now what?"

"We have to hurry and complete the ritual of the Beckoning," my mother said. "The rest can wait, but the Goddess and the earth cannot."

I agreed. However, it was easier said than done. We'd have to sneak back into the castle. The centerpiece of the magic required for the Beckoning lay within Capital. Built in ancient times, it stood at the base of the Goddess's altar there. The power of the Goddess could only be awakened through filtering the life force of wizards and witches into the stone.

"And then, I'll have a little chat with the king," Tristan said. "This has taken far too long, and I won't stand for it." He turned to my father and said, "Angus, I'm afraid we're going to need some additional assistance. I could overpower the wizards here, but I'm not sure I can do it there, even with Moira and you by my side."

I was pissed off he hadn't included me on his list of allies, but then again, my powers were unreliable at best. My father nodded. "I figured that would be the case. I



contacted my closest friends and they're meeting us at Brennan's tower."

That startled me a little, but then I recalled Brew had also been a part of the movement. It would be nice to see the tower again. Had it only been a few days since I'd been living there? It seemed so long ago.

The discussion extended over how we'd proceed to enter the palace and when my father would come into play. Apparently, the witches would be required to burst into Capital and create a distraction from the stealthier part of the operation.

"And what do I do?" I asked, when I realized no one would tell me anything.

"You and I will be dealing with the actual ritual," my mother said in her 'duh' voice. "If it's possible, we'll get more witches to assist us, but I think we can do it by ourselves."

As everyone turned toward me, I swallowed nervously. My mother seemed to trust my power, but I didn't, not at all. And the ritual of Beckoning was incredibly demanding and complicated. How could we possibly do it on our own?

"Don't worry so much, Artie," Tristan said with a smile. "You'll do great."

Tristan's words shocked me so much I couldn't even

bring myself to doubt anymore. He reached for my hand and squeezed it, and love swelled inside me. Yes, I could do this, if not for myself or the rest of the witches, for Tristan, and his trust in me.

There was one more thing on my mind, and I wanted to get the question out before I lost my nerve. "What about Evan?"

"He won't try to escape," Tristan said, voice certain. "By now, he'll be feeling the shock of magic withdrawal. If he's aging, his one chance is either to hope I die, or get me to unbind him. Both are very difficult things to achieve."

I gathered it wasn't easy to kill a necromancer, and for that, I felt thankful. Still, I wanted to get this dreadful chore over with so Tristan and I could spend some time together as a real couple.

We didn't linger much longer over breakfast after the conversation ended. There were too many preparations to make and too little time to arrange everything. Thankfully, with the help of the ghostly servants, we had everything ready in an hour or so. We took our magical arsenal, additional runes and books, as well as some foodstuffs. Tristan filled his own bag with miscellanea I couldn't hope to know the purpose of.

At last, Tristan summoned a portal for us. Beyond the water-like mirror, I could see Brew's tower, and some

people gathered around it. We didn't delay in rushing through the gateway. Passing through Tristan's portal turned out to be different than using the normal wizard ones. It seemed as if we crossed through the border between the realm of the dead and that of the living. Seconds later, when we emerged in the painfully familiar forest, I felt chilled to the bone.

My mother and father greeted everyone, while I struggled to match the faces to my vague recollection of the names. I'd met these people, but I couldn't for the life of me make small talk or act friendly. Tristan distracted them and kept me away from all the hustle and bustle. I was quite happy to be on my own and with my cats.

Everyone readied their brooms, and I realized they intended to fly into Capital. I didn't enjoy the thought at all, especially given what had happen upon my last attempt. "Don't look so glum," my mother soothed me. "You're with me and Tristan. He'll help us out and open a portal."

Right. So the witches led by my father were supposed to distract the guards, while we sneaked inside and summoned the Goddess.

My dad joined one of the older, lighter witches on her broom. He looked a bit wary as he positioned himself over the broomstick. I hid a smile as I realized I'd inherited my lack of grace from my leprechaun father. "Just hang on

tight, honey," my mom shouted. "You'll get there in no time."

As the witch took off, my dad looked as green as a four-leaf clover. We watched them as they disappeared in the distance, and my amusement vanished upon seeing my mother's tense posture. She was divided between her child, her husband, and her duty. How could she even bear it? I didn't think I could ever be so brave.

I remembered her pained eyes when we'd first been reunited, and I finally understood the extent of her sacrifice. Once this was all over, we'd fix things. We'd become a family once again.

At last, my lover opened another portal, this time to Capital. We waited in silence until we saw the castle shake through the watery window. That was our cue. I took Tristan's and my mother's hands and we walked inside, with the cats trotting behind us.

This time, the chill didn't feel so terrible, and I had no trouble pushing it away. We emerged on the other side, into an unfamiliar-looking corridor. There didn't seem to be anyone around, although in the distance, I could hear shouts and crashes. Through the windows, I saw the sky cloud ominously. That wasn't good. We needed to make haste and help out our witch friends.

Tristan wordlessly ushered us forward, and I

followed behind him, my mind swirling with confusion. I'd never been in this place. My knowledge of Capital was sketchy at best. Tristan and my mother seemed to know their way around, and I, as always, felt young and stupid. I remembered Tristan's words from the dining room and told myself to man up. I could do this. I could.

All too soon, we reached our destination. We entered a corridor that, unlike the previous one, wasn't so abandoned and unguarded. In fact, the area teemed with soldiers, and I understood the wizards had been prepared for us making an appearance. Great. Just great.

Tristan seemed absolutely unfazed by this development. He nodded at me and my mother, signaling for us to stay back. After that, he turned and muttered a brief spell under his breath. I could swear his skin turned transparent, and I couldn't suppress a small cry. I'd given us away.

As it turned out, my panicked whimper wasn't important. Tristan took a few steps forward, straight into the line of sight of the guards, and without even bothering to take cover. I wanted to scream at him, to tell him to dodge or come back, but Cat Number One interfered. "Don't worry," she said. "He can handle it."

"They're not wizards," Cat Number Two added soothingly. "It'll be easy."

True enough, now that my familiar mentioned it, it was true the guards weren't wizards. Well, I did spot Sparkly-Boy among them, but most of those there were simple folk.

Even if our country was called Wizard's Realm, few people were actually wizards. Most had magical powers to a certain extent, but nothing very fearsome. They could occasionally create a potion or, if they were more talented, be healers. Others could tend fields with more success. The real wizards, like Brew and Evan, were scattered all around, with the highest concentration here, in Capital.

The main threat would, therefore, be Sparkly-Boy. Tristan took him out first, before our enemies could even get over their shock. One muttered spell and the man fell, engulfed in what looked like a cloud of darkness.

The soldiers shouted and raised their weapons. Arrows flew, and I almost launched myself at my lover to make him dodge. My mother physically held me back, and I watched the projectiles pass straight through Tristan. It was as if he'd turned into something else, a ghost like Giles and Will. He seemed to have no flesh, and my knees buckled at the sight. What in the world was going on?

A dark chill fell over the corridor, and the avalanche of arrows stopped as abruptly as it began. A few seconds later, Tristan called out to us, "Come on. It's safe now."

We, or rather my mother did, and she pulled me along. I found with dismay I had trouble focusing and even walking. I hyperventilated, simply too panicked to think straight. I didn't know how I even managed to reach Tristan, but I ended up in his arms, his strong, hard body against my own.

"It's okay, Artie," he said as he cupped my cheek. "It's just a spell."

Goddess be blessed, he was no longer transparent. His hand felt cold, I noted, but very palpable. Just a spell. Right.

He smiled at me, and I punched him in the face. Well, not so much a punch, as a sort-of-slap. Not even in my pissed off state could I make myself harm that handsome face. "Next time, let me know, damn it," I growled at him. I broke away from the embrace and glared at him. How could he not have figured out I wouldn't much care for seeing my lover as a ghost?

To be honest, I wanted to kiss him, to hold him, but I felt furious and yes, still frightened. And yet, when Tristan offered me a grin, I melted. "Noted," he replied, in a cheekily sheepish manner.

I wanted to hang on to him and never let go. His eyes were so beautiful and deep I couldn't even remember why I'd been pissed off.

My familiars broke the moment. "We should get a move on," Cat Number Two said.

I blinked, flushing when I realized I'd totally zoned out and yet again forgotten about what we needed to do. I felt a bit better when I realized Tristan was in the same situation. My mother chose not to draw attention to our little mistake. With just a slight delay, we headed toward our target once more.

As we ran, I took a look around, only to spot the guards lying on the floor, pale and unconscious. From this distance, I couldn't tell if they were dead or not, but I somehow doubted Tristan killed them just like that. When we got closer, I realized they were, indeed, still breathing. I wondered how long Tristan's spell would keep them immobilized. One thing was certain, we didn't have much time.

The altar room wasn't very far away, and we entered it without further trouble. To my shock and glee, I realized it had already been prepared, probably by the wizards. Excellent. Now we wouldn't have to delay in order to make all the arrangements. Sometimes, being a witch was very tiresome.

Tristan let out a thoughtful 'hmm'. My mother seemed tense, and even my cats became wary. Now that I thought about it, this did indeed look suspicious—far too



convenient for it to be some sort of happy coincidence.

Tristan took a few cautious steps forward and glanced around. Nothing happened, and we breathed a sigh of relief. He turned to us, obviously intending to tell us we should get busy. He never got the chance.

A spell struck him, and he staggered, falling toward me. This time, I really did scream. Five basilisks emerged out of nowhere and lunged at us. My familiars hissed, somehow managing to turn into dragons once more. They stood up to the basilisks, defending us. I was too confused and worried about Tristan to even move.

Tristan recovered easier than I did. He shot to his feet, dark magic swirling around him menacingly. The only sign he'd been in any way affected by the spell was the fact that he leaned against his staff.

A woman stepped out of the shadows, and I easily identified her as Evan's girlfriend from the image he'd seen her in. Tristan sent a magical bolt toward her, but it collided with some sort of shield and fizzled out. Clearly, she'd been smarter than the wizards and made preparations in advance.

She smirked at Tristan, then disregarded him altogether. For some reason, her glance focused on me. "We haven't met," she told me sweetly. "I'm Tara. And you, if I'm not mistaken, are Arturus."

I made an unintelligent 'uh' sound. What did she want with me? How could I possibly be in any way important?

"Artie," Cat Number One told me, "get out of here."

Somewhere to my cats' right, the centerpiece stone shone, as if waiting for us. We couldn't just run away, could we? The castle was shaking now, reminding me of the battle that took place outside. We couldn't disappoint our friends.

And yet, as I watched the basilisks circle around my cat-dragons, I knew we had no other choice. Any moment now, the wizards would send reinforcements. Even if Tristan could break through Tara's shield, the delay might be the death of us all.

As if to confirm my glum prediction, a basilisk cornered Cat Number One, assaulting her ruthlessly. At the last moment, Cat Number Two intercepted the creature. Cat Number One managed to dodge the second attack, but Number Two wasn't so lucky. The basilisk hit him in the back and he went flying, straight into the wall.

For a few seconds, I waited for him to move, to give any sign of being alive, but he didn't. Instead, he just shifted into his normal, cat form. With a cry of dismay, I rushed toward my familiar. They were powerful, my friends, but they were also outnumbered. And now, Cat

Number Two was injured.

I knelt next to the unconscious black cat and cradled him to my chest. The ritual would have to wait. My loved ones were more important. I threw a look toward Tristan and saw him deep in a battle of spells with Tara. My mother was assisting Cat Number One with the basilisks, but our situation looked bleak.

Outside, thunder sounded. "Come on," I shouted. "We need to go."

No way was I leaving without them. "You go on," my mother said. She added something else, but I couldn't hear it. The stone wall burst with a deafening boom, sending rock flying all over the place.

I had the presence of mind to shelter Cat Number Two's body from the flying debris. Since we were further away—or perhaps because of my own stupid luck—the rocky projectiles missed us entirely. Not so Tristan, my mother, Cat Number One and even some of the basilisks. Watching my loved ones collapse under the stone almost stopped my heart.

Tara also looked a little messed up, but not as affected as the others. The angle of the blow must've allowed her to escape the main blast. She summoned a spell, obviously intending to finish Tristan off now that he was down.

"Don't!" I cried out. "Please, stop."

I hated asking her for anything. Clearly, she was a bitch, and the chance of her actually agreeing to anything I had to say was slim. She ignored me. A green-black light appeared in her hand, and thorny vines extended from her broomstick.

All that I could think about was to stop her from hurting Tristan. I found myself muttering a spell I had no idea when I'd learned. The vines withered and died, helplessly disintegrating before they could reach Tristan or my mother.

Tara directed a glare at me. "As expected," she said between gritted teeth. "Evan was right about one thing. You are powerful."

She'd discussed me with Evan? My skin crawled at the thought. At least because of my spell, she abandoned her goal of wiping out Tristan. Of course, that put me in a precarious position, but I'd worry about it later.

Later turned out to be one second after. A spell from Tara had me trapped in a strong hold of the vines. I did my best to protect my familiar from the thorny grip, desperately trying to remember how I'd managed to wither the plant before.

All my life, I'd had this problem. I couldn't cast spells as well as other witches, although my mother and

Brew always claimed I had the potential. Mentally resigning myself to being captured, I focused on the one spell I did know. I sent positive energy into my familiar's body, energizing him, healing the wounds. This time, my magic seemed to work, and more powerfully than before. Cat Number Two twitched slightly in my arms. He let out a soft mewl, which I interpreted as a good sign. Tara just laughed, obviously having no intention of healing her own familiars. Whatever she did have planned couldn't be good for me.

And then, the thundering of footsteps sounded from the corridor. Tara looked up, her expression twisting into a mask of hatred. To my shock, Bitchy-Blonde entered the room and immediately pointed her staff at Tara. "You!" she said. "What in the world are you doing here?"

"Deirdre..." Tara began, "how nice of you to join us."

For all her pleasant words, Tara didn't seem very happy to see Bitchy-Blonde—now identified as Deirdre. In fact, she was already backing off, muttering a spell under her breath. As she walked, the vines dragged me toward her and away from the incoming wizards. I started to struggle once again. I preferred to take my chances with Deirdre and her lackeys than become Tara's experiment.

As Deirdre followed us inside, the dust began to

clear and I saw Tristan and my mother get up again. "Artie!" they called out at the same time.

I couldn't suppress a sigh of relief. They were all right. Cat Number One stirred as well, looking dizzy, but otherwise okay. I sent a prayer of thanks to the Goddess, grateful She'd kept them safe from death. At the same time, I noted the Goddess's altar, and the centerpiece, had survived. It shouldn't have surprised me, but I still felt relieved at the sight.

Deirdre's appearance must have caused Tara to feel outnumbered. A portal appeared behind us, strangely summoned by her. How did she do that? As a rule, witches used broomsticks for moving around, while wizards made use of gateways. Both had advantages and disadvantages, but in this case, a portal clearly represented the best way out. As a witch, though, she shouldn't have had the ability to create one.

Tristan ran toward me, but he didn't reach us in time. Tara pulled me through the portal, and we emerged through the other side in an ominous, eerie room. Behind us were two of the basilisks. The rest must have been unable to recover from the blast.

Still in the hold of the damn vines, I did manage to get a look out the window. I could see the sky, although the light of the afternoon sun seemed filtered by a sort of dark

veil. I easily figured out this was the evil witch's tower. Strangely enough, I didn't panic. Instead, I sighed in disgust. Why did I always get kidnapped or attacked? Did I have some sort of sign on me that said 'abuse me'? I didn't think so. I was just a normal young man, well, as normal as a half-leprechaun, half-witch could ever be.

To top it off, the damn tower looked exactly like my idea of an evil witch's lair, complete with cobwebs, burning dark candles, skulls, and a bubbling cauldron with some sort of eerie concoction in it. Sure, Brew owned a cauldron as well, yet another remnant of my mother's experimental days, but it was nothing like this one.

I opened my mouth to tell her she didn't have a chance of getting away with it, but closed it once more when I realized what a cliché I'd be spouting. I had enough evil geniuses in my life without turning into yet another ridiculous prisoner. My boyfriend would kick her ass, yes, but pointing it out wouldn't help one bit.

In truth, Tristan hadn't been very successful in taking care of me, but really, it wasn't his fault. Circumstances were terrible for both of us. I had no doubt that he'd come for me. Still, my knight would have his hands full at Capital. I needed to come up with a plan to escape this situation on my own.

Well, I had taken care of Evan, in a stupid way, but

I had done it. I'd also managed to wither Tara's vines once. Maybe I could make it work this time as well. Now if I could just figure out how.

At least I still had one ally with me. Cat Number Two had recovered and he became alert once more. "Artie, what mess did you get us into this time?" he meowed-whispered.

"It wasn't my fault," I replied. "This damn witch kidnapped us, remember?"

For the moment, Tara wasn't paying attention to us. She'd decided to look at the injuries of her remaining basilisks. I took advantage of her inattention and sneaked Cat Number Two through the vines. He gave me a look of regret before running off to hide under a creepy-looking chair. His black fur helped because he blended in with the scenery.

That turned out to be quite lucky, because seconds after my familiar vanished behind the ghastly furniture, Tara returned to me. "Now... what will I ever do with you?"

I almost rolled my eyes, but the vines tightened around me, the thorns painfully digging into my skin and keeping me from expressing amusement in any way. "Thanks to you and your little friends, I didn't get the chance to finish the ritual," she said, "but we'll have to do it



here."

Finish the ritual? Surely she hadn't intended to summon the Goddess herself. Not only would it have been very difficult on her own, but she also didn't seem the type to worry about the environment and the people.

I waited for her to elaborate, already realizing she was one of those people who just loved to boast about their accomplishments. Predictably she went on to explain, "If I channel the power of the Beckoning and reverse it, I'd be able to draw tremendous energies within me. I'd be unstoppable."

I never did understand why evil folk tended to detail their plan in front of their helpless prisoner. Didn't it make more sense to just hurry up and finish whatever they intended to do? I couldn't for the life of me figure it out, but Tara behaved exactly like that. To complete the picture, she just needed to rub her hands together in evil glee while cackling. Scratch that. She was doing it now. "And now I have you, beautiful, naïve, powerful Arturus Penedental. It worked out better than I expected. I don't even need the centerpiece at the castle anymore. I'll just use you."

Was she really that stupid? If I'd been powerful, I could have escaped her hold. Still, I needed to stop her. If she succeeded in her plan, the entire country, or perhaps even the world, would just wither and die. That, and I

would wither with it. I had no desire to become a sacrifice for an evil witch. This was why the centerpiece existed in the first place, to focus the magic of witches and wizards for the purpose of the ritual.

If Tara had me as a vessel to focus and reverse her magic, she might not need it, just like she'd said. That would, however, imply some very complicated spells. Did she have such a thing here, or could I hope for a delay?

As if guessing my train of thought, Tara headed toward a heavy black bookcase. After a bit of rummaging, she extracted a grimoire and set it on the table. She leafed through the book and then stopped at a certain page. "Aha!" she said victoriously. "Here you are."

Great. Just great. She'd found what she'd been looking for. No matter. I could still get out of this. I ignored her chuckling in favor of taking a look around once more. Was there anything I could use to escape my predicament? I spotted several objects that would have made promising weapons if only I hadn't been tied up.

A black fur ball drew my attention from the sharp daggers that may or may not have been ornamental. Cat Number Two must have decided he could not leave me to suffer in Tara's clutches. As much as I appreciated such a noble intent, I didn't want him to recklessly lose his life. He was still recovering from his injury and wouldn't be able to

transform into his more powerful, dragon form.

I struggled to find some sort of way of way to warn him, but then I realized something was not right about Cat Number Two. In fact, the approaching familiar was not Cat Number Two at all. It made its way to Tara, rubbing against the witch's legs.

Tara didn't seem to appreciate the cat's affection. She pushed it away with a sharp motion of her leg. "Leave me alone, stupid animal," she grumbled.

The familiar let out a mournful mewl, and my heart constricted at the sight. Apparently, black cats were out of style for evil witches. The latest fashion must include basilisks, gorgons, and Goddess only knew what else.

The sounds coming from her cat seemed to annoy Tara, and she snapped the grimoire closed. "Damn creature," she snarled. The vines extended toward the cat, but with an angry yowl, it scampered off, hiding someplace in the dark maze of the witch's tower.

"Good riddance," Tara muttered.

This was my chance. I had to get rid of my vegetation chains while Tara focused on her cat. I put all the energy I had into remembering the magic I'd used back in Capital, willing the vines to wither and go away.

The spell must have registered only the latter part of my intention, as the vines began to thrash wildly around

me. The thorns scratched at my exposed skin, and I had the foresight to close my eyes before I accidentally blinded myself. I took a few steps back, hoping at least my attempt at spell casting had given me a small out.

I had no luck. The wild vines grabbed me again, tightening around me. I heard Tara screech, and dared to crack my eyes open. In that exact moment, one of the enchanted plants swirled over Tara's table, sweeping over the grimoire and sending it flying out the window.

"No!" Tara shouted. The guilty vine withered almost instantly, but it was too late. The book was gone.

Fuming, Tara made her way to me and slapped me hard across the face. "Stupid boy. Do you think that's going to change anything?"

I smirked at her and licked my bloody lip. At least my spell worked in one way. I had no intention of telling her the book hadn't been my target if she didn't realize it already. With luck, it would help me stall until I figured out another solution. Yet again, my luck popped up in the most unlikely moments.

Of course, it would have been much more useful if I'd gotten lucky—and no, not in that way—a little earlier; I wouldn't be in this situation in the first place. But some things could not be avoided, not even through a leprechaun's luck. I could only hope to make the best of

this situation and work with what I had.

Bearing that in mind, I ignored her anger once more. She continued to rant at me, while the vines squeezed my chest, threatening to stop me from breathing. At one point, my vision began to darken, but thankfully, Tara must have decided she still needed me.

The vines loosened up a bit, and I could breathe again. Tara turned toward her remaining basilisks. "Guard him," she said. "If he moves, immobilize him without killing him."

The basilisks seemed to nod. "Understood, mistress," one of them hissed.

It was the first time they'd spoken, and I gathered they weren't very sociable, not that I truly expected them to be. As Tara grabbed her broomstick and left the room—presumably to recover the grimoire—I briefly considered trying to get the basilisks to release me. I didn't believe they'd actually listen, but it was worth a shot.

"Hey," I whispered, "won't you help me out here? I promise I'll find a better mistress for you."

Predictably, the basilisks paid my words no heed. The thorns of the damn vines dug into my flesh, and I tried to loosen them up a bit. It didn't work, but it did draw the attention of Tara's familiars. I opened my mouth to try to speak to them again. The reptilian creatures just gave me

the evil eye, and I looked away hastily. I might be immune to necromantic spells, but that may not be the case for basilisk powers. I had no desire to suddenly turn into stone. As much as I admired art, I didn't love it enough to become a statue.

In the process, though, I noticed Tara's black cat had made its appearance once more. It sat on an armchair right next to me, giving me a look of disgust. "So unfortunate for a pretty man like you to be so stupid," it said. "You can't reason or make nice with basilisks."

"So I noticed," I shot back. "I don't have many other options, though. Got any bright ideas?"

Cat Number Two leaped next to it and I sighed in relief. "Thank the Goddess. Please, help me out here."

"I would do that, Artie," Cat Number Two replied, "but I'm a bit busy right now. My lady here needs my company."

I noticed he was rubbing himself against Tara's familiar and distantly remembered Cat Number One was in heat. This one must be in a similar state, and it clearly affected my familiar. No, this couldn't be happening. My cat wasn't running off with some evil feline to copulate and leaving me to die in the witch's lair.

"Don't worry, though," he said. "We'll still be around to help you out."

Tara's cat rubbed against him, and he lost interest in me. Time was running out. I could almost sense Tara's approach, her presence sending shivers down my spine. "You can't be serious!" I screamed at my cat. I wanted to call his name, but I realized I still hadn't given him one. "Come on now. Surely, the heat can wait until we're out of danger."

Tara's cat seemed to get even angrier with me. "Don't you just love making decisions for him?" she hissed at me, flexing her all-too sharp claws. Thank the Goddess I liked males, because I seemed to have talent to annoy females, both biped and otherwise.

"He is my familiar," I blurted out, knowing I wasn't helping my case, but reluctant to let a cat scare me. Besides, she just felt angry for being scorned by Tara. I didn't deserve to be treated like this.

I half-expected the cat to get even angrier, but instead, she jumped on to the floor and threw me another disgusted look. "Being a familiar these days really isn't worth it."

Cat Number Two nodded in his feline way, then followed after her. "Do you know Artie didn't even name me? He still calls me Cat Number Two."

The unknown familiar let out a shocked catlike gasp. "Witches," she said. "They're all the same."

"Hey!" I protested. "I take offense. And I'll name him once this whole thing is over. I promised I would."

This conversation was unbelievable. Damn cats couldn't get their priorities straight. Why couldn't my mother have let me inherit some dog familiars? They were more loyal, and probably more useful in the long run.

My argument didn't convince the two cats, so I tried something else. "Okay, then. I'll name you now." I paused, trying to figure out names. I'd always been hopeless with stuff like that, yet another reason why I avoided naming my familiars in the first place. "How about... Blackie?" I offered lamely.

"You're kidding, right?" my cat said, obviously displeased with my choice.

"Shady? Foxy? Lucky? Lover? Spot?"

All my attempts were scorned. "Seriously, do you see any spot on me?"

Exasperated, I tried another approach. "What's your name?" I asked Tara's cat.

"Onyx," the familiar replied.

Of course, she would have an elegant name. Why couldn't I come up with something like that?

In the end, the entire process proved to be futile as I heard Tara approach once more. The cats scampered off, finding a hiding spot, or perhaps someplace to make baby



kittens. At last, Tara entered the room once more, holding the slightly dusty grimoire. "I told you, Arturus," she said, "your efforts won't change a thing."

She passed by the basilisks without a word, and I absently noted the reptilian beings hadn't moved a muscle when the cats approached me, or Tara. Perhaps if Cat Number Two and Onyx got over their entirely unreasonable anger with me, I still had a chance of escaping.

## Chapter Eight

Half an hour later, my hope had dimmed considerably. Tara had already made the preparations. There was no sign of either Tristan or my familiars, and my magic seemed to have run off for greener pastures. If a miracle didn't happen, I'd die here today.

There was no magical centerpiece included in Tara's version of the Beckoning ritual. Instead, she drew a pentagram, much like Tristan had done in the Summoning Room. After that, she proceeded to place several gemstones and runes in the corners of the five points, drawing the symbols of the elements and the Goddess's power in each of the triangles. In the middle she drew a circle, then stood straight and took a deep breath. She began to murmur an incantation under her breath and the pentagram lit up, emanating a dark glow. How odd. This hadn't happened with Tristan's, but then again, his had been one of protection, while this one... Well, this one didn't have a very positive purpose, at least not for my health and existence.

When Tara finished her spell, the vines began to move, dragging me toward the pentagram. They flipped me through the air, propelling me forward. I landed with a

painful thud on the floor, straight in the center of the magical symbol. Before I could even try to escape the pain, the vines wrapped themselves around my wrists and ankles, holding me captive once more.

I'd never been a kinky person, not really. I could of course, appreciate the potential of being bound by a lover. But this was an entirely different thing, and my frustration and anger dissipated into genuine fear. I could sense Tara's evil magic swirling around me, ready to transform me into a corpse.

Tara knelt in front of the pentagram and closed her eyes, gathering her focus. The gemstones began to shine as I futilely struggled to release myself from my thorny chains. The magic grew more intense, until it engulfed the entire tower. Any moment now, it would drain me dry and fuel Tara with my magic and that of our land.

Through the corner of my eye, I caught sight of two black cats approaching stealthily. I had no idea what Onyx and Cat Number Two intended to do now, but it was too late. I wanted to tell them to find cover, so they would not be engulfed in the magic, but stopped when I realized I might draw Tara's attention to them.

The cats reached the pentagram in a few seconds. Tara focused on summoning the magic, so they had no trouble sneaking past her. Cat Number Two sniffed the vine

bonds, then wisely abandoned them. If he'd touched the plants, Tara would've felt it. He wouldn't be able to break through them in time.

The two cats seemed to have a backup plan, though. They rushed around the pentagram, stopping next to each gem to modify its position by 180 degrees. The precious stones now pointed in the exact opposite direction from before.

I hoped that would be enough, because the spell was already being cast. The cats rushed away just before Tara opened her eyes. And then bolts of magic shot from the gems and my world turned into sheer magic and pain. I lost sight of Tara, of the tower, of my entire reality. Every cell in my body burst into flames and I could no longer feel anything else but the overwhelming power. My vision filled with white, silver, and green, so intense I thought my eyes would burst out of their sockets. I heard myself scream, but I couldn't even identify the shout as mine. I became disconnected from my very being, my entire self engulfed by the power, my senses shut down and inundated by the onslaught of magic.

All of a sudden, the painful assault stopped. I found myself floating through a pleasant warmth, very much like I had when I'd blacked out earlier, upon my use of the necromantic sphere. Was I dead?

In front of me, a presence emerged from the void. It shone so bright I had to close my eyes, as the incredible light overwhelmed me. But the pain became distant now, and the mysterious entity soothed me, erasing all my wounds and hurts.

I still felt the power washing over me, but it no longer seemed so hostile and evil. Instead, it turned soft, kind, like a warm fire on a chilly winter morning. My nostrils were invaded by the scent of the forest, and I could hear the whisper of a river nearby. A spring breeze swept through my hair, gently caressing my face.

I dared to crack my eyes open. Then I let out a gasp of shock. I was back in the grove in the middle of the forest. Night had fallen and the trees rustled around me, murmuring in their own, unique language. As I got up, it seemed to me I'd been propelled back into the past, to that day when I'd gone to the forest and fallen asleep.

Had it all been a dream? My familiars, Evan, my parents... And oh, Goddess, Tristan. It couldn't be. Tristan had to be real. I felt him deep in my heart, our bond as strong as ever.

A soft female voice snapped me out of my terror. "Calm down, Artie," she said. "Everything you've experienced is real."

I turned around, only to see a little girl sitting on the

gnarled roots of an old tree. I recognized her as Adine, the young wizard who'd helped me back at Capital. "What? W-Who are you?"

"You know who I am, Artie," the girl replied. There was no mockery in her voice, only kindness, and suddenly I did, indeed, know her identity.

"The Goddess." I said it as a statement, not a question, but she nodded regardless.

"But how?" I asked. "I don't understand."

"I have many vessels, Artie," the Goddess answered. "Adine just happens to be one of them. She is her own person, but occasionally, she acts on my behalf."

That made sense, in a way, but I still didn't get how I fit in all this. I wasn't her vessel. I could barely even use my powers. Why had Tara thought to use me as a sacrifice in the first place?

The Goddess smiled, a wise, warm smile that shouldn't have fit on such a young face, but somehow did. "It's all right, Artie. I've chosen you for a very special purpose: to heal this land and these people. They've suffered far too much because of the pettiness of the powerful. This time, you will be my vessel."

I couldn't fathom what determined her to grant me such an honor. More so, I had no idea what I'd do with such a responsibility. "You do have the power, Artie. You are a

good witch, the best there is."

I really doubted that. I felt overwhelmed, foolish and unprepared. "I'm sorry," I answered. "I just can't see it."

The Goddess gave me a reassuring smile. "It's here, in your heart. You just need a little nudge to use it. You'll know what to do when the time is right," she said, obviously seeing straight through me.

She patted one of the gnarled roots, silently indicating I should join her. I obeyed and made my way to her side. I sat next to her, fidgeting as she fixed me with her deep blue eyes. "Tell me, Artie. What are you afraid of?"

She knew what I feared. How could she not? There was nothing in the souls and minds of us mortals she didn't know. But I needed to say it out loud, needed to speak to someone who'd understand, who'd never judge me. She'd been by my side forever, albeit in a different way, but I'd always felt her.

"I just... so many things have happened. I don't know who to trust. And Tristan..." My face heated as I remembered our one time together. "I-I want to be with him, but I'm not sure if I'm not pushing him too hard, too fast."

The Goddess listened to me rant as I spoke about Evan and his betrayal, my parents, Brew, my cats, Giles and the other ghosts, and of course, Tristan. It all came

down to Tristan. I wanted so much to fix things and just begin a new life by his side, but everyone seemed to stand against us.

I had no doubt he'd escaped Capital. He was simply too resourceful for the wizards to stand in his way. At the same time, I wondered what he'd think when he next saw me. I always skirted death, and that was something Tristan couldn't deal with.

"He will learn to accept it in time," the Goddess said. "He loves you."

She took my hand and held it tightly. "Besides, there are benefits to being my vessel."

She spoke in riddles, just like Brew, but even if I didn't understand her fully, I still felt comforted by her presence. On instinct, I placed my head in her lap and closed my eyes. "Relax," she told me. "Everything will be fine. You don't have to be afraid anymore."

Her hand caressed my hair, and I found myself getting sleepy. Just as I fell into slumber, a sense of power invaded me once more. This time, it seemed entirely different, and I accepted it, with my Goddess's blessing. It took over my every pore, opening my senses to a world that I didn't know existed. I heard her whisper another word of encouragement in my ear, and then I swirled back, back, straight back into my reality and the witch's tower.



The marble floor felt both cold and humid against my back and somehow, the scent was different. When I opened my eyes, I could actually see light sweep through the gloomy tower, casting away the shadows.

Unfortunately, the improved lighting in the area allowed me to view my surroundings better, and my eyes fell on a monstrous display. I screeched at the sight of the once-beautiful Tara. She'd become a drained out husk, her skin wrinkled and dried up, her lips cracked and her hair white and crusty. She extended a claw-like arm toward me, and I instantly recoiled.

In the process, I found the vines had, at some point, released me. I managed to scamper away from Tara and shot to my feet. In a few rushed steps, I was at a safe enough distance from her. After the shock wore off, I acknowledged the fact that now she looked exactly like a cliché witch would. She just needed a few children to roast and eat and the picture would be complete.

She didn't scare me anymore. The ritual had drained her instead of me, probably due to the two cats messing with the gems and the Goddess's interference. I had the childish urge to laugh in her face, and barely refrained from doing a little happy dance. After all, I was the Goddess's vessel now. I needed to be respectable, wise, and all that nonsense.

Cat Number Two and Onyx popped up next to me. "I'm sorry, Artie," Cat Number Two said. "It was the only way."

I glanced at my cat, noting his concerned eyes. By his side, Onyx gave me a similarly worried look. "I'm fine," I told them. I shouldn't have doubted my familiar. He'd done his best, considering the circumstances.

"You won't be fine when I'm done with you," Tara croaked out, dragging her wretched body toward me.

But she had no power over me anymore. I could sense the Goddess's magic flowing through my veins. When Tara's attack came, I had no trouble blocking it. The vines that previously trapped me with such ease couldn't reach me. She didn't take kindly to that. Her evil witch nature fully emerged and everything living thing around us began to turn twisted and dark. The basilisks appeared once more, only now, they'd doubled in size. Their appearance became grotesque, spines covering every inch of their backs and dark scales shielding every spot on their bodies. Their eyes sparkled with a reddish glow, and I saw Tara's malevolence echoed inside them. It made me sad.

To my surprise, Onyx suffered from a similar treatment. I saw the black cat screech, and then turn into a cat-dragon, much like my own had, and yet so very different. When the transformation was complete, Onyx

showed no sign of knowing Cat Number Two or me at all. More twisted vines erupted from Tara's broomstick. Several more creatures appeared, some flying in from outside, other bursting through the doorway. They seemed to have been birds or animals of some sort, but their nature had been twisted by Tara. The tower itself shook, and I could feel the earth protesting to the onslaught of dark magic.

Everything happened so fast I didn't even have time to gather my wits. But the power within me sang, and almost as if in a dream, I raised my hand and beckoned the creatures forward. The pure light of the Goddess's power streamed out of me, encompassing each and every one of the manipulated beings. In a flash, the room was cleansed, and everything returned back to its natural state.

The spell also dispelled Tara's remaining power, and she fell to the floor in an undignified heap. Good riddance. Maybe this time, she'd stay down. Then again, maybe not. Some people never learned their lesson. But either way, it didn't matter anymore.

By my side, Cat Number Two busied himself with soothing a very confused Onyx. Onyx grumbled and bitched, but obviously felt relieved at my familiar's presence. I smirked at them and said, "You make a very nice couple."

"Well, Artie," Cat Number Two replied, "that's all well and good, but don't forget you still need to name me."

"And I'm going to need another name too," Onyx added. "Tara gave me this one and I hate it."

She was looking at me, and I desperately shook my head. I had enough on my hands with two black cats without adding a third one to the mix. "And of course, if I'm going to live with you, I'll need something nice you can call me. I won't accept random names like Cat Number Three, by the way. Oh, and don't forget about finding a nice spot for my new litter. I want the best for my kittens."

As she spoke, she seemed to get stronger and come up with more and more ideas on what I needed to do for her. Cat Number Two gave me a horrified look and I glared back at him. What had his love-struck ways saddled me with?

"Well, anyway," Onyx finished, "we'll deal with that later. I'll be right back. I need to pack."

She sauntered off, and I watched her go in a daze. One would think nothing could surprise me after meeting the Goddess. Apparently I was wrong. What could a familiar possibly have to pack?

"I don't think I'm ready to be a father," Cat Number Two said as Onyx left the room.

I was a bit confused. I'd lost count of the times he'd

run off on his romantic expeditions, back when we lived in Brew's tower. Surely by now he'd impregnated half of the female cats in the area. "You mean you don't have... uhh... kittens?"

"Feline familiars can couple with normal cats, but can only procreate with other familiars," Cat Number Two explained. "Other than big sis, I'd never met another cat familiar before."

I gathered his big sister was Cat Number One. This would be very problematic indeed.

Shaking my head, I decided this issue could wait. I needed to focus on the most urgent things, like dealing with Tara, all the confused animals, and finding a way back to Tristan. Why did familiars always choose the worst possible moment to make unreasonable demands?

Thankfully, through the Goddess's power, it was easy enough to soothe Tara's summoned beasts. I had Cat Number Two watching Tara and the basilisks, just in case something happened while I wasn't paying attention.

While I said my goodbyes to the birds, I randomly threw a look outside. Had the sky ever been so blue? I walked to the window and gaped as I took in the sight.

I'd been raised in a sheltered area, where the power of evil could not reach. But even that didn't prepare me for the shock. Tara's tower was surrounded by dense

vegetation, stretching as far as the eye could see. The trees shone with life and joy and a fresh breeze surrounded me in the scent of blooming flowers. Through Tara's failed ritual, or rather, the Goddess's success, our land had been saved.

A bluish spark below drew my attention from my admiration of the Goddess's work. It grew and grew, until I realized it was a portal. A man rushed out of it, and even through all the thick greenery, I instantly recognized him. Tristan.

"Go to him," the Goddess whispered in my ear. "He is waiting."

My lover ran toward the tower, and if I judged by his tense posture, he expected to find something terrible here. I threw a look over my shoulder, briefly checking on Cat Number Two. He faithfully remained at his post, and ushered me off with a wave of his paw. "Go on."

I didn't wait to be told twice, nor did I bother with taking the stairs. I just leaped out the window, every cell in my body aching for Tristan's touch. I didn't have my broom with me, but it didn't matter. The tree branches helped me descend, gently carrying me down. "Tristan," I called out to him. "I'm here."

Tristan looked up and his eyes widened as he saw me. He froze in his tracks, and to me, he seemed torn between despair, disbelief, and shocked hope. I couldn't

bear to know how much pain he'd been through because of me.

I landed straight in front of him and immediately embraced him. His arms wrapped around me and he inhaled, as if trying to take in my scent, to make sure I was really there. "Artie..." he said, sounding almost reverently, "You're alive."

The emotion in his voice almost brought tears to my eyes. "Of course I am," I answered. "I promised, didn't I?"

Tristan let out a low chuckle. "You did indeed." He broke the embrace and our gazes met. For a brief instant, time seemed to stop, and then, Tristan's mouth crushed against mine. I gasped and surrendered to his assault, parting my lips obediently. His tongue ravaged me, and I reacquainted myself with his taste and his passion. Had it only been a few hours since we'd made love? It seemed like forever now.

Our kiss came to an abrupt end when an unpleasant woman's voice snapped me out of my pleasure. "What a touching reunion."

I immediately tensed, having had too many surprises from various females in the past few days. As I briefly broke away from Tristan, I noted the approaching woman was Deirdre, also known as Bitchy-Blonde. What in the world was she doing here?

I got my reply when she added, "Well, you found him. I fulfilled my part of the deal. Now you have to do yours."

I disliked the very mention of a deal between Deirdre and Tristan. "Tristan, what's she talking about?" I asked, suspicious.

Tristan sighed. "As it turns out, I made yet another mistake regarding Tara. She had a different lair that I didn't know about, and I severely underestimated her powers. Deirdre offered to help, as long as I agreed to release Evan."

I gaped at him. "And you agreed to it?"

What a stupid question. Of course he'd agreed. What else could he have done, abandon me in Tara's clutches? Shaking my head, I pecked him on the lips. "Thanks, but it really wasn't necessary. Tara is not a danger anymore."

To my surprise, Deirdre shot forward and gripped my arm. "What do you mean? What did you do?"

I released myself from her grasp, surprised and angry at the sudden attack. "She did it to herself. She wanted to use me as a sacrifice for the ritual, and ended up draining her own powers dry."

What little she'd had left, she'd try to use on me, but I didn't mention our little standoff. I didn't want to get into



how I'd become powerful or reveal the fact that I was the Goddess's vessel.

Deirdre didn't get the chance to interrogate me further as I was engulfed in a tight hug, this time from my mother. "Artie... oh, my child. I can't believe you're safe."

From behind my mother, my father appeared, with Cat Number One in his hold. I let them fuss over me a little, all the while musing over Deirdre and Tristan's words. If Evan got away, this would just happen all over again. "Don't be down, Artie," Tristan whispered. "I promise we'll find a way."

I nodded, then gently broke away from my mother. "Come on. Let's go inside."

I led my family inside Tara's tower, more than anything desperate to get this whole thing over with. As we entered the main ritual room, I caught sight of Cat Number Two and Onyx still watching over the unconscious Tara. To my surprise and amusement, Onyx had a small black bag next to her. I didn't dare ask what she kept inside.

At first, Tristan seemed very suspicious, more so when he caught sight of the basilisks. But the reptilian familiars just gave him a slightly disinterested look, focusing their scrutiny on me. "What about us?" one of them hissed.

Oh, Goddess, I couldn't deal with basilisk familiars

now. "Give me a minute," I told it.

I was so distracted by my new reptile friend I didn't realize Deirdre had moved until a light sob came from Tara's direction. I noticed then the female wizard knelt at Tara's side and gently caressed her hair. I just stared at them, trying to understand what was going on.

"Remember when I said I remembered her from someplace?" my mother whispered. "She was Deirdre's girlfriend back before you were born. I don't think she was always an evil witch."

I rubbed my head awkwardly and began to back away. Somehow, we'd landed in a sort of love triangle. I wanted no part of it. Goddess powers or no, I didn't feel prepared for something like this.

"Moira, we'll let you handle this," Tristan said. "If you need us, we'll be outside."

Without further ado, Tristan took my hand and pulled me out of the room. I ran after him, eager to get away from a situation I didn't know how to handle. I didn't want to think too much about Tara and Deirdre. It was much easier to hate them both than see them as genuine persons, capable of love.

We left the tower and ran into the forest, stopping when we were at a safe distance. As much as I'd yearned for being alone with Tristan, I still found myself asking,

"Did you know about that?"

Tristan shook his head. "No. I've known Evan for a long time, but he's kept his relationship with Tara under wraps. And I've never seen Deirdre as much of a threat so I didn't care about her personal life."

It made sense in a weird way, although judging by Tristan's tone, he berated himself for his shallow assessment of Evan's connection to Tara. A flash of information swept through me. It was because of Tara that Evan had known how to find me in Tristan's home. Her power, united with Evan's, had allowed her to spy on Tristan and to summon portals. But I was sick of having Tristan blaming himself for everything that backfired. I cupped his cheek, gently caressing the stubbled skin. "You don't have to worry about that anymore. The Goddess will look after us."

Tristan gave me a startled look. "What do you mean? Artie, how did you manage to escape in the first place?"

As reluctant as I'd been to reveal the source of my power to the others, I didn't mind doing so with Tristan. I trusted him with my life, everything that I was and I would ever be. "The Goddess allowed me to become her vessel," I whispered softly.

Tristan began to back away from me, as if my

words had been a powerful blow. "Tristan?" I asked, shocked. "What's the matter?"

"I thought we had a chance, but how can we be together now? You belong to Her. She's taken you away from me."

I heard the resentment and the anger in his voice, and I knew he was misunderstanding the whole thing. The Goddess would never take my will and my life away from me. If anything, she'd encouraged me to be with Tristan. "I won't let her," Tristan said before I could even try to explain. "I won't let anyone tear us apart, not death, not the Goddess."

His words should've scared me, but instead, they made me giddy with happiness and relief. I felt the Goddess by my side, and I heard her whisper words of comfort. It was only when Tristan froze that I realized he could hear her too. "You have my blessing now, Tristan Sinclair. You needn't fear a thing, not even death."

I recalled her mentioning the benefits of me being her vessel, and finally understood what she meant. My knees buckled and Tristan caught me before I fell to the ground. "Thank you," he whispered.

There was no reply, and I sensed the Goddess fade away, leaving behind just a faint presence to keep us safe. She gave us privacy, I realized, and I appreciated it. Tristan

gently put me down on the grass and sat next to me. I cuddled into his embrace, feeling both overwhelmed and relieved. One didn't find out every day he'd become immortal.

All that began to lose its importance when Tristan pulled me even closer. I lifted my head so I could get a better look at his face. He was looking at me with hot eyes, a gaze I recognized from the one time we'd had together. Instantly, my entire body responded. My cock, already half-hard just from his proximity, stiffened completely.

"Tristan," I whimpered, "please."

Tristan didn't speak. Instead, his hands began to work at my clothes, slowly divesting me of every item I wore. As he did so, he rolled us over so he could be on top of me. He pressed kisses to every inch of skin he exposed. I wanted to help him, but my hands refused to obey and my body surrendered to the sensation. Each butterfly-light touch made my body warmer and warmer.

The moment of passionate bliss was shattered when Tristan suddenly tensed and pulled away. "Come on out," he growled.

I looked up to see who he'd addressed only to watch Cat Number Two and Onyx approach. "Oh, my dear Arturus. You were preaching to us, when you're just as bad." I could practically see Onyx smirk.

"Shut up," I told her moodily. My face flamed so hot I thought I'd surely die. I had no reason to feel embarrassed, damn it. Well, actually, I did, since I was still naked and very much aroused. Thankfully, Tristan took over the conversation, allowing me to recover. "Why did you come after us? Is something wrong?"

"Nah," Cat Number Two replied. "Just what you'd imagine. Deirdre's being a bitch and demanding to see Evan. She also wants medical attention for Tara."

I sighed. It would seem that as much as I tried, I wouldn't be able to get out of this. "Give us a minute," I told the cats.

The two familiars obeyed and retreated in the direction they'd come. I sighed, resigning myself to abstinence for the next few hours. What else could I do? Fighting evil really encroached on one's sex life. We got up and arranged our clothing half-heartedly. I cheered myself on with the thought that soon, I'd have Tristan all to myself, without the cats, Tara, or Evan bothering us.

The thought brought back the memory of Deirdre's unreasonable demand. As we began to walk back to the tower, I couldn't help but express my concern. "What will you do?" I asked my lover. "We can't let Evan go."

Tristan took my hand and squeezed it. "Stop worrying so much. It'll be fine. You'll see."

I found it funny that we spent so much time reassuring each other. If he realized it as well, he didn't say it. Instead, we made our way to our destination in comfortable silence. Once we got this whole thing over with, I'd arrange a vacation for us, far, far away.

\* \* \* \*

An hour later we were in a completely different mood and in rapidly deteriorating circumstances.

"You lying scum," Deirdre fumed at my lover. "How dare you go back on your word?"

We'd returned to Tristan's residence and Tristan had proceeded to release Evan from the Summoning Room. Evan looked tired and, dare I say, frightened. I could see very little trace of the high wizard who'd wanted to hurt me.

However, neither Tristan nor I trusted Evan. So even if Tristan let Evan go, my lover had refused to break the binding over Evan's magic. "I promised I would free Evan, not that I'd give his powers back."

Tristan's living room seemed very small and unwelcoming now. The atmosphere crackled with tension and anger. The ghostly servants lingered around the corners, contributing to the eerie, stressful situation. I

suppressed the urge to collapse on an armchair and focused on the conversation.

"Tristan..." Evan tried again. "You have to stop this. I made a mistake, I get it. It's enough already."

The apology came out choked and half-hearted, as if he had difficulty in saying it. I couldn't believe my ears. Did he really think he was entitled to go on living happily, after everything he'd done? Even if I disregarded the unpleasant rape attempt episode, I could not forget the resentful ghosts.

I wouldn't have known what to do in these circumstances, but I sensed the Goddess working through me again. As through in a dream, I stepped forward and took Evan's hand. Power flowed through me and into the former high wizard. He gasped and he tried to snatch his hand out of my grip, but I held onto it tighter.

When I finally let go, Evan swooned and nearly fell over. "What did you do?" Deirdre asked as she supported him.

"I kept him from aging." When Evan lifted surprised eyes toward me, I gave him a disdainful look. "Just be thankful for that," I told him coldly. "You won't receive anything more."

Evan might not realize it now, but the Goddess had punished him in the worst way. For a witch or a wizard,



being without magic was akin to losing a limb. Living like this, no longer aging, taunted all the time by the ghosts of the past and the magic around him, Evan would always remember what he'd done, and forever regret it.

There was one thing left to do. I touched Deirdre's hand, working my way around her magic. "It's your choice now," I told her. "You can give Tara her youth back, but be warned. It'll drain your powers and hers as well. You'll be like Evan."

I saw the shock and despair in her eyes. Choosing between the person she loved and her magic had to be so very hard. But it wasn't much of a choice, not really. If something happened to Tristan, I'd give away my magic in a heartbeat if it meant rescuing him. In this, Deirdre and I were similar.

In fact, she'd been the one who'd insisted on bringing Tara along and finding her a healer. Technically speaking, both my mother and I would have been able to deal with her injuries, but Tristan forbade me to even go near her, and my mother understandably felt resentful of her. I would've been pissed off at Tristan's high-handedness, but he meant well. Besides, I didn't think I could focus my healing powers either. I might be a good witch and the Goddess's vessel, but in the end, I was still just a person. It would take a while until I could forgive and

forget.

The Goddess had given me a way out, leaving Tara's healing in Deirdre's hands. Even as I acknowledged the righteousness of this decision, I still felt tired. I wanted to curl up against Tristan and sleep for a week.

But first, we had to get rid of these people intruding on our time together. Generally, I disliked being curt, but I'd had enough of this. "Decide now and leave," I told them.

"I understand," Deirdre said with a nod.

I saw the decision in her gaze as she spoke. She wouldn't leave Tara to die like that. She'd take her chances with being mortal and powerless.

Evan looked like he wanted to protest, but his sister didn't give him the chance. She just turned her back on us and stalked away, presumably heading toward the room we kept Tara in. Evan rushed out of the living room after her. I wondered how their lives would turn out, now that the three of them were reunited. How would Tara feel once she awakened, young again, but deprived of the magic she'd loved with such a fierce, fanatical passion?

"Stop thinking so much," Tristan whispered in my ear. "You've done everything that could be done."

He pulled me out of the living room and up the stairs. I heard voices coming from Tara's room, but Tristan's hold on my hand made everything else lose its

significance.

When Tristan led me to his room, I thought we'd surely finish what we started earlier. Tristan did indeed take my clothes off, but didn't make any attempt to take things further. Instead, he lay me down on the bed and covered me with a quilt. "Sleep, Artie," he said while caressing my hair. "Tomorrow is another day."

## Epilogue

And so, the great knight and his prince defeated the evil witch. The land was free once again and the people rejoiced. Or so, the story goes. In reality, the great knight—aka me—was faced with a whole new set of problems that often kept me from enjoying some down and dirty action with my very own prince, Tristan.

The ritual had healed the land, yes, but after all the rejoicing was over, the people began to bicker over who had the healthiest goat or the plumpest cow. Capital was left without two of its most important wizards, being therefore deprived of the people who basically ruled the land. King Faren, I soon found, was a very nice, but slightly senile little old man who would've agreed to any proposal he received from his advisors, no matter how crazy it might be.

Unfortunately, the king could also be very stubborn, and for that reason, I often spent my afternoons having a tea party with dear old Faren.

"So, Arturus, how are things going?" the king asked me.

I forced a smile to my face. "Very well, Highness, thank you. We've managed to organize the department and

are going through the requests now. The people are happy."

In the end, we'd created a whole new department, just to deal with these newly emerging issues. We called it the Department of Propriety and Magic Agriculture. I hadn't had the time to find a better name, since the amount of work that piled up every day was staggering. Naturally, I couldn't tell the king such a thing, so I always gave him reassuring reports.

"I'm glad to hear that." The king beamed. "What about you? You've been working so hard."

I felt half-touched, half-annoyed at the king's words. Truly, it meant a lot to me that he thought about my well-being. However, it would have been much more useful if he stopped summoning me to these tedious meetings and let me finish my daily tasks. All things considered, I much preferred spending my time in a constructive manner so that I'd be able to steal some private moments with Tristan.

It went on and on, the mind-numbing conversation almost as bad as Brew's old tomes of magical instruction. I finally managed to escape the king after he extracted the promise of another visit from me.

I politely said goodbye to King Faren and made my way out once I was dismissed. Perhaps I'd get some work done today after all.

As I advanced through the palace, I absently noted

the changes and progresses in its appearance. Although we hadn't increased the royal budget by much, we'd still decided to make some renovations. This was a new beginning, for all of us, and it should show in the palace.

Unlike during my first walk through the castle, the servants didn't cower away from me. I'd essentially become one of the wizards, although it wasn't at all how I'd had expected. Each day I was stuck sorting through correspondence and paperwork, reading through proposals and complaints, visiting the king and supervising the staff. Honestly, I should have just taken the position of high wizard, not left it to Adine. But I wasn't much for the spotlight, and I preferred an advisory post. My modesty and shyness landed me in a pile of bureaucracy. I always felt tempted to just sign all the blasted things, but the occasional important document did sneak its way through the general mess.

As much as I hated all these tasks, I'd gotten used to it—which was why I immediately realized the hustle and bustle seemed even worse than usual. This morning, things hadn't been so hectic. Something must've happened while I was talking to the king.

I stopped the first servant girl who crossed my path. "What's going on?" I asked.

She blinked at me in confusion. "Highness? You

haven't been told?"

I forced back a feeling of inadequacy. Sure enough, if something of import happened, I should've been notified. "I've been busy with the king," I answered.

The servant nodded in understanding. "Well, I'm happy to give you the good news then," she said bouncily. "Your Highness's mother is coming to visit."

I felt faint. As much as I loved my family, this was truly not the time for them to make an appearance, more so given the sudden changes in our lives.

Shortly after my glorious victory over the forces of evil, my mother announced that she would soon give me a brother or sister, my greatest fear realized. To a certain extent, I felt happy for her and my father, of course, but not so much when she became moody and unbearable to be around. Things would only get worse once the babe popped out.

Thankfully, she'd decided that both she and my father were still needed to finish their pet project, the country for witches. Many were still resentful of the treatment they'd received from the wizards, and old prejudices and hatreds couldn't be forgotten so easily. Naturally, I'd have liked us all to get along, but at least the situation allowed me a bit of a breather.

Now that she'd returned, however, that would all

change. I couldn't suppress a groan, a fact that didn't come unnoticed by the servant girl. "Anything wrong?" she asked me.

I offered her my trademark smile, knowing that the concern and curiosity of the staff were the last things I needed. "Just fine." I remembered something else and hastily added, "Oh, and keep up the good work. I appreciate your efforts."

I made it my business to compliment everyone for a job well done. It helped, especially in such confusing circumstances. The girl blushed and made a clumsy little curtsy. "Thank you, Highness."

With that, I rushed off, stressed, angry, and frustrated. I knew exactly why I hadn't been told of my mother's return.

Onyx was also pregnant, with Cat Number Two's—or rather Hero's—kittens. Yes, I'd finally taken the time to name my familiars. Well, Tristan had done it for me, since my name giving abilities were as pathetic as ever. He'd dubbed Cat Number Two Hero and Cat Number One Voodoo. Onyx's name was pending, since nothing we chose ever seemed to her liking.

As if that weren't enough, I'd somehow ended up with five more familiars: Tara's basilisks who'd refused to leave after she had been defeated. The three she'd left



behind in Capital had been healed by my mother. For some reason, instead of leaving with her, they chose to follow me. I suspected that had something to do with my mother's general bitchiness.

However, the excessive number of familiars—among other things—led me to have a very short temper. I'd had a particularly bad fight with Hero and Onyx the night before. I'd planned to apologize, but that wouldn't happen now.

I stalked to my office, fuming. I heard an ongoing conversation, although I couldn't quite distinguish what was being said. When I burst inside, everyone stopped speaking. And by everyone, I meant eight familiars of different species and sizes.

"Can anyone tell me why a servant had to notify me of my mother's visit?" I asked. "What do I have all of you for?"

Silence was my only answer. It occurred to me that my familiars must've been very busy, since Tristan had also mysteriously vanished. "What did you do with Tristan?" I asked sweetly.

I could almost hear Hero gulp. "We... ah..."

"It was just a prank," Onyx said hastily. "We didn't mean any harm."

"What happened?"

"Over here," a tiny voice replied.

It was only then that I noticed a small man standing on my desk. Small wasn't quite a good approximation. He was tiny, as tall as my pinkie finger. My headache intensified as I identified the man as Tristan. "They put something in my drink," Tristan said. Even in this form, his anger seemed apparent. I had the feeling that in spite of his size, Tristan could very easily get rid of my pesky familiars.

"You look upset, Master," one of the basilisks, who I'd affectionately named Ace, said. Yes, I had learned my lesson and decided to name my familiars from the get-go. My affection toward all of them was, however, quickly dwindling. "Of course I'm upset," I shouted. "My familiars are having fun at my expense and my boyfriend is the size of Thumbelina."

From her position on top of Ace's head, Voodoo let out a thoughtful hum. "Well, it can be reversed. We just need to make an antidote."

I probably should have been disturbed at Voodoo's closeness to Ace, since even the thought of having some sort of hybrid cat-reptiles around scared me.

"Potions don't work the same on necromancers, you idiot," Tristan shouted at Voodoo. It came out weird and high-pitched, and hysterical amusement filled me. I leaned

against the door, chuckling wildly. Tears of mirth streamed down my face. This shouldn't have been amusing, given all the work I had to do, but damn it if it wasn't.

A small voice drew my attention, and I wiped my eyes and looked down. "Artie, are you all right?" Tristan asked me.

I hadn't heard him coming. Then again, how could I? He was so small. "Fine," I replied. "Just fine."

I reached out to him and he climbed on top of my hand. It was so odd to see my broad-shouldered warrior looking like this. I had a distant flashback of the one time I'd seen my father in his tiny form. I'd laughed at him that day and had suffered an extreme bout of bad luck as a result. But Tristan wouldn't punish me, so I grinned at him. "You know, you don't look so bad like this," I told him. "Since my familiars are useless, maybe I could carry you around. You'd fit in my pocket."

Tristan gave me an affronted look, while various protests sounded in the background. All amusement aside, I knew I couldn't give up on my familiars. They'd been hurt too much to have another master abandon them. And in a sense, this teasing was their way of expressing affection. I'd just have to remember to tease them back.

I closed my eyes and thought about the Goddess. I rarely called out to her, since my own powers were

sufficient to get by in times of peace. However, this particular problem was beyond me.

In my mind, the Goddess chuckled. Warmth flooded me and magic flowed out of my body and into Tristan. The spell on him broke, and seconds later I saw him fall back on the floor, confused, but in his normal form.

The familiars whooped, each in their own weird way. Ace did a little happy dance, which looked very peculiar, given his basilisk nature. Shaking my head at their antics, I said, "We should return to the matter at hand, namely my mother."

"Don't worry about that, Artie," Tristan said. "I managed to organize some things before the familiars jumped me."

Onyx and Hero began to make their way out. Tristan caught them before they could flee. "Not so fast," he said. "It's payback time."

The familiars yelped as Tristan grabbed them. They yowled my name, but I ignored them, choosing to focus on the various pieces of correspondence on my desk. "Have fun," I told Tristan.

He smirked at me and left the room, helpless familiars in his hold. The basilisks slithered away somewhere, obviously cowering before my lover's anger. I

shook my head and focused on my work.

A few hours later, I grumbled as I read through yet another file detailing a dispute between two local landowners. I wondered where Tristan had gone. He was certainly taking a long time punishing my familiars.

As if summoned by my thoughts, Tristan walked in, holding a paper in his hand. I beamed at him and he smiled in turn. "Hey, babe. Guess what I've got here?"

Forgetting all about my work, I got up and headed toward him. Our lips met and we both became lost in each other and an addicting kiss. It began as a slow and gentle exploration. I had no intention of taking it further. But gradually, the heat between us increased. Tristan began to push me in the direction of the desk, and I clung to him, relying on his sense of direction to guide us.

We broke apart when we reached the table. Tristan swept his hands over the desk, effectively pushing aside all the stacks of documents. Paperwork flew in every direction, but I couldn't care less. Tristan set me face down on the desk and with a few brusque motions, got rid of my pants. He didn't even bother to take care of my shirt, and I honestly didn't mind. I could do without the foreplay today. In fact, the urgency that burned inside of me demanded it.

I obediently spread my legs, aching, waiting for his touch. Yes, I was spoiled. How could I not be with such an

amazing lover catering to my every whim? I heard him fumble with his breeches, and the rustle of clothes that followed indicated he'd managed to defeat the stubborn bindings.

I heard him bark out an order and realized he must've sent the familiars away. At last we were alone together. Tristan smoothed his palms over my cheeks and spread them apart. I felt exposed and vulnerable, yet so very safe and loved. A few seconds followed while he just caressed them. I eagerly wiggled my ass. "Come on, Tristan. Please."

"Demanding little witch, aren't you?" Tristan chuckled. With a dull thud, he dropped to his knees. A wet tongue licked across my crease, awakening every nerve in my body. I gasped and dug my nails into the wood of the desk, clinging to it with all my strength.

Tristan's tongue relentlessly stabbed at my hole, worming its way inside my passage. At first, I tried to hold back, but the sensations were too powerful for me to withstand. I began to push back, aching for a deeper penetration.

Through the material of my shirt, my nipples rubbed against the wood. The rough, slightly painful feeling sent lightning bolts of pleasure through me, straight to my cock. My shaft throbbed, demanding release, but in

my position I couldn't touch myself. Even so, I found the slightly frustrating situation led to a more pleasant result. If I'd touched myself, I'd surely come on the spot, and I didn't want this moment to end, not just yet, not ever.

And then, Tristan's tongue abandoned my body, leaving me empty and needy. I let out a whimper of distress, which quickly turned into a gasp of pleasure when Tristan pressed his body over my own.

"Do you have any clue how sweet you taste?" he whispered in my ear.

Tristan's dick nudged against my opening and, in one smooth motion, he thrust home. I couldn't help but cry out. Even if he'd prepared me with his tongue, the sudden invasion still hurt. I didn't mind. In fact, I quite enjoyed it.

Tristan's dick hit my special spot, and I dissolved into a being of sheer passion. I couldn't for the life of me know what I said, what I did. The only thing I acknowledged was Tristan, his power, his strength, and his love for me.

Every motion brought me closer and closer to the edge. Tristan started thrusting harder inside me and I pushed back, impaling myself on Tristan's dick. Our bodies moved in tandem, our very hearts following the same rhythm.

It was raw and almost animalistic, the sheer power

of nature and life exploding between us. Carnal mixed with the emotional, in the unique blend that only being with Tristan could bring me. It felt better than even a communion with the Goddess, and as blasphemous as that might've been, I couldn't question the truth of it. Love beyond all meaning and passion beyond reason—that had always been the relationship between me and Tristan.

With every passing second, the pleasure escalated more and more. Somehow, I sensed it in Tristan, as well, as he pushed his cock into me with abandon. His grip on my hips was so hard I knew I'd have bruises. Yet in every possessive, lustful action, I felt his love.

One more moment, one more thrust, and my orgasm swept over me, taking me by surprise. I must've screamed, because I heard someone yell Tristan's name. Tristan bit down on my skin, so hard he must've drawn blood. It just made my pleasure soar higher. Heat filled me as Tristan emptied his seed inside my passage. Yet again, the magic flowed between us, beautiful and free, binding our souls together.

I collapsed on the desk, exhausted and sated. Tristan's spent dick slipped out of me, but he seemed just as reluctant to lose the intimacy of this moment as me. He pulled me close, and together, we slipped down to the floor. As I tried to recover from the aftermath of the mind-



numbing climax, I idly noted I'd somehow escaped the unpleasant danger of splinters. Tristan must've had the presence of mind to keep my exposed bits away from the rough wood. I made a mental note to thank him as lustily as possible, once we were back in our bedroom.

For the moment, I pressed myself against him, loving the way our combined scents enveloped us. I wanted for us to be together, like this, for all time, with nothing else in our way. Alas, it wasn't meant to be. One shift of my leg had me slipping against the scattered paper, and I remembered all the work piled up. I reluctantly pushed away from my lover and uttered a cleaning spell. Courtesy of my new powers, I'd gained the ability to wield the elements as well, and I wasn't shy to use it if necessary. The damning evidence vanished, the only reminder of our coupling a slight soreness in my ass. I could've gotten rid of the ache, but I didn't. In spite of the discomfort, it felt sinfully good to still sense Tristan within me, even after we were both spent.

I got up and Tristan followed my example. He leaned against the desk, watching me with his trademark smile that reminded me of a predator. I squirmed as I arranged my clothing, the lust already rising within me again.

In that moment, I recalled the piece of

correspondence Tristan had come with. "So? What were you talking about earlier?"

"It's a letter from Deirdre," Tristan said nonchalantly. He retrieved the paper in question from his pocket, and I noted he'd somehow managed to keep hold of it, in spite of the mess we'd made of the entire desk. Typical for my lover to do impossible things.

I plopped my sore ass on the chair and waited for him to elaborate. "Really? What does it say?"

"Apparently, they're doing well. Tara has taken up knitting, and Evan has a new boyfriend. They didn't say where they'd gone and the messenger left before I could get it out of him, but I gathered they'd left Wizard's Realm."

I gaped at him. "You're kidding."

"Not at all," Tristan replied. "I'm quite serious. Apparently, Tara's little foray into old age left some scars."

He sounded amused, but I myself felt too shocked to echo his mirth. Sure enough, I'd hoped for something like that for them, but hadn't really expected it to happen. In fact, my familiars had been quite put out we had released Tara and the others without further punishment. I'd have second-guessed my decision if not for the Goddess's support. Still, it felt good to know I'd made the right decision after all.

I somehow managed to get myself to kneel on the

floor and start gathering the papers. Tristan soon joined me and we managed to sort through the disaster area a bit. And then, Tristan smiled at me. "It looks like the brave knight and his prince are going to have their happy ending after all, as will the evil witch."

My face flamed at his words. Stupid necromancer had read my diary. How dare he invade my privacy like that?

I lunged at him and we fell to the floor amidst the scattered papers. Naturally, I ended up under him again, and that day, I didn't get any more work done. But in the end, the brave knight had his prince, and we lived happily ever after. Well, until Onyx's kittens were born, at least.

THE END

## About the Author

Scarlet Hyacinth was born in 1986, in a Romania still struggling under the weight of the communist regime. As a young girl, she started studying the English language and fell in love with books. She grew up an avid fan of Karl May and Jules Verne, reading fantasy stories and adventure. Later, when she was out of fantasy stories to read, she delved into her mother's collection of books and of course, stumbled onto romance.

After a childhood spent devouring hundreds of pages of fantasy literature, Scarlet found her calling when a dear friend of hers—the same friend who introduced her to GLBT fiction—proposed they start writing a story of their own. As it turns out, the two friends never did finish that particular story, but Scarlet discovered she had a knack for writing and ended up starting to write individually. And so, between working on her dissertation, studying for exams and reading yaoi manga, she started writing M/M fiction. The rest, as they say, is history, or rather, lots of hard work and sleepless nights. Today, she can only say with a smile that nothing is impossible and that no matter what others say, you can achieve your dreams if you work hard enough.

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Also by Scarlet Hyacinth

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