



THE
MIRROR
OF
BEASTS

Also by
ALEXANDRA BRACKEN

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Silver in the Bone
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Passenger
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ALEXANDRA BRACKEN

THE
MIRROR
OF
BEASTS

BOOK 2

Quercus

QUERCUS CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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*May worms feast upon the mind
of any thief so wicked and unkind
to take this book from off its rightful shelf
and from its rightful owner: you, yourself.
And should they crack the spine or tear a page,
then by my curse, they'll know your seething rage.*

For LD—

May your life be full of magic and wonder.

★ DRAMATIS PERSONAE ★

THE UNMAKERS

CAITRIONA—Once chosen to be the new High Priestess, Caitriona was the de facto leader of Avalon until it was destroyed. She now struggles to adapt to the modern world.

NEVE GOODE—A cheerful, caring self-taught sorceress who searches for information about her parentage and mysterious powers.

TAMSIN LARK—Thrust into the world of Hollowers as a child, Tamsin possesses no innate magical ability, but does have a photographic memory and a keen business sense. She's determined to save her brother from Lord Death's influence.

OLWEN—The half-naïad former healer of Avalon, who fights to hold her friends together as darkness descends.

HOLLOWERS

EMRYS DYE—The scion of the Dye dynasty, founders of the North American guild. Unimaginably wealthy, annoyingly charming, and a Cunningfolk Greenworker, he is Tamsin's main rival within the guild and enjoys provoking and flirting with her.

NASHBURY LARK—Tamsin and Cabell's guardian. A notorious figure among Hollowers and sorceresses alike, known for his roguish ways and elaborate storytelling.

HECTOR LEER—A crony of Septimus and Endymion.

EDWARD WYRM—The leader of the London guild at Rivenoak Manor.

SEPTIMUS YARROW—An infamous Hollower who was killed in Avalon, he is best known for recovering Herakles's club.

SORCERESSES & MAGES

ACACIA—Cruel in nature, she is one of the sorceresses who takes Tamsin, Neve, Caitriona, and Olwen captive.

HEMLOCK—A sorceress Tamsin meets at the Dead Man's Rest.

HESTIA—One of the sorceresses, along with Acacia, who takes Tamsin and the others captive.

ISOLDE—A skittish sorceress who attends High Sorceress Kasumi.

KASUMI—The High Sorceress of the Council of Sistren.

MADRIGAL—A mysterious crone sorceress known for her deadly dinner parties. Hires Emrys and Tamsin to find the Ring of Dispel.

MORGAN—Leader of the priestesses who rose against the Druids and were later exiled. Half sister to King Arthur, and lover to Viviane.

ROBIN—Going by the gender-neutral title of Mage, Robin is a recordkeeper for the Council of Sistren.

THE WILD HUNT

LORD DEATH—Having posed as the knight Bedivere and now King Arthur, Lord Death has crossed into the mortal world and is intent on revenge against the sorceresses.

ENDYMION DYE—Emrys's cold and imperious father, who once ruled the guild with an iron fist.

CABELL LARK—Tamsin's brother, who seems to be suffering a curse that turns him into a monstrous hound. He now serves Lord Death as his seneschal.

PHINEAS PRIMM—Formerly a member of Tamsin's Hollower guild.

OTHERS

THE BONECUTTER—An enigmatic figure who procures skeleton keys to open Veins, as well as other oddities, such as basilisk venom.

BRAN—The pooka bartender at the Dead Man's Rest.

DEARIE—The sorceress Madrigal's pooka companion, who acts as both her butler and enforcer.

ELAINE, THE LADY OF SHALOTT—An unfortunate love rival to a sorceress, she was temporarily trapped in the Mirror of Shalott.

FRANKLIN—Tamsin's lovesick tarot customer, who would really benefit from actual therapy.

GRIFLET—A kitten given to Mari.

THE HAG OF THE MIST (OR GWRACH-Y-RHIBYN)—A primordial deity who occupies liminal spaces and has the ability to pass between the boundaries of worlds unimpeded.

THE HAG OF THE MOORS (OR ROSYDD)—Like her sister, the Hag of the Mist, she is a primordial deity able to open the boundaries of worlds and who has a penchant for eating mortals.

IGNATIUS—The hand of glory Tamsin carries to tap into the One Vision, also capable of opening any locked door.

LIBRARIAN—An automaton that tends to the library and protects its many treasures. Has a passion for soft, fluffy things and vacuuming.

MERLIN—Once a Druid and mentor to King Arthur, he attached himself to the Mother tree to survive a duel and now babbles nonsensical prophecy to the few who will listen.

THE NINE OF AVALON—Arianwen, Betryst, Caitriona, Fayne (Flea), Lowri, Mari, Olwen, Rhona, and Seren.

VIVIANE—The last High Priestess of the Arthurian age, who lived for centuries as she waited for the new Nine to be chosen.



GREENWICH, CONNECTICUT

Summer storms had a way of waking the house's slumbering ghosts,

drawing them out of the shadows and through locked doors forgotten decades ago. They peeled away from the walls, wilting with the faded silk coverings. They fell like dust from the sheets that covered once-sparkling chandeliers and the ornate furniture. If you closed your eyes, you could feel them gliding like ribbons around you, greeting you in every dark hall.

The trouble with these old houses, Emrys decided, was that the longer they stood, the more magic and energy and darkness they absorbed, until they became living things themselves.

They allowed their families to repaint their faces, to break the bones of their walls and reset them. They watched as children left and never returned, suffered the silent indignation of being sold to wealthy strangers. And all the while, as years turned to centuries and the houses remained, they patiently collected the dead of their families, swallowing the magic woven into their souls before their bodies had the chance to cool in their beds.

Once, when Emrys was five, maybe six, barely old enough to understand that death was the only certain promise of life, his mother had told him to talk to their house. To greet it as he came and went, and treat it like a friend, so that it might treat him like one in kind.

So he had. *Hello, house; goodbye, house; you look exceedingly lovely today, house . . . Good morning, house. Sleep well, house . . .*

And sometimes, in the haze of exhausted delirium, or after polishing off one of the lustrous bottles in his father's liquor cabinet, he could have sworn Summerland House recognized him. Answered back.

Hello, boy.

And each time it happened, all he could think was *I can't die here.*

Not like the generations of ancestors who'd come before him. The ones who'd laid the house's first stones. The ones who'd expanded it into an estate. The ones who'd found the first relics now lavishly displayed in its halls. Both sides of his bloodline were brimming with Cunningfolk, and he knew the house had greedily sipped at their magic as they performed their talents, the way he could sometimes feel it doing to him when he worked in the gardens.

Named for the Otherland of the mysterious, and perhaps mythical, beings known as the Gentry, Summerland House wasn't so much a member of Emrys's family tree as the tree itself. All their lives had been carved into it, or maybe from it.

Emrys cleared his throat as he made his way down the shadowed hallway, listening to the rain battering the roof. With the invading damp came the musty smell of age. It clung to the carpets and velvet drapes, revived the moment the storm clouds appeared in the distance. The wind tore at the side of the house, as if trying to rip it out from its rotten roots. His garden would be a mess by morning, the flower beds flattened and the vegetables drowned.

"Evenin', Grandmother," he said as he passed the portrait of a stiff-backed, glowering woman. Emrys stooped slightly, using the clouded antique mirror beside the painting to tame the waves of his rain-slick hair. "How's the view from down in hell?"

He almost laughed when a crack of thunder answered.

"That's what I thought," he murmured. He could practically feel her long fingernails digging into his earlobes to silence him. "Stay toasty, you old bag."

The note crinkled in his jacket pocket as he tucked his shirt back into his jeans. He'd found it on his bed after crawling up the trellis to get back into his room. His father's precise handwriting had sent a chill through him. *See me in the study once you've returned from your tantrum.*

Tantrum. His top lip curled.

After a dinner that saw his mother's face cut by his father's wine-glass, and the struggle to get her safely to her room, which had left him hoarse and burning with rage, Emrys had gone for a drive. Through town. Through the next. Through the empty, winding roads until the sky was cloaked with midnight and the car's gas gauge was begging him for mercy.

He'd had to get out of the house before he added one more ghost to its collection of Dyes.

Not for the first time, Emrys had been frightened by his own fury. Suffocated by knowing he'd inherited that darkness and it lived inside him like a seed, only waiting for the first drop of claimed blood to bloom.

I'm not like him, Emrys told himself, the words sounding as hollow to his ears as they felt in his heart. He could never keep that icy veneer of control that came so naturally to his father. *I'm not a monster.*

His lungs gave a painful squeeze as he checked his appearance again, swiping the back of his hand over his mouth.

The note hadn't been a surprise. This was their routine, and Emrys knew what to expect next: his father would be brooding in his study with a glass of Scotch. Emrys would apologize. His father would not. They would agree never to speak of it again.

On and on, turning like the Wheel of the Year.

His feet slowed as he passed his parents' wing of the house, but if his mother was still barricaded inside her bedroom, he couldn't hear even a whisper of evidence. Rain thrashed against the windows, as desperate to get in as his mother was to escape. Neither ever succeeded.

On sunny days, Emrys could make a case for Summerland House

feeling like a museum dedicated to the accomplishments of his great-something-or-others. The sword of Beowulf, its ferociousness dulled by age and the glass case that imprisoned it. Herakles's bow. On and on; countless relics, stolen and traded and bought.

But on nights like this, when a chill crept through cracks in the window frames, when there wasn't another soul around and the ornate sconces cast even the most brilliant treasures in ghoulish light, Summerland House felt more like a mausoleum.

The long hallway brought Emrys to the marble staircase in the foyer. Then, just to the right of the entrance hall, the ancient black oak doors that guarded his father's study. The spiraling patterns of crystals and iron hammered into the wood had their own dark beauty, but also told the story of his father's poisonous paranoia. The sigils carved around them created a protective ward, impenetrable to anyone—mortal or otherwise—without an invitation.

Emrys, however, had the misfortune of being invited.

Ordered, more like, he thought, reaching for one of the silvered door handles. The shape of it, like a gnarled branch, reminded him instantly of the ridiculous pin his father and his cronies from the various Hollower guilds had taken to wearing. They fancied themselves a secret society, but their collective brainpower seemed to be somewhat lacking. As far as Emrys could tell, they mostly just met to complain about the sorceresses hoarding the best relics.

The door swung open at Emrys's touch. He caught an unusual green scent—fresh and sweet and so unlike his father's tobacco and sandalwood cologne, which usually clung to this room. With one last deep breath and a swipe at his unruly hair, Emrys stepped inside.

The shadows of Summerland House seemed to love this room best, stroking the books on the shelves and lounging on the old, velvet-tufted chairs gathered before a cold marble fireplace.

But tonight, the room was draped in crimson silk curtains that concealed all but what lay at its center.

A ring of candles glowed around him, making the fabric shimmer.

With the storm's thunder muffled by the static growing in his ears, and the pounding dread that seized his body, it felt, for a moment, like Emrys was trapped inside a chamber of a throbbing heart.

On the floor, a garland of holly and a garland of oak leaves had been knotted together in a strange pattern. One that seemed vaguely familiar.

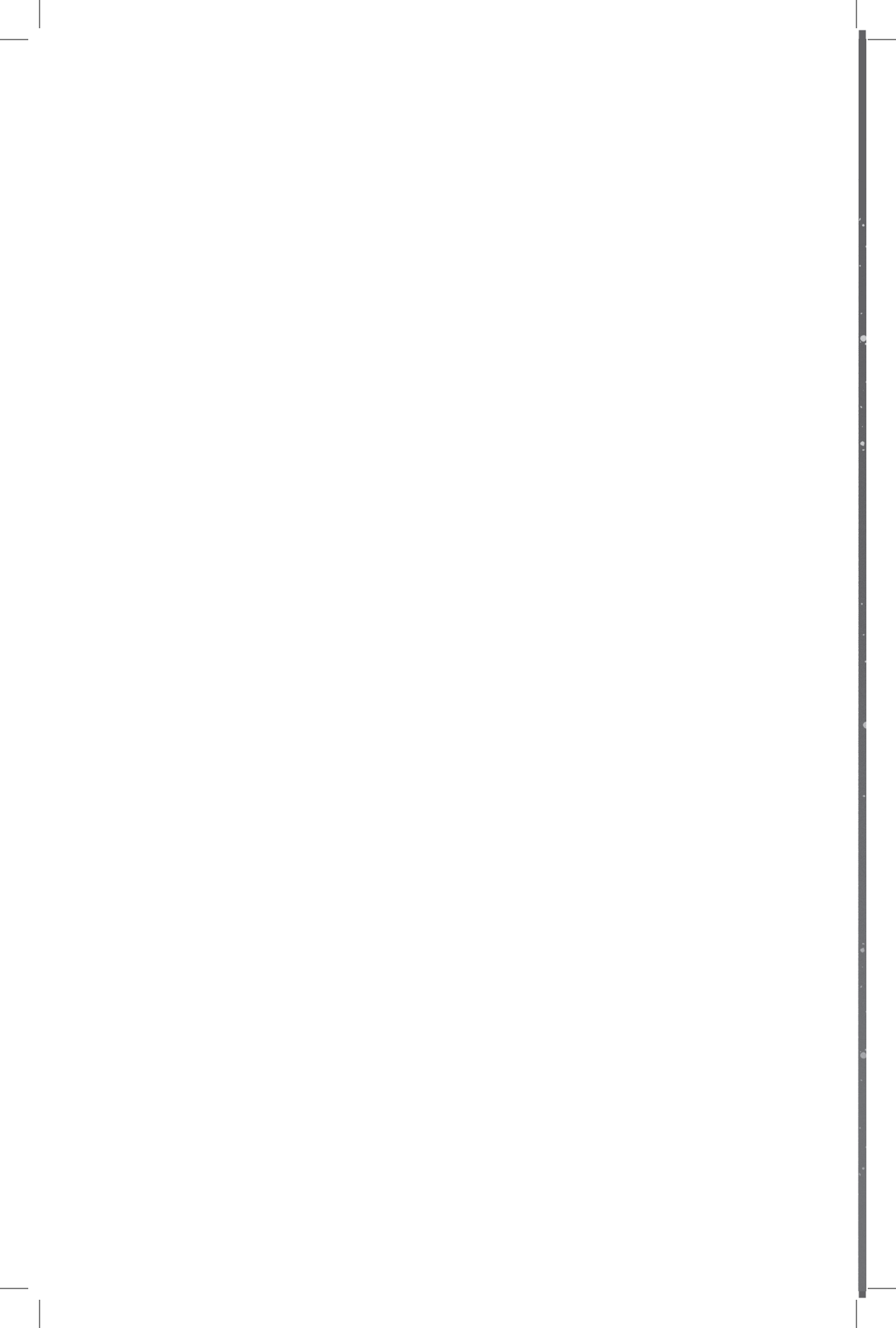
"What in the hell . . . ?" he breathed out, taking a step back toward the door. But when he felt for it, the handle was gone.

There were a rustling of fabric and a shift in the air behind him. Emrys's pulse jumped violently as a hooded figure parted the silk curtains and stepped out, a long silver ceremonial knife clutched in his hands. An eerie wooden mask, utterly expressionless, covered his face, but Emrys recognized the man's rigid gait, the signet ring on the left little finger, the familiar scent of his tobacco and sandalwood cologne.

"No . . .," Emrys began, his shock burning like bile in his throat. "Dad—"

It was the house that answered, triumphant and ravenous from the shadows.

Goodbye, boy.





PART I

THE WINTER
HOST





1

“No, Tamsin. To break yours.”

As Nash’s words faded in the air, other sounds rushed in to fill the void of silence they left behind. Distant cars and voices moving endlessly through Boston’s old streets. Music from a nearby bar whispering through the walls. My upstairs neighbor pacing, his feet beating out a muted rhythm through the ceiling. The rasp of Nash’s fingers torturing his hat’s brim. All vying to fill the long silence that stretched between us.

And still, I couldn’t bring myself to speak.

“It’s been a long time, I know,” Nash continued, his voice gruff. “A long time past too long . . .”

Whatever he said next vanished beneath the roar of blood rushing in my ears. The throb of my heartbeat that seemed to make my whole body shake with the force of it. My hand closed into a fist, and before I could stop myself, before I could tame that surge of pure, unadulterated fury, I punched him.

Nash staggered back, swearing beneath his breath.

“Tamsin!” Neve gasped.

I shook out my stinging hand, watching with grim satisfaction as he pressed his own against his face to stanch the flow of blood from his nose. He reached up, resetting the bone with a terrible *snap* that made even Caitriona wince.

“All right,” he said, his voice muffled by his hand. He pulled a handkerchief from the pocket of his leather jacket, holding it to his face. “I suppose I deserved that. Good form, by the way.”

I forced myself to take several deep breaths. As quickly as the anger had come, it abandoned me, and the emotion that welled up in its place was as useless as it was unwelcome.

When I was a little girl, I used to spend hours in our Hollower guild’s library, tucked between the lesser-used shelves of Baltic legends and incomplete Immortalities, staring at a glass display case it seemed everyone else had forgotten about, or didn’t care to remember.

The light above the polished chunk of amber inside sent a warm glow rippling over the dark shelves, beckoning. Inside its crystalline depths, a spider and a scorpion were knotted around one another, still locked in their battle for supremacy. Perfectly preserved by the same pit of resin that had killed them.

The amber might as well have been a window in which past could see present, and present past. It was frightening and beautiful all at once—it told a story, but it was more than that. It was a sliver of time itself.

I used to think that my memory was like amber, capturing each moment that passed, preserving it in excruciatingly perfect detail. But looking at the man who had once been my guardian, the same one I’d been so sure had abandoned my brother and me seven years ago as children, I began to question that.

I began to question everything.

Nash looked twenty years younger than the final memory I’d captured of him. Before I’d punched him, my mind had registered that the bridge of his nose was straight again, as if it had never been broken in a pub brawl, let alone three others. And his expression, so grave . . . there was none of the reckless adventurer, no sly grins or lying eyes.

Or maybe I was guilty of what I’d always accused him of: mythologizing the man just to tell a better story.

“Tamsy?” he prompted, brow furrowing. “Did you hear what I said about the curse?”

Exhaustion dug its claws into me. My lips parted, but the only words spinning through my mind were the ones he had spoken. *No, Tamsin, to break yours.*

“You don’t believe me, I see it in your eyes.” He glanced toward the door, momentarily distracted by the way it seemed to rattle as the wind picked up. “But I need you to listen to me carefully—to truly *hear* me—and do what I say for once in your stubborn life, because like spring, you are cursed to die young.”

“So?” The word was out before I could stop it.

The others turned to me, horrified. I almost wished that I felt the same way—that I felt anything at all. Instead, an almost comforting numbness settled over me, as if I’d known all along. Maybe I had. People like me . . . we weren’t meant for long lives or happy endings.

“What in the Blessed Mother’s name are you talking about?” Olwen demanded. “Who would have cursed her, and in such a way?”

“Was it the White Lady?” Neve asked softly.

The bruiselike stain on my chest, just above my heart, turned icy, prickling the warm skin around it. My pulse started a drumming beat, off-tempo from the throbbing of the mark. As if a call, and an answer. Every hair on my body rose as the seconds stretched with the agonizing silence.

Nash took a step toward me, bringing with him the smell of damp soil and grass and leather. “No, Tamsy was born with it. But the magic of the curse did draw the spirit—”

The dark air of the apartment shifted violently, forcing me back as another blur of movement raced forward. A flash of silver hair—of a silver blade.

Caitriona launched herself at Nash, using the force of her momentum to slam him back against the front door. The hat and handkerchief fell from his hands, both slipping along the threadbare rug to land at my feet. Olwen gasped, hands pressed to her mouth as Caitriona brought one of my kitchen knives up to Nash’s bare throat. Her other arm rose to pin him in place.

“Who are you?” Caitriona demanded. The edge of the blade drew a faint line of blood to the surface of his clean-shaven skin.

A bolt of panic shot through me as her words sank in, electrifying my mind.

It's not him.

We'd found his body in Avalon. As much as I wanted the last few hours to be one long, unending nightmare, it wasn't. I could lie to myself about any number of things, but that wasn't one of them. Nash was dead.

“Who are you?” Caitriona repeated. “There are many creatures that can wear the face of another, all tricksters, most wicked.”

The man stared at me with a familiar look of indignation, exasperation, and amusement. The air burned in my lungs, begging for release.

Who? Caitriona repeated.

His answer was to shift his stance, hooking his leg through the inside of hers as his open palm shot out and slammed against her solar plexus. Breath burst from her in an explosion of shock and anger, but his foot had hooked her knee and she was falling before any of the rest of us could lunge to catch her.

“Cait!” Olwen moved to kneel beside her, but I caught her arm, holding her in place.

The being reached down to claim the knife, the corners of his mouth quirking with a suppressed smile.

“All this blade's good for is picking teeth and buttering toast, dove,” he said.

“Put down the knife and step away from her.” I'd never heard Neve's voice as cold as it was then, her face hardening with anger. “Touch her again and you'll have hands for feet and feet for hands.”

Her wand, through magic or some strange stroke of luck, had survived the destruction of Avalon—I had completely forgotten about it until I saw her reach into the bag at her waist and pull its long body free. Nash—or Not-Nash—stared down at the razored tip pointed toward him, then looked at me, a bushy brow arching.

“Never thought I’d see the day you’d be cavorting with a sorceress, Tamsy.”

“Keep going,” Neve said. “Your face can only be improved by swapping your mouth with your nose.”

The man tilted his head to the side for a moment, as if pausing to picture this. But he did as asked, setting the knife down on the floor and kicking it out of Caitriona’s reach.

“Are you of Avalon?” he asked Caitriona. “Are you the reason it’s merged again with our world?”

The words were like hands around my throat. The others flinched, retreating from the accusation—but we were guilty of it, all of us. We had performed the ritual thinking it would heal the Otherland and free it from a cursed existence, but it had only restored it to our own world. The collision of the isle and modern Glastonbury had wrought death and destruction I couldn’t begin to think about without wanting to claw at my own face.

You didn’t mean for it to happen, I told myself. None of us did.

It was a mistake. It was a terrible, terrible mistake. I could rationalize that all I wanted, but it didn’t stop the waves of nausea from spreading through me, or the gripping horror at knowing what we’d done.

“Tamsy—” he began again.

“Don’t,” I got out around the knot in my throat, “call me that.”

“That’s what I’ve always called you,” he said. “From the time you were nothing but a wee imp. The first time I used it, you kicked me in the shins and called me a dingus. That was your favorite insult for a while.”

My stomach clenched. The others looked to me, searching for the truth of it in my face.

Caitriona finally rose from the floor, backing toward us, eyes scanning the room for another weapon.

“How . . . ?” I whispered. *How are you alive?*

A low grumble of thunder moved through the city, bringing him

up short. Nash returned to his perch by the door, his body tensed as he looked through its peephole. Whatever storm had blown in was only building in ferocity. When he turned to me again, it was with that same look he'd had when I'd opened the door.

"Were you able to find the ring in Avalon?" Nash asked, as if I hadn't spoken at all.

"Yes, but—" Olwen began.

"Cabell needed the ring, not me," I whispered. That was the most unforgivable part of all this. If I had been able to use the ring on Cabell . . .

The thought of my brother just then, the only other person who'd understand the chaos of my thoughts, who'd be able to help me untangle them, was a knife to the gut.

"Cabell is beyond its help," Nash said. The dismissiveness of his tone made bile rise in my throat.

"How would you know?" I snarled. "You haven't even cared enough to ask where he is!"

"Do you really think I don't know why he's not here? Do you truly believe I don't know what you unleashed into this world?" Nash shook his head, blowing out a hard breath. "Where's the Ring of Dispel now?"

"It's—" Neve glanced at me, as if not sure she should say. "Emrys Dye took it."

"You let a Dye have the ring?" Nash exploded. "For the love of hell-fire, Tamsy!"

"Call me that again and I'll make sure you stay dead this time," I warned him.

"Tamsin didn't have a choice in it," Neve continued. "He was hired by a sorceress."

"Which one?" Nash pressed, reaching down to swipe his hat off the floor.

I got the name out through gritted teeth. "Madrigal—"

Her name vanished beneath an explosion of thunder. It seemed to erupt from above us and below us all at once; the force of it made the

dishes in the kitchen chatter like teeth and sent books falling from the nearby shelves. At the sound of a flat-toned blare, deeper and more wrenching than any ship I'd heard before in the harbor, a chill walked its bony fingers down my spine.

A stream of furious words burst from Nash as he jammed his hat back onto his head and gripped the doorknob, struggling to open it against the taunting of the wind.

"You're *leaving*?" Caitriona asked, aghast.

"Of course," I said bitterly. "It's what he's best at."

Nash finally wrenched the door open and whirled around. His right hand pressed to his heart in a mockery of a vow. "All I've ever wanted—all I've ever tried to do—is protect you."

"Since when?" I spat.

Neve's hand curled tighter around my arm as she drew me closer to her. I'd never seen her like this, all but trembling with anger. It radiated from her until it became indistinguishable from my own.

The December air billowed in around Nash, exhaling delicate flakes of snow. Thunder boomed once more, loud enough to rattle the town-house-turned-apartments down to its foundations. A sharp, acrid scent like ozone filled the apartment, making my toes curl in my boots.

Behind Nash, far above the festive garlands and twinkling Christmas lights, the sky had turned an eerie shade of green. The furious wind tugged at his clothes, drawing him toward the waiting night. Behind him, the trees bowed to the storm, groaning.

"I'm going to get that bloody ring to break your curse," he snapped. "If you hear that sound again, closer than it is now, run as fast as you can—but until then, stay here, or so help me, I will wring your scrawny little necks myself!"

He pointed a finger at the four of us in turn. "You haven't the faintest idea what's coming—what hides within winter's icy depths. Listen to me and you may yet survive this horror you've brought upon us."

The door slammed shut behind him.



“Wow,” Neve said after a moment. “I *hate* that guy.”

My knees turned soft, and I was grateful that Neve still had such a grip on me, that she didn’t seem inclined to let me go. My heart sped furiously as I stared at the closed door, my breath shallow.

Was that really him? I wondered.

The apartment had taken on an unreal quality, hazy and uncertain. The storm seemed to have spread to my mind, swirling those same questions around until I felt suffocated by them. *Was that really him?*

How?

And the only one who could have understood—really understood—the way I trembled with confusion and adrenaline and anger wasn’t here.

“Are we . . . going to go after him?” Olwen asked faintly.

It felt like being torn in two. The logical part of my mind demanded I stay in the apartment, but the ache in my chest urged me to follow him, to demand the answers I needed.

All of it could be a trick, my mind whispered. *Even if it is Nash, you know better than to trust him.*

“No,” Caitriona said sharply. “That’s not our plan.”

“From everything Tamsin has told us, we have no reason to believe him,” Neve added, echoing my thoughts. “. . . Right, Tamsin?”

“Right,” I said, when I found my voice again.

“Is our plan still what we agreed upon earlier?” Olwen asked, looking between us. “We’ll seek out the person Tamsin believes can repair the High Priestess’s vessel?”

She gestured toward the small basket at the foot of the couch, a blanket hiding the shattered bone sculpture that had contained Viviane’s memories.

All of which would be lost to us, including the memory in the shard that Lord Death had stolen and hidden away, if we didn’t repair it.

With each moment that passed, my thoughts darkened, until that frail hope began to fade.

It was absurd, wasn't it? All of it. Even if we found the Bonecutter, what were the chances they'd know the ancient druidic art of vessel-making? Some of the bone fragments were no bigger than needles, while others had been ground down to dust—what if there was no fixing it?

Nausea burned in my stomach, rising in my throat. I don't know how I managed to say, "Yes. We should start searching for the Bonecutter as soon as possible."

"About that," Neve said. "I know we need to find the Bonecutter, but maybe we should go to the sorceresses first. What if they don't have the full story of what happened when Morgan broke the bargain with Lord Death? If they don't know he's still alive, they might not realize he's back and coming for them to get his revenge."

"But Cabell said the sorceresses sealed off the pathways to Avalon from *this* side, to keep Lord Death from being able to follow them into the mortal world," I said. "To me, that says they know some part of him survived."

Merging Avalon back into our world was the only way to circumvent the barriers, which was why Lord Death had gone to all that trouble to manipulate us into performing the ritual.

Caitriona released a harsh breath through her nose. "Indeed."

"Have you changed your mind, then?" Olwen asked Neve. "Do you want us to find the sorceresses—the Council of Sistren, as you called them? To warn them?"

"Yes. I think we should do that before anything else." Neve chewed on her lip, wearing her indecision plainly. "I know we need to repair the vessel, but . . . the more I think about it, the more I believe we need to work alongside them to stop whatever Lord Death's greater plans are."

"Then send word to them, but we owe them nothing more than that," Caitriona said sharply. "Because the more *I* think about it, the more I believe they're the ones that brought this pain and blood upon themselves. The only thing that should matter to us is righting that mistake and finishing what they couldn't by killing Lord Death. Our hunt should begin now."

“And if he kills sorceresses in the meantime?” Neve pressed.

Caitriona lifted a shoulder in a shrug. “So be it.”

Even I startled at that. A slow thread of anxiety began to wind through me as the air took on a different, angrier charge.

Neve inhaled sharply, squaring up to Caitriona as if the other girl didn’t have almost six inches on her. “You don’t mean that. I know you care about innocent people dying.”

“That would require the sorceresses to be innocent, which they are not,” Caitriona shot back.

“But we don’t even have a way of stopping Lord Death. Rushing out to find him is only going to get *us* killed,” I said. “What if the vessel can give us that information? Shouldn’t we be prioritizing that?”

Neve whirled toward me, betrayal flashing in her eyes. “So you don’t care if they die either?”

“I didn’t say that,” I told her.

“You all but did,” Neve pointed out.

I bit the inside of my mouth, anxiety churning my stomach. We couldn’t fight—we had to stay together. In the face of Avalon’s death, we’d chosen one another. And if we were to break apart . . .

I shook my head against the thought, my heart crimping painfully in my chest. *I will have no one left.*

“You *know* my main concern is Cabell,” I said. “All I want is to get him away from Lord Death before whatever hold that monster has on him deepens. You’re the one who suggested it—that the real Cabell is still in there, trapped inside the servant Lord Death created.”

Death magic, born of Annwn, the Otherworld of the monstrous dead, had corrupted Avalon, poisoning its land with shadows, rendering it unrecognizable as the paradise of legend. If it could happen to a place of such power and purity, there was no way Cabell’s mind would have been strong enough to resist whatever enchantment Lord Death had cast over him.

Neve blew out a hard breath, but I knew she understood that much. Whatever she might have said was interrupted by a faint *meow*,

as Griflet, the scraggly kitten who'd journeyed with us from Avalon, edged out from where he'd been hiding beneath the couch.

"Oh, there you are," Olwen said softly, stooping to retrieve him. The gray tabby purred as she held him to her chest, finally content. But the priestess's own gaze was anything but. She sent a helpless look my way as Caitriona and Neve turned their backs on one another, both silently fuming.

"Listen, you're both right," I said, trying again. "We owe the Council of Sistren a warning, but I don't think we should hold out hope they'll do anything other than retreat into their vaults and try to wait him out."

What I didn't say was that while Neve might have been a sorceress herself, I had far more experience dealing with them as a Hollower. And when the sorceresses weren't fighting among themselves over relics and centuries-old grudges, they were nurturing their deeply held instinct for self-preservation.

"Sorceresses aren't cowards," Neve said, her voice streaked with anger. "They'll fight."

"But this is *our* fight," Caitriona countered. "Lord Death deserves to be punished for what he did to Avalon, for killing—" She stopped herself, steadying her breathing before whispering, "For destroying everything, and everyone."

I tamped down my memory before it could punish me with images of vacant eyes, bodies, blood snaking between the tower's stones.

"Careful, Caitriona," Neve said. "You're sounding an awful lot like a sorceress with all that talk of revenge."

Caitriona let out a cold laugh. Her earlier words, as we'd stood together illuminated by the funeral pyre of everyone she had loved, echoed back, terrible and hollow. *I am the priestess of nothing. That is all I shall ever be.*

"Avalon is gone," Caitriona said, "and so are my obligations to it and its Goddess. If I do not call upon her magic, I am not beholden to her laws."

A surge of helplessness rose in me as I exchanged another look with Olwen, too afraid to say anything in case it made the situation worse. Her lips parted, the blood draining from her face.

“What?” Neve gasped out. “You—you won’t even use your magic? After everything, you’d turn your back on her?”

“She abandoned us first,” Caitriona said. “Will you be next?”

“*Stop it!*”

Olwen inserted herself between them, whorls of ink-blue hair rising around her shoulders, as if caught in drifting water. Her face was so stricken, my whole chest ached with the sight of it.

“Stop it,” she repeated, softer this time. “We cannot do this—we cannot fight one another and fight the darkness, too. It’s all toward the same end, isn’t it? No one, not the sorceresses, not us, will be safe while he walks in this world.”

She gestured toward the small basket at the foot of the couch, the blanket hiding Viviane’s shattered vessel.

“All of the memories this vessel contained will be lost to us if we cannot find a way to remake it,” Olwen continued.

My hands curled into fists at my sides.

“We stay with our original plan,” Olwen told us, her chest heaving with the force of her breath, her body vibrating with exhaustion and desperation. “The one we *all* agreed upon not more than an hour ago. We will find the sorceresses and tell them what’s happened, and then we will seek out the person Tamsin believes can repair the vessel. Yes?”

“Yes,” I said quickly. A painful knot constricting my chest released as the tension in the apartment eased. After a moment, Neve nodded. Caitriona crossed her arms over her chest and looked down, her jaw sawing back and forth.

Thunder split the sky above us like a hammer’s fall, devouring every other sound as it shook the walls. And then, like the deep bellow of some primordial beast, came the unearthly blare we’d heard before.

“Okay, what in all the hells *is* that?” I said, stalking over to the

door. By the time I had the cold knob in my hand, Caitriona was right behind me.

“Didn’t Nash *explicitly* say we should run if we heard that sound again?” Neve asked.

We were seven years past the point of him being able to tell me what to do.

If that was even him . . .

The wind shoved the door open against me. I threw up an arm, trying to shield my face from the biting cold and the sharp flecks of ice that swirled through the dark air as the storm fell upon the city. I slipped down the icy stoop.

The neighbor in the unit to my right had stuck her head out of the door, only to retreat inside once the sleet turned to outright hail. A gasping “Holy sh—!” from the side of the converted town houses told me my upstairs neighbor had made a similar decision and bolted back up their private stairwell.

“This storm is—!” I could barely hear Caitriona over the whipping winds. Olwen covered her head with her arms, protecting it as she made her way back into the apartment on unsteady, sliding feet. Come morning, I thought, the city would be frozen solid.

“Do you see anything?” Caitriona shouted to me.

I turned my gaze up, cupping my hands around my stinging eyes. The sky still bore that sickly shade, glowing with a hideous fluorescence as lightning snaked across it, splintering the mirror-like surface of the gray clouds.

“Come on,” Caitriona said, tugging at my arm. Ice crusted in my hair, only flinging itself loose when I shook my head. Neither of us was wearing a coat, and the chill had turned unbearable. A stop sign tore loose from its post, hurtling through the air until it smashed into a nearby car window.

“Go in!” I told her. “I just need—!”

I couldn’t bring myself to say it, but she understood. Her freckled hand gripped my shoulder as she passed me, carefully making her way

back to the stairs. Snow collected on my lashes, in the folds of my clothes. The longer I stood, the easier it became to convince myself that it wasn't the wind that was howling.

I strained my ears, searching for the thread of it again, the monstrous chorus of baying voices.

A crash sounded from inside the apartment. I spun, sliding back toward the stoop. The lamp near the window flickered, then went out.

The wind pushed the door open for me, nearly sending me sprawling to the floor with the force of it. The dark living room greeted me, silent as I struggled to shut the door again.

"Guys?" I called, venturing toward the bedrooms. My heart rose into my throat. "Hello?"

I turned the corner at the kitchenette and stopped dead.

Caitriona lay prone on the floor, her eyes shut, a broken flowerpot from the kitchen in pieces around her. A figure in a dark hooded robe bent over her and wrapped something around her hands.

"Don't touch her—!" I surged forward, wild desperation exploding in my chest. I drew my arm back to shove the intruder away, but my joints locked and I slammed onto the floor.

"Don't!" I gasped, trying to crawl toward Cait. Where were the others? Where was—

Pain exploded across the back of my skull as something cracked against it. The stench of warm blood flooded my senses as it dripped through my hair into the puddle of melting ice and snow beneath me. A low, scornful laugh curdled my blood.

The floor pushed against my cheek, rattling with approaching footsteps. Somewhere, Griflet yowled. The shadows of the hall grew long, spreading across the floor like a spill of tar, devouring Caitriona, devouring all.

And hard as I fought, when the darkness reached me, I was gone.