

*Immisceo*  
TAKEN

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STORM EYE  
PUBLISHING

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Published by Storm Eye Publishing  
A United Kingdom imprint

ISBN 978-0-9957947-0-2

First Edition 2017



*For my mother,  
whose greatest power is her unyielding love.*







*ELMFIRTH, 19 YEARS EARLIER*



**F**IRE CURLED IN THE OLD woman's hand, bright and hungry as though it could already taste its next victim. Amara screamed at the sight of it.

'Hush, girl,' said the younger woman next to her. Her grip on Amara's shoulder tightened like hooks in the girl's flesh.

'Please! Please let them go.'

The woman shushed her again and shook her. 'Enough. Don't make it worse for yourself,' she scolded. She wrestled the girl to a standstill and glanced across the circle at the older woman.

'It's time,' Rosamund said, flame held high. 'You may say your brief goodbyes.'

The girl shoved against her captor, wrenching free. She lunged toward the circle's centre, toward the waist-high pile of logs and kindling—toward her parents, bound against the pyre's towering stake. Tumbling onto the wood-pile, the girl stretched out her arms in a futile attempt to embrace her weeping mother. A fist clamped in her hair and jerked her to a halt.

‘Don’t hurt her,’ the girl’s mother cried. ‘Please! She’s innocent.’

‘Innocent?’ Rosamund’s eyes widened in the dusky light and the flame in her hand flickered. ‘Her very existence is a crime onto itself.’

Amara’s mother shook her head. ‘No. Please, no. She’s just a child. It’s not her crime. It’s mine—’

‘And she will pay for it with her life.’

The mother wailed—a sharp, gut-wrenching howl that echoed in the wood-clearing and sent birds flapping skyward.

‘Enough!’ Rosamund barked. ‘If you’ve nothing to say save for your protest, let us be done with it.’

Amara shivered, wrapping her free arm across her chest and biting her lip to keep from crying. She studied the face of her father. His dark eyes bore into hers with intent. They flicked back and forth between hers and the face of the witch with the relentless grip on Amara’s shoulder. Amara frowned at him, wishing she had the power to read his mind.

‘Saba. Hand the girl over to Coen,’ Rosamund instructed.

Saba shuffled Amara along to the other side of the circle where a man stood waiting. The girl caught her father’s eye one last time, and words formed on his lips.

‘Touch her,’ he mouthed.

Amara blinked, comprehension lost on her as her father's face disappeared from view. She stumbled, and Saba yanked her to her feet.

'Look where you're going, girl.'

She ignored the warning, glancing back at her father. His face was no longer visible, but his fists clenched repeatedly at his back. Not to escape his restraints, Amara realised, but as a message.

Almost too late, she laid both hands on her captor, clenching her small fists around the witch's wrist, imitating her father. She flinched, startled by the new and compelling portal in her mind's eye. Bright colours of energy swarmed under Saba's skin. Hairs rose on the girl's neck even as Saba wrestled against her, beginning to squirm easily out of the child's grasp. But then Amara found it—the swirls of energy—dancing, translucent—and she clawed at them with her mind. She drew them into her, into her own hands, and Saba was locked in her grip. The girl pulled the swirling energy inside of her until she could feel the heat of it on her skin. Her eyes flew open as she pushed the magic from her tiny outstretched palm, gasping as the flame ripped through the air toward an unsuspecting Rosamund.

The old witch flared orange and fell to her knees, the single flame in her hand engulfed in the raging fire of the rest of her. Her skin and flesh blackened and shrivelled, and as quick as the fire began, it was

gone, a spiral of smoke curling from the pile of ash where Rosamund had stood mere seconds before.

Amara looked from the ash to the palm of her hand, her eyes wide. Saba shrieked, and the male witch behind them, Coen, rushed forward. Amara pulled at Saba for more magic, but the swirls were nothing more now than threads. She flung the witch's wrist from her clutches and ran toward the pyre.

Heat cracked alongside her, missing her by inches, not flames but lightning. She yelped, covering her head on instinct. She scrambled toward the stake, propelling her small body over the wood, ignoring the ache in her knees as she fell against the logs again and again.

'Go! Amara—RUN!'

She shook her head at her father through tears. 'I won't leave you.' She reached her mother first, flinging herself against her body, whilst fighting the knotted rope at her mother's back. Beneath her, smoke began to rise, and the union of wood and flame crackled in her ears. 'No... No!' She swerved behind her parents, plucking at the knot with shaky too-small fingers.

'Amara! Run, dammit, run!'

'I can't untie them. I can't do it,' she cried, throwing her fists against the ropes.

'Leave us!'

She shook her head again, stepping around her mother. Then she thrust herself between her

parents, throwing her skinny arms across their waists. They wept as the smoke rose steadily, the encroaching heat driving Amara closer and closer between them.

A white crack of lightning snapped at her feet, and she screamed again. The spark caught, orange and yellow flames licking their way toward the stake. Amara made to stamp on them, but another whip of lightning struck, this time to her right, missing her elbow a fraction of an inch. She looked down into the stone faces of Coen and Saba: there'd be no point in pleading.

Her father howled beside her as Coen cracked another bolt of lightning, this time at her father's side. A deep welt appeared on his arm, blooming with blood that dripped at an alarming rate onto the logs. 'Please, Amara. Leave us. I beg you. Run,' her father cried. A solitary tear streaked down his cheek, glistening in the light of the fire. 'Go,' he pleaded.

She cast long looks at both her parents. A tight ache blossomed in her chest as the fire began to roar in earnest behind her. 'I'm so sorry,' she said. Then she slipped around her mother for the last time and ran. She hurtled to the base of the pyre, hidden in the curtain of smoke as she tumbled to the ground. Her breath came quick and heavy as she pelted toward the thicket of trees on the other side of the clearing. She didn't dare look back.

Night fell swiftly upon her, the smoke disappearing with the light, the glow of the fire dimming. But the final cries of her parents echoed in Amara's ears as she ran. And they would continue to echo for a long time to come.

*Luciana*



# One



**I**N THE TOWN OF ELMFIRTH, the only thing worse than a meeting was a meeting with the Duciti. It foretold one thing: trouble. Luciana shut her eyes against the crowd and sunk lower in her chair. If she couldn't be seen, maybe they wouldn't call her name. Maybe this once, she would go unnoticed, be left alone, free to hide away and play human for a while.

Saba, Coen, and the new and youngest Duciti, Liam, stepped forward at the front of the town hall. Saba strode onto the podium with the airs and easy grace of someone in charge and took the stand.

Luciana squirmed in her seat. Saba's presence alone presented a stark reminder: this was Coven Duty—Coven Law. Luciana could no sooner get out of this than she could pull the power from her body and gift-wrap it for the bastards. Served her right for having too much of the stuff as it was. And the Duciti took it to be their job to remind her—and

often—just how big an honour it was to have ‘such power’. As far as she was concerned, they could take her power and keep it, for all the ‘duties’ they deemed necessary. In her opinion, not that they ever asked for it, the Duciti were little more than racist elitists with a penchant for barbarism. It was hard luck no one in over a thousand years had ever had the balls to inform them of it.

Saba shuffled her paperwork, her beady eyes darting around the room with hawk-like precision. She cleared her throat then spoke directly to the congregation. ‘Tobias North,’ she said without ceremony or introduction. ‘Come forward.’

The crowd murmured, turning their heads that way and this, seeking out Toby—a young, single farmer, as well-known for his potent Energy magic as for his market-fresh produce.

Luciana turned her head, daring to hope that poor Toby had packed up and left town. Mere seconds later though, Tobias North stood up out of the throng and, solemn-faced, trudged toward the podium.

Luciana sighed.

No one knew what was to be asked of the lucky selected two, only that the Duciti required a male and female, one from either coven, strong in every branch of magic. Whatever the Duciti had in mind was hardly anything to be excited about. It never was. Luciana knew better than to hold out hope for a rainbow and a pot of gold.

Saba nodded her head at Toby, and casually referred to her paperwork as if it were nothing more than the daily herald. ‘Excellent,’ she said, ignoring Toby’s obvious awkwardness as he hovered front and centre in the hall, shifting his weight from foot to foot, his sun-brown arms dangling idly at his sides.

‘Luciana Blaknall,’ Saba called.

Luciana started as if Saba had hollered in her ear. *Expecting* to hear her name was wholly different to actually hearing it, and despite prodding and gentle nudging from her neighbours in nearby seats, Luciana’s legs forgot their job.

‘Luciana Blaknall,’ Saba called again, and this time, someone next to Luciana all but shoved her upright. ‘Come to the front, Luci,’ Saba said.

Luciana cringed at the shortening of her name, then decided it was altogether beside the point. Her name had been called.

Whatever contemptible task lay ahead, she would be expected to smile, say thank you, and get it done. She trudged her way to the front, her stomach heavy, dragging on the floor behind her as she went.

‘Good,’ Saba crowed, giving a tight-lipped smile. ‘Excellent. We will see the two of you privately. Meet us in Room 2A if you please. The rest of you may leave.’

If you please, indeed. As if any of this was optional.

Saba, Coen, and Liam made their way to one of the internal doorways. Toby and Luciana lingered at the foot of the stage, silent, sombre, eyeing each other like two stray cats. The rest of the crowd began moving.

‘All that hullabaloo for virtually nothing,’ someone said.

Coven members knew their place: very much under the Duciti, minding their business and keeping their noses clean, out of fear if not respect. But they weren’t above showing their aggravation of a wasted afternoon, grumbling as they shuffled out of the town hall.

‘We should go, too,’ Toby said finally as the last of the crowd dispersed.

‘Yes, straight out of that door and no looking back,’ Luciana said, jerking her head toward freedom.

He sighed. ‘Come on,’ he said. ‘Best not keep them waiting.’ He placed his hand on her shoulder and steered her away, and with the pace of two prisoners being led to the noose, they set off to find Room 2A.

‘What do you think they want with us?’ Toby asked as they navigated the corridors.

Luciana shrugged. ‘Whatever it is, you can bet your farm it won’t be pretty.’

On reaching 2A, Toby hesitated, his hand hovering over the doorknob. ‘I don’t have as much history with them as you do, but I’ve heard and

seen enough to know what's what. Whatever's waiting for us on the other side, let's agree to stick together, yes?'

Luciana studied Toby's face. The mop of black hair, long straight nose, and honest eyes the colour of burnt sugar. His thick dark eyebrows puckered as he waited for her to agree. She huffed at him instead. 'It's good sentiment, farmboy. But we may not have that luxury.' She swept past him and opened the door. 'Let's get this over with.'

Six faces lifted and smiled in their direction as Luciana and Toby crossed the threshold. Two of the three Duciti from earlier hovered near the hearth, flanking Saba who sat behind a large, ornate desk. Three more perched serenely in lush armchairs around the room, cradling delicate china cups and saucers as if this were an intimate tea party.

'Ah, finally,' Saba said. 'Would you care for refreshments?'

Luciana shook her head. 'I'd care to know what this is all about.'

'Excellent,' Saba said for the third time in one session, indicative of anything but. 'Then let's not waste any more time. Both of you—have a seat,' she said. 'I will presume you know of the situation we have with Amara and her Outcasts. I suspect it's no secret, even among the likes of a commoner's daughter and a mediocre farmhand such as yourselves.'

Hardly the best way to induce camaraderie, but Luciana merely shrugged and Toby gave only the slightest hint of offence as he adjusted his stance in his chair.

Saba continued. 'Amara has evaded capture for far too long, and she has built something of an army against us. We find ourselves in need of a weapon.' Saba paused and fixed them both with an unflinching gaze. 'That's where the two of you come in.'

Luciana snorted. 'You want *us* to go up against Amara and her band of misfits? Ha! It's a suicide mission. You may as well kill us yourselves and save everyone the trouble.'

Saba warmed the nearby teapot with the palm of her hand before topping up her teacup. She added copious amounts of sugar and studied Luciana with raised eyebrows, stirring the liquid in her cup with the daintiest of spoons. 'Please don't tempt me, Luci. You've worn my patience thin on more than one occasion, but it seems we both will have to endure yet another.'

'It's *Luci-ana*, and believe me, I hate our little escapades at least fifty times more than you could possibly begin to fathom.'

'Be that as it may, it's your duty. Some of our strongest witches have met their ends, and we're turning to the people. Your power is unmatched—except of course by ours.' She swept a bony hand

around the room, gesturing to the coven leaders. 'Besides,' she said, 'this time you'll have company.'

'To do what, exactly?' Luciana asked.

'We need the two of you to marry,' Saba said, 'and your—'

'To *what*?' Luciana leaned forward in her chair.

'Marry. Be wed. A rare exception to one of our most fundamental laws. You'll make history,' Saba beamed, as if enthralled by this notion. 'We will allow, just this once, a union of both covens. The two of you—and your child—will be Amara's undoing.'

Luciana let rip with a burst of laughter. She stood, pacing back and forth in front of Saba's desk. 'Assuming for a moment that what you've just said isn't the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard in my or anyone's life, and assuming I'd even consider going along with it, how in hell's name would my getting married and impregnated achieve victory over Amara?'

'Firstly, you have no choice in the matter. Secondly, you know as well as I, a union of our covens is forbidden for many reasons, not least of which is that an Immisceo witch has an unlawful amount of power at his fingertips.'

'And you've now all decided you want one at your disposal?'

Saba shrugged and sipped her tea. 'We need one.'

‘Then go out and find one!’ Luciana said. ‘We all know they’re out there somewhere—runaways. On the run from you lot, no doubt.’

‘Yes. Precisely why we’ve had trouble locating one willing enough to blow their cover.’

‘Who can blame them, with the price you place on their heads. And now with the task you want to throw at them.’

‘Yes. It’s unlikely one will come forward. More unlikely is gaining their trust. Which is why we must resort to this. The two of you will produce the Immisceo witch we need.’

‘What if the child we have isn’t an Immisceo? What if he’s born a Mimic? Do we keep going? Child after child after child? Like rabbits?’

Saba allowed a small smile. ‘We’d rather hope for a lucky strike. But yes, there’s every chance your firstborn will be a Mimic. But it will be handled. And we would hope that in due time, the odds will fall in our favour.’

‘When you say handled...’

‘I mean taken care of.’

‘By someone else?’

Saba gave an almighty sigh. ‘If you insist on transparency... any child that is not an Immisceo would be put to death.’

Luciana stilled. ‘This is... it’s...’ She faltered and tucked her dark hair behind her ears, trying to find an appropriate response that didn’t involve fleeing the scene. ‘You’re all... barbaric,’ she said. ‘You

would kill innocent children? Children created at your command? I have rights. *They'd* have rights!

'Rights! What—human rights?' Saba let out a derisive snort. 'Not only would you suffer these powerless blemishes on our society, but you want to lump us together with *humans*? Rosamund would have fried you where you stand, girl, for such an outlandish suggestion.'

'Let me see if I'm getting this right. The long and short of it is that I must produce children for the good of the covens, only to watch them all die?'

'If those children are Mimics, yes. You know the law. Mimics are products of a crime.'

'A crime you and the other Duciti would have me commit!' Luciana crossed her arms over her chest as if it would shield her. 'It's madness,' she said. 'I want no part in it.'

'It isn't a choice you have the privilege of making.'

'So, you would have us—Toby and me—churn out babies one after the other just to throw them on the front line?' Luciana shook her head. 'No. I won't do it.' She rounded on Toby. 'Don't you have anything to say? Tell them! This is preposterous!'

Toby stared at her with wide imploring eyes and said nothing. He wrung his hands over and over before looking away.

'Say something, dammit!'

He raked a hand through his dark crop of hair, his brow furrowed. 'It is preposterous, I agree, but—'

'There!' Luciana said, her wide-eyed gaze trained on Saba. She stretched her hand toward Toby as if his agreement was all she required to get out of doing it.

'But it's our duty,' Toby finished quietly.

Luciana stared at him like he'd grown six heads. Her ice-blue eyes flashed. 'Like hell it is!'

Saba sighed and several of the Duciti shifted in their seats. One of them coughed. Saba placed her cup on the desk with a loud clatter and produced half a ream of paperwork from her drawer. 'Stamp your feet if you must, Luciana, but you *will* do this. Arrangements have already been made.' She plucked a quill from the desk and extended it to a horrified Luciana. 'The only decision you need now make is this: will you do it with your freedom, or without?'

## Two



LUCIANA STALKED OUT OF THE town hall with Toby at her heels. Her feet carried her along as if they knew something she didn't, and Toby kicked up dust behind her, struggling to keep pace.

'Don't do anything rash,' was the first thing he said to her.

She snorted. 'Is there another way to react to this?'

'You heard her. We have no choice. We're obligated. Bound by—'

'Bullshit!' Luciana's nostrils flared. She jerked to a halt and fixed Toby with a glare. 'Were you awake in there? Did you not hear what she expects us to do?'

Toby withered beneath her wrath. 'What do you propose as an alternative? Running?'

'Exactly that.'

'Or die trying, is that it?' Toby said. 'Are you willing to be a fugitive for the rest of your life?'

Luciana threw her hands in the air. 'Beats being a puppet!'

Toby backed up several paces and Luciana tried to wrangle control of her temper. 'Look,' she said, as evenly as she could manage. 'I can't tell you what to do. By all means, go ahead with their ridiculous request. Just don't expect me to go along with you.'

'So, you're leaving? Just like that? Do you think it'll be so easy?'

'Not likely—but I have to try. And you're welcome to join me.'

Toby frowned, his expression grave. He absently kicked the ground with the toe of his boot, lost in thought. 'This is a mess.'

'Something we can finally agree on,' Luciana said. 'And if we go through with it, it can only get messier.'

'You're right. I know you're right.' Toby grimaced, his words at odds with his expression. He stood in front of her like a tall, awkward tree. 'Whether this makes me more or less of a man for admitting it: I'm afraid, Luciana. The Duciti aren't known for their mercy.'

Luciana nodded. 'I understand. But if I do nothing, I might as well roll over and play dead.' She reached out and gave his shoulder an awkward pat. 'Good luck,' she said. 'Whatever you decide. And if you change your mind, meet me at the crossroads before sundown.'

She set off for home, pretending not to notice the intrigued glances and whisperings of folk in the street. A fragile sense of calmness spread through her at a glacial pace as a half-realised plan began to form in her mind.

It shattered as she drew level with her mother's house.

On either side of the garden gate, like paradoxical guardian lions, stood two guardsmen, their distinctive yellow coats as much a mark of the Duciti Order as it was a cause for nausea on an already gruelling day. A third guard hovered outside the open front door, his thick-soled boots trampling the primroses on the garden path.

'Need directions, boys?' Luciana asked, opening the gate and swanning through. Neither one responded and Luciana forced herself to keep moving.

The guard at the front door had other plans. His hand flexed over the grip of his sword as he widened his stance and puffed out his chest. 'State your business,' he said, blocking Luciana's entry.

A prickle of irritation ran through her. 'I live here, imbecile.'

'Ah, Ms Blaknall.' The man drove his sword home in its scabbard and stepped to the side, all gruffness gone. 'Just a precaution, you understand?'

Luciana balled her hands into fists. 'A precaution for what?' she asked, but the guard appeared to

have conveniently lost his voice. She charged past him and came face to face with her mother.

Alice Blaknall shot a scathing glance at her daughter. 'What have you gone and done now?' she said.

Luciana clenched her teeth to stop a barrage of curses.

'How many times have I told you, Luci?' Her mother shook her head, her lined face weary. 'Didn't I warn you about getting mixed up in matters that don't concern you?'

'I waited for you at the Clock Tower,' Luciana said, ignoring her mother's rhetoric launch into a well-rehearsed lecture. 'Where were you?' she asked. 'Why weren't you at the meeting?'

'Need you ask?' Her mother threw a pointed look at the guard outside the doorway. 'I've been entertaining your guests.'

'They've been here all this time?'

'Right after you left for the market this morning,' her mother said, nodding.

'And they're not my guests,' Luciana added.

'Well, they certainly aren't mine. What's the meaning of this, Luci? You're in over your head with this Duciti business.'

The guard turned at the mention of the Duciti's name and gave both women a disapproving look of warning.

'Don't I know it,' Luciana mumbled. 'I'll explain later.'

Her mother shook her head, the tidy grey bun on top of her head shaking loose with the motion. 'No. You'll explain now.'

Luciana blew out air between her teeth and took her mother by the wrist, bundling her toward the kitchen at the back of the house. The guard raised an eyebrow and nothing more.

'The meeting,' Luciana said, perching on a chair next to the hearth. 'It was another Selection.'

A look of terror crossed her mother's face. 'For what?'

Luciana found herself smiling. A mirthless, incredulous smile. 'A marriage.'

The older woman frowned. 'What? Why?'

'They want to unite the covens,' Luciana said. 'To create an Immisceo child—as a weapon.'

Her mother stared into the crackling fire without uttering a word.

'And that's not the worst part,' Luciana went on. She leaned forward on her elbows and met her mother's gaze. 'They chose me.'

'That's why—' Her mother pointed at the guard across the room and Luciana nodded.

'By the stars, Luci!' She took hold of her daughter and shook her by the shoulders. 'What have you done?'

'Something terrible in a previous life, I presume. That's all I can put it down to.'

'Now is not the time for flippant humour, child. What do you intend to do?'

Luciana looked toward the door and then back at her mother. 'I have to leave,' she said under her breath.

The older woman's eyes went as round as two plates. 'Openly defy the Duciti?' She clapped Luciana across the back of her head. 'Do you have a death wish?' Her mother clutched her chest and cast a nervous glance at the front door. She shuffled toward the nearby kitchen table and took a seat. 'You should never have started any of this,' she said. Her hands trembled as she smoothed her hair back into place.

'It was hardly optional, Mother.'

'Maybe not today. But you placed yourself in their hands long before now.'

Luciana folded her arms across her chest and studied the fire. 'And was it ever optional then?' She kept her voice even for the sake of the guard, when all she wanted to do was yell.

'You put yourself in their midst,' her mother said. 'You made a target of yourself when you needn't have.'

'And what would you have had me done? Sit idly by as Father faced everything alone?'

'Yes!' her mother said. 'A thousand times, yes! It was his job. And he died anyway, child. Yet you persist.'

'This again?' Luciana shook her head. 'Have you no feeling? Do you not miss him?'

Her mother bent forward, her eyes full. 'On the contrary, Luci. I say this *because* I miss him. What's to become of me if I lose both of you?' She blinked back tears. 'Has that ever crossed your foolhardy mind?'

Luciana turned away, full of shame. 'I'm sorry.'

'Not half as sorry as I am. Haven't you learnt anything since your Father's passing?'

Another rhetorical question.

Of course, she'd learnt things. She'd since learnt how to bottle her grief, and hide her fear, how to live with regret. Mostly, though, she'd learnt that the Duciti were not who they claimed to be.

'I should go.'

Alice jumped up from her seat. 'Over my dead body.' She stood over Luciana as if her frail form alone could stand between her daughter and the stupid choice she was about to make. 'Luci, if you go now, you'll spend the rest of your life running.'

'You sound like Toby.'

Alice gave her a quizzical look. 'Who?'

'My betrothed. Your future son-in-law.'

'Well, I like him already. He's right. And if you take a moment to think before you act for once, you'd see that, too.'

'Maybe you should marry him instead.'

Alice said nothing, but she let out a long sigh.

'I'm sorry, Mother. I shouldn't have said that. But think about what you're asking me to do.'

‘I’m not the one asking—I just don’t want you to live a fugitive’s existence.’

‘It doesn’t matter.’ Luciana shook her head, resolute. ‘Not when the alternative is ruining the life of an innocent child.’

Alice sighed again and ran a soft, wrinkled hand along her daughter’s cheek. ‘But you are *my* innocent child.’

Luciana leaned into her mother’s touch for a moment, then she rose and headed for her room. She stuffed the bare necessities into a tattered satchel and tucked a paltry handful of coins into the small leather pouch on her belt. She strode back into the main room. Wanting to avoid further protest, she gave her mother a stiff one-armed hug and started toward the front door. She paused at the threshold and glanced over her shoulder.

Alice stood in front of the hearth, teary-eyed and defeated. A look passed between them that said more than any number of farewells or *I-love-you*s could have expressed. Then, with a deep, bone-rattling breath, Luciana stepped outside.

‘Where do you think you’re going?’ the guardsman said as soon as he saw her.

‘I’m meeting my future husband,’ Luciana said. ‘You should be thrilled.’

The guard scrutinised her. ‘This is the first I’ve heard of it.’

‘Can I help that you’re out of the loop?’

The guard bristled and Luciana raised her chin, careful to maintain eye contact. 'Not on my watch,' he said. 'Get back inside.'

Luciana sighed. 'I really hoped you wouldn't say that,' she said, then without further warning, she curved her arm through the air and sent the guard flying in a pale-yellow stream of magic. The two guards at the gate charged forward, and inside the house, Alice cried out in alarm.

Luciana held up both hands and swirling ribbons of power streamed forth. She clapped her hands together and the two charging men butted heads, falling in a heap on the garden path.

Three more appeared from the side entrance and Luciana swerved, backing towards the gate. She stepped over the two unconscious men and ducked as one of the three conscious guards hurled his blade at her.

Another followed suit and this time, she turned the weapon mid-air and sent it hurtling back toward him. The man cried out as the blade pierced his shoulder. He stumbled backwards and hit the ground hard.

Luciana stretched out her arm and reached for the sword once more with magic. As she lined up the weapon with another of the men, a resounding clap of thunder split the air.

'Enough!' The sound of Saba's voice demanded attention.

Luciana's gaze whipped back to the house. The sight before her held her frozen in place.

Saba stood in the doorway, her hands crackling white with lightning, and in her clutches, was Luciana's mother. Her eyes were wide, her mouth gaping open as Saba's energy magic sparked and pulsed against Alice's throat like a noose.

'Looks as though I'm just in time for the party,' Saba said, flexing her hand. Her magic glowed in a deadly synchronised dance across Alice's skin. 'Why don't you come back in and join us, Luci?'

Luciana's heart thudded against the walls of her chest.

'Think carefully, girl,' Saba said. 'Are you willing to sacrifice your only parent for a child you're yet to birth?'

Luciana looked to her mother, disgusted with herself for her moment of hesitation. She stepped forward and with a clenched jaw, raised her hands at her sides in surrender. The sword clattered to the ground in the same instant. 'Let her go,' Luciana said.

Saba smiled. 'With pleasure.'

As the lightning crackled back into Saba's palms, Alice tumbled forward, clutching her throat and gasping for air. Luciana rushed to her side and helped her mother up. The weight of what she'd almost done hit harder than a blow to the stomach. Guilt clogged her throat as she took her mother's shaking hand in hers.

Alongside her, Saba let out a long, exaggerated sigh. ‘Why must you insist on making everything difficult?’ she said, and turned on her heel, striding into the house as though she had every right to.

Luciana stared into the eyes of her petrified mother and weighed her options. That was when it dawned on her—

There were none. Her options were nothing more than illusions. There would be no running, she realised. Only dancing. And the Duciti were the ones pulling the strings.



# Three



**L**UCIANA SLAMMED THE BOOK SHUT and threw it on the ever-growing pile. She pulled herself away from the sprawling collection of tomes and grimoires on the kitchen table. Day after day, she scoured the pages until the words began to blur together, the sentences dancing across her vision long after she closed her eyes. And still, she had not the faintest idea of what she was meant to be searching for.

It was useless. She'd known it from the first book to this latest one. She'd known it from the very day she'd been hurled into this nightmare in that stuffy, overbearing room almost three years ago. And nothing about the nightmare had changed, at least not in any way worth remembering.

She was searching, yes. For what, she might not know, at least not specifically. All she knew was that she needed a way out. A way forward. A way to give the Duciti what they wanted—Amara's

defeat—without having to give them another child. But figuring out how to do that was proving impossible.

The child in her belly kicked and Luciana smiled then checked herself. Unless she could find the elusive escape route, becoming attached to the child inside of her would be nothing more than pointless heartache. There was more than enough of that to go around already.

Luciana marched out of the room and through the cottage. She strode out into the clean country air, looking for all the world like someone with a purpose. But she had none. There was nothing left to do but wait for this baby to be born, then wait for the moment when he would be snatched away from her—one way or another.

Toby hailed her from the other side of their small garden. His brow creased, visible even at a distance. She dismissed him with a wave of her hand.

Nothing was wrong, she wanted to tell him.

Only, everything was wrong.

She padded barefoot along the path. The thicket of trees ahead in the distance stood like soldiers, shoulder to shoulder, gatekeepers to the town beyond, between the life she used to know and the half-life she walked around in now. She turned away from them and headed toward the open plains of Archer's Field, toward the stream. The sun's fierce afternoon rays enveloped her like an

old friend, as if there was something to be happy about. Warm breeze danced in her long, ink-black hair and she wished for a storm, something more to fight against instead of the sham of Summer's gaiety.

Her breath grew laboured the farther she went, the hem of her long dress tangling around her bare ankles and snagging on weeds and wildflowers. She pushed on until the fallen oak came into view.

She'd been here countless times since last season's storm, trying and failing to move the mighty dying tree—with magic that shunned her every move. She inched closer today, every day a little further, hoping proximity would make a difference, ignoring the pressing matter of needing proximity in the first place.

Closing her eyes, she blocked out the rolling fields. The cottage, Tobias, the forest, and the distant town—she cleared them all from her head and zeroed in on the dying mass of the oak tree, and she touched it with her mind. She cocooned the trunk in her magic, its leaves and branches rustling, disturbed, as her power swirled around them, and when the entire form of the oak was encased in power like a tight translucent blanket, she pushed with her mind, up and away from her, compelling it to obey.

It moved an inch. A single inch.

It seemed to groan as Luciana's power tried to lift it off the ground and then—nothing. Luciana

snapped her eyes open and stared at it, then re-examined it with her mind's eye. The magic was there. She could see it; she could sense and feel it. It just wouldn't do what it was told to, much like ordering a cat to fetch a stick.

Shoulders tensed, she dropped the connection with the tree and approached it. She perched on the expansive trunk and lay her palm on the rough bark, sifting through all the possible reasons for the sudden disconnect with her power. The baby kicked again, and she shooed away the distraction of it, anxious to figure out whatever fresh hell she appeared to now be in.

There had been other times in the past when her magic misbehaved; a working that didn't have quite the same results as she'd intended, or using too much power to move something requiring significantly less. But that was in the beginning. That was when she hadn't known her potential; barely knowing or understanding, or even *wanting* her strength in magic. Amateur mistakes like that were a rare occurrence now. The only real hindrance these days might be side-effects from a particularly volatile mood swing.

The baby kicked again, sensing her agitation, and she palmed her belly, idly running her hand over the six-month bump. He kicked at her touch and Luciana smiled before she could stop herself. He had a hell of a lot of fight for his size...

She jerked as comprehension struck with the force of a wild horse stampede. Like the satisfying sealing click of a key sliding into a lock, the pieces aligned in her mind, and she stared at the bump with new understanding.

The baby was a growing witch.

It made such sense. So much in fact, that she felt like an oaf for not realising it sooner. The first pregnancy and the miscarriage had rendered no change in her abilities... because those children had not been witches. The subtle but immediate sting at the corners of her eyes was an unnecessary reminder that they had all paid dearly for that. The baby inside her was different. As soon as she acknowledged this, she realised some part of her had known all along. Three months, maybe four, her magic had grown increasingly unpredictable. The baby couldn't possibly have his own power yet; children didn't come into their own until after their fifth year, but that potential... that void waiting to be filled... it had to be the reason behind her magical malfunction.

Gazing at her stomach, the satisfaction of getting to the root of her problem was short-lived.

Her unborn child would be an Immisceo witch—a witch so powerful among her people that their very being had been outlawed. And yet, for all the power her child would soon possess, he would be helpless against his fate.

She hung her head and wept, curling her hands around her belly and foolishly wishing she could keep him in there forever—keep him safe, from the cursed existence to which she'd condemned him.



HER NEW KNOWLEDGE HUNG LIKE a heavy weight around her neck as she ambled back through the field. Yet another burden to bear. Even as the familiar twinge of guilt ran through her, she knew she was right. Regardless of the child's abilities, he was doomed from conception. As a mother, she had failed before she'd begun.

She stopped at the stream to catch her breath, toeing the water's edge and letting her mind wander. She felt powerless. All this time, under the orders of the Duciti, under their watch. All for the sake of her freedom. Except this wasn't freedom. A handsome, isolated cottage in the middle of an idyllic field was not your regular prison. But aesthetics aside, Luciana and Toby had spent the last two years in shackles. And had they refused to go through with it, the result would have been the same—only with literal shackles and a cage to sleep in.

She sighed, tilting her face toward the sun's rays and closing her eyes. She had never been so powerless as she had been these last few years. And

the irony of losing her magical power on top of it all was not lost on her.

As she started back toward the cottage, two dark figures loomed into view. Dread settled in the pit of her stomach as the figures grew: Saba and Liam hovered in the garden like sinister scarecrows.

‘We were beginning to worry,’ Saba said by way of a greeting.

‘Thought I’d grabbed the old broomstick and fled?’ Luciana asked.

‘Well, it wouldn’t be the first time you attempted something ridiculous.’

‘Believe me, if such a thing existed, I’d have given it a shot long ago.’

Saba’s lips twisted into a ghost of a smile, neither amused nor friendly. ‘We’ve come to see your progress.’

Luciana laughed, despite her black mood. ‘My progress... Right. You make it sound like I’m writing a report and I’m past my deadline.’

‘As delightful as your sarcasm is, I haven’t the time nor patience for it today. Amara’s numbers grow daily, and you, in your rural bliss here, may be unaware of the increasing body count. The situation is dire, Luci. We need the weapon, and the survival of the covens rests entirely with you.’

‘The weapon.’ Luciana’s nostrils flared. ‘It’s a child. An unborn child. What’s the matter with you people?’

‘Shall we go inside?’ Saba asked, though she and Luciana both knew it was not a request.

Luciana waved them into seats as she bustled through the living room, but instead of sitting, they followed her straight through to the kitchen. She finished up washing her hands and turned from the sink to find Saba lurking directly behind her.

She jumped and clutched a hand to her chest. ‘What are you doing?’ she yelled. ‘Are you trying to *scare* this baby out of me?’

‘If it would work—perhaps.’

Luciana shooed them out of her way and dried her hands on the skirt of her dress. ‘Wait for me inside.’

‘We can talk here.’

‘Well I need a drink, so here, there, either way, you’ll have to wait.’

Saba sighed, although for its volume and tone it was more a reprimand than anything else. Only a Duciti could take something so benign as a sigh and bend it into a threat.

‘I know what you’re attempting to achieve here, Luci.’

‘A cup of tea with any luck. Although this kind of harassment calls for more than chamomile.’

‘You’ve little control. This is the only way you can assert yourself. It must be irksome for someone as... wilful as yourself. I know the situation hasn’t always been... pleasant,’ Saba said.

‘Irk some? Unpleasant? Is that the best you can come up with for what you’ve put me through? Put all of us through?’

Saba’s brow creased under Luciana’s withering gaze. For a fleeting moment, the Duciti’s face almost crumpled. Almost. Then, as if Luciana’s eyes had just played tricks, Saba reformed her usual stoic stance. ‘It is regrettable, Luci. Your bearing of a Mimic, the miscarrying of another. But all is as we wish. You must make your peace with it.’

Luciana stared at her. It was all she could do to keep from bashing Saba over the head with the teapot. Her eyes filled, with sorrow, sure, but mostly in fury. How anyone, let alone another woman, could stand before her and sweep away the injustice of killing a child—her child—was incredible.

Saba, Liam—all of them—they’d lost their grip on reality. It was no recent loss either, but this was the closest Luciana had ever been in witnessing how far they’d go.

She turned to the jars of herbs on the counter and practised deep breaths.

‘What’s all this?’ Saba said, interrupting Luciana’s measured breaths.

‘I’m making tea!’ she snapped, spinning to face Saba. ‘Is that allowed?’

‘Not that—this!’ Saba indicated to the book-laden table, which at first glance was nothing out of

the ordinary; if they looked too closely however, it might give away what she'd been working on.

Luciana huffed at herself. *She* barely knew what she'd been looking for. Let alone anyone else. Sadly, there was nothing to give away. 'Is there a restriction I don't know about on reading material?'

'No. Not yet anyway.' Saba flipped the covers of several open books, glancing at titles and frowning.

Something in Luciana fluttered at the expression on Saba's face. Did she dare to hope? Was there something worth finding that would help her after all?

Liam interrupted her thoughts, his first words since arrival startling her back to reality. 'What are you researching?'

Luciana took great care to shrug casually. 'Nothing. I've only just gotten around to taking them out of storage. More dust than actual words. Old family hand-me-downs.'

'Personal grimoires?'

'Some. From the Blaknall line. And a few others,' Luciana offered, happy to prattle on about the so-far useless books as long as it deflected the issue of what she hoped to find within their pages.

'It takes merely a glance to tell that half of these may as well be fiction. Look. Look at this—' Saba held up a small brown book and read the title aloud. '*An Unfinished List of Magical Artefacts and*

*How to Create Your Own.* She snorted. 'Absolute hogwash.'

'Not absolute,' Liam corrected. 'Aren't there several items in—'

Saba stopped him short with a glare. 'Well, what about this one? *Dragon Sightings Throughout History.*' She tutted. 'The mind *boggles.*'

'So, there were a few loose cannons in my family. I'm sure you can relate,' Luciana said.

Saba ignored the jab at her state of mind. 'I hope you haven't been nurturing ideas of double-crossing us, Luciana. Especially not with dragons. Temperamental creatures. The townsfolk would be on clean-up duty for weeks,' she laughed, the sound from her lips equally as foreign as the idea of giant flying lizards.

'If I find one, I'll be sure to give it directions,' Luciana said.

'Yes, well... Jesting aside, you are bound by duty to cooperate. No number of books will help you out of that.'

Luciana seethed beneath her calm exterior. As if she needed confirmation. As if she didn't already know how cornered her would-be family was. 'I'd like for you to leave now,' she said, the strain of keeping measured and calm making her voice wobble.

'We came here with a purpose. We still need to check your progress.'

‘You may speak with my midwife—if you haven’t taken it upon yourselves to do it already.’

‘Yes, we have, but... there are things about the pregnancy even a midwife cannot detect.’

Luciana raised her brow.

‘Have there been any disruptions to your magic?’ Saba asked pointedly.

Luciana hesitated. They already suspected. Why else? Why would they ask something like that? The previous two pregnancies warranted no such question. Why this one? The books. Her stupid, fruitless search for an escape had drawn attention to what she herself had only just discovered: the baby was an Immisceo. She’d be damned if they learned of it.

She struggled to compose herself, to not give anything further away; the tiny life inside of her strengthened her resolve. ‘Disruptions? No. Why? Should I be worried? Is there something I should be aware of?’ she asked. Acting concerned was hardly difficult, and feigning idiocy was lately all too easy.

Saba studied her for much too long a moment before finally shaking her head. ‘Not yet. If there are any... interferences in your power, you must inform one of us. Immediately.’

‘Why?’

‘It is an order, Luci. It would serve you to recognise one.’

Luciana shook her head dismissively. 'Not that. I mean why would there be problems with my magic? What would it mean?'

'It's nothing to trouble yourself with. In your condition.'

Luciana stifled a retort.

'Just be sure to report back to us if and when it occurs,' Saba said. 'We'll see ourselves out.' She stalked out of the room without so much as a goodbye. Liam dipped his head toward Luciana and shuffled along behind the first Duciti, leaving Luciana alone in the kitchen once more with nothing but the wretched books for company.

She picked up the book on dragons and smiled, a stunning visual playing in her mind with Saba being snatched off the ground by a formidable 40-foot fiery creature. What joy.

She scanned the pile for the other book Saba mentioned, moving tomes and journals and grimoires, one after the other. She upended title after title, curiosity and frustration incensing her hunt, and when every book on the kitchen table had been displaced, Luciana knew the truth. *An Unfinished List of Magical Artefacts* had been stolen. And although robbery was hardly cause for celebration, Luciana felt lighter than she had in months.

It meant that whatever was in those pages was worth something—something that might mean never having to give up her child.



LUCIANA'S JOY WAS SHORT-LIVED. SHE realised that, hope aside, discovering the book's potential wasn't particularly helpful if she no longer possessed it. She spent her mornings searching for a replica of it, and in the evenings, after Toby's work was done, she plagued him into sketching what little she remembered about the book's illustrations—artefacts rumoured to be in existence but now reduced even further by her limited memory and Toby's artistic failings.

He humoured her as always, but she was becoming more and more afraid that humour was all it ever was because none of it brought her closer to finding a way out.

It tired her out more than the pregnancy did, and that was no picnic either. With her magic as unpredictable as it was, she felt tetchy and off-kilter, almost afraid of her own next move, treating her body the way she'd treat a rotten egg so as not to accidentally crack it and wreak havoc.

Plus, she hadn't been sleeping. If she didn't know any better—if the cottage weren't warded with Duciti magic—she would have sworn someone had been tracing her dreams over the last few nights. Tracing was powerful Mind magic. She had only gotten a handle on it a few years ago, and according to the Duciti, she was one of their brighter buttons.

It occurred to her that maybe the book hadn't been stolen for its potential after all; perhaps it was nothing more than an access tool to trace her dreams. Except she couldn't begin to think why the Duciti would need to resort to stealing her possessions. Bastards that they were, it would have been possible, and far easier, for them to invade her mind during their visit. None of it made much sense at all, but hoping against her own instincts was the best she could do until she figured the book out. Or until the Tracer, if there was one, found what they were looking for and came to take it.

The days between the birth of the baby and finding any sort of lead on magical artefacts drew closer and closer together—and only one thing became clear. The baby was undoubtedly a witch. Apparently discontent to simply toy with Luciana's power anymore, he drained her of both magic and energy, rendering her practically useless after midday.

Thankful for the autumn breeze, Luciana collapsed into a chair overlooking the garden, raising her eyebrows as the chair held her weight without folding in on itself. Toby worked the vegetable patch, his brow glistening with the labour of it in the weak afternoon sun.

'Take a break, farmboy,' Luciana called to him, smiling.

He paused and stood, wiping his arm across his brow and grinning. 'Some of us don't have your excuse,' he said, beckoning to her swollen belly.

He sauntered over anyway and kissed the top of her head before sitting on the doorstep next to her. He glanced up. 'You should rest,' he said, frowning.

'Is that a polite way of telling your wife she looks like the cat's hind legs?'

Toby grinned. 'Not at all. That would insult the cat.'

Luciana laughed and took a playful swipe at him. 'I've ruined you. You used to be so... mild-mannered.'

Toby shrugged. 'Guess you rubbed off on me.'

Luciana cast a long look at him. Her husband. She never would have predicted it but she'd grown to love him. Not the fairy-tale love her mother had told her of when she was a child; there was no romance between them. But what did exist was a fierce and protective companionship. The kind of bond that formed between two creatures broken by the same whip.

She smiled at him. 'You too,' she said. 'On me.'

He snorted. 'Fat chance.'

She swatted him again, repeatedly, until he clasped her hand with his own and kissed it.

'Seriously, Luce, get some rest.'

'I can't.'

'The baby?'

Luciana shook her head. 'The Tracer.'