

Chapter One

Brietta's sneakers beat the pavement with a dull, reassuring thud that created a pleasing counterpoint to the pounding of her heart. It wasn't yet light, and there was still a cool freshness in the air that would dissipate when the hot sun rose to reflect off the asphalt, turning the city into a stifling hell. No matter—she would be at work by then, amid the rich, hidden meadowlands of Chicago's Druidic Circle, where well-tended forest and hedgerow boundaries blocked the relentless noise of the city. Brietta was apprenticed there as a soil-speaker, one of those who worked to use ancient druidic teachings to heal the ailments of the land. Her work began before dawn every morning, for there was no better time to listen to the earth, and she often worked until late in the night, wandering the meadows and hedges to speak to the night-blooming plants and learn their secrets. So Brietta ran in the early darkness, working up a fine sweat to start her day out right. Her phone chirped a notification in her pocket, but she didn't stop to look—this was *her* time.

She had always loved to run—loved feeling the strength of her long limbs as they moved smoothly, loved feeling her russet hair stream out behind her in its waist-length ponytail. Most of all she loved the feeling of freedom it gave her to pull on her shoes and *go*. Brietta always wanted to be going, and it was her greatest goal in life to travel the world, healing droughts in places like Africa or Asia, teaching the land to bear again after phenomena, natural or unnatural, had wreaked havoc on the local ecosystems. Brietta wanted to see the ancient hedgerows and standing stones of Britain where her ancestors had studied and worshiped, and even to venture beyond, into the Old World as the Fae called it, that shadowy land that had its own ancestral claim on her. Brietta was not a full-blooded Fae, but she still woke from dreams of that strange place with tears of longing on her face.

By the time Brietta made her way back to the little apartment she shared with her mother and half-sister, she was soaked in perspiration, and she headed straight for the shower, cleansing herself before changing into an embroidered linen tunic and long, comfortable skirt. Her mother was already moving around in the kitchen, and Brietta grabbed a cup of coffee and sat down to wait for breakfast. “You don't have to cook anything,” she said, as she did almost every morning.

“I guess I'll just throw out this pan of oatmeal, then,” her mother said blandly. Helori Larch was a tall woman, quite fair, with a large, mild brow that gave her countenance a gentle charm. “Such a shame.”

“Well, as you've already started it,” Brietta laughed. She glanced at her phone, seeing a text message from an unfamiliar number, though the area code was local. *Good morning, beautiful. I like your hair better down.* Her face clouded a little as she read the message, toying with one long, damp tendril. It was probably a mistake—she'd stumbled on a message from some secret office flirtation, perhaps. *Wrong number,* she texted back, then laid her phone aside. “Did you sleep well, Mother?”

“Too well, I think,” Helori yawned. “I know I dreamt—and when I woke I was sure it was very important, but I couldn't remember a thing.”

“A sending, do you think?” Dreams were taken seriously in the Larch household, and Helori, part Fae and part hereditary druid, was gifted in the arts of divination.

“I'm not sure,” her mother frowned. “It wasn't an ordinary dream—but I'm not sure it was a sending. I suppose if it was important, it will return.” She laid a dish of oatmeal, bathed in cream and topped with a piece of fragrant honeycomb, before Brietta. “Will you be home for lunch today?”

“I'm not sure—I hope so,” the young woman answered before hungrily attacking her breakfast. “But Walter's obsessed with the vacant lot project right now, so he's running us hard.” The vacant lot project had a nicer name—The Reclaiming Rituals—but all the apprentices called it by the more homely name, for it involved more or less traveling around the city to find vacant lots and urban ruins and help the land there remember its original purpose.

“It's important work,” Helori chided gently. “Just think of what children can learn there once the earth remembers.”

“Children don't play in fields anymore, Mother. They don't know how.” Her phone chirped again, but she didn't pick it up to look—her mother had strict rules about phones during meals. “I know it's important, but it doesn't make it any nicer. And Walter plays the *worst* music in the van, and he'll never let us change the station. Mark got around it the other day, though—he said we should meditate on the way to the lot to prepare, so at least we didn't have to listen to any more 'polka fever.’”

“Well, your sister put up a lunch for you last night, so don't forget to take it with you.”

“Yes, Mother. Tell her I said thank you.”

“You can thank her yourself,” Helori said, now sounding just a little stern. “It would make a nice change from you going at her about the recycling.”

“But she always sorts it wrong, even after I made a chart, and then I have to do it again—I wouldn't mind if she just put it all out for me to sort, but it's stupid to do it twice.” Brietta went to the sink to rinse out her bowl, and then picked up her phone to check it. It was from the same number as before, and when Brietta read the message, she stopped breathing for a moment. *There's no right or wrong between us, Brietta. Only fate.*

“Stupider still to quarrel with a sister over something so small.” Daria wasn't quite Brietta's sister of course; she was the product of an affair her late father had had with a powerful strega witch years before. When that woman had returned to Italy, she had left her little daughter Daria with her father's family. If Helori had felt any shame or anger about her husband's unfaithfulness, she had never vented it on Daria, but had welcomed the little girl into the family immediately, and never made any distinction between her own blood and her adopted daughter.

“Mother...” Brietta said slowly, then handed Helori the phone to show her the message. “Did you give that weird guy upstairs my number?”

“What? Of course not.” Helori read the text messages, but instead of becoming alarmed, as Brietta expected, she smiled and returned the device. “You've got an admirer! That's lovely.”

“Those... don't sound like an admirer,” Brietta said, reading the words again. “*I like your hair better down*—I had it back when I was running. It sounds creepy, like someone was watching me.” And she really didn't like that last message.

Helori rolled her eyes. “You always make too much of everything—judging everybody all the time.”

“What?” Brietta looked up, stung. “I don't!” She couldn't understand her mother's reaction, why she didn't seem at all worried by the strange tone of the communications.

“Maybe if you didn't, you'd have some decent dates and not spend all your time with that predator.”

“Mark is not a predator!” He was, technically—her fellow apprentice and best friend was a werewolf, but he wasn't like some of the others. There were actually a few werewolves in the Druidic Circle, for their animal selves often helped them communicate with beasts in a way that even Brietta's Fae heritage and intuitive connection with nature couldn't match. Werewolves

were generally considered the more reliable of the two classes of predators by the magical community, primarily because most of them worked with natural magics rather than the dangerous ritual magics practiced by vampires. Still, they were often treated with unease even by the Fae, who were as a rule less fearful than humans.

“A wolf’s a wolf, sleek fur or not, and I’m sure you’d say something different if you met him in the moonlight. Now hurry up, you’re going to be late—and don’t forget your lunch.”

Brietta stared for a moment, then finally nodded, putting her phone in her purse and pausing to find her little lunch bundle, tied up prettily in a Japanese cloth. “Yes, Mother. Do you need me to pick up anything?”

“There’s an elixir waiting at the apothecary shop if you have time.” Helori kissed her daughter’s forehead, then said, as she always did, even if Brietta was only leaving the apartment to run to the corner store, “Walk in the ways of truth, and spirits guard you, daughter.” Usually the words were reassuring—but in light of the strange text messages, they made Brietta wonder if her mother weren’t trusting to the spirits a little too much.

Brietta arrived at work right before dawn, and Mark handed her a cup of tea as they set out to walk the meadows, as they did every morning. “What’s wrong?” the werewolf asked as soon as they were alone. “You keep looking around like you’re waiting for someone to jump out at you.”

“I kind of am,” she confessed, then explained about the text messages.

But once again, she didn’t receive the reaction she expected. Mark gave a little shrug. “At least he didn’t send you a dick pic.”

“So I’m supposed to be grateful that this person who might be stalking me hasn’t yet shown me his package? What the hell, Mark?” Whereas her mother’s reaction had confused more than angered her, this was enough to get her blood up, and fire kindled in her hazel eyes. “What’s wrong with you? Can’t you see how creepy this is?” While she might have expected that kind of response from some caveman, frat boy type, Mark wasn’t like that.

“I’m sorry,” he answered, looking crestfallen. “I just...look, it’s probably some asshole borrowing someone else’s phone. Just ask who it is.”

Brietta pursed her lips, still angry, but couldn't think of a better solution. She pulled out her phone, took a deep breath, then texted back, *who are you?* Then she shoved the phone back into her pocket, far from eager to see the response. “Vacant lots again today?” she asked.

“No, thankfully,” Mark answered. “Walter left a message this morning—some trouble with the van. He's taking it to the mechanic today. Let's hope it's an expensive and lengthy repair!”

Brietta giggled, and then fell silent as her phone chirped. It took several long moments of battling with her cowardice before she pulled it out and looked. When she finally did, she nearly stopped breathing. *I am many things, Brietta. I am the night shadow at the corner of your eyes. I am hunger and I am thirst. And I am your future sire.* “Mark.” The word came out as a thin croak.

“Hmm?” Mark, who had been following the flight of a thrush with his keen eyes, looked at Brietta, his eyes warm and concerned. “What is it?” Brietta wordlessly shoved her phone into his hands so he could read the words. He scanned the message and then, to Brietta's astonishment, began to laugh. “So it's some emo sorcerer kid who's read too much vampire poetry.” He held the phone out to return it to Brietta.

“How can you assume that?” If Brietta had been angry before, now she was merely aghast. How could he assume something so sinister was just a silly joke? “If this is a vampire... if he's set on... on...” She couldn't even finish. *Sire.* The word made her want to vomit. To be stalked, even killed by a vampire was one thing, but to be turned... to become a creature of living death... to Brietta, for whom earth and sky and natural magic had been her first teachers, that would be the worst thing that could happen. She would lose everything—she would lose herself.

“Why do you always have to assume the worst?” Mark asked. “If he were really a vampire, why would he be telling you all this first? It's just stupid, some kid playing around.”

Brietta clenched her jaw, then took her phone and thrust it in her pocket. “I need to go walk the far hedgerow—I'll see you later.” Without waiting for a response, she set off with a long stride, needing badly to find solitude to regain her equilibrium. Why could no one understand her fear? Why did they all treat it like a joke? Brietta was hardly some timid maiden who jumped at every shadow. Usually, her mother chided her for being *too* brave, for taking too many risks. Yet now she was chuckling over these terrifying texts, and Mark too. Was she taking them too seriously? But such things weren't unknown—rare, yes, but they happened. The

Gazette reported at least one or two cases of vampire cults run amok every year. It usually happened because of humans encouraging the predators, eager for the promise of great power and eternal life.

When Brietta reached a lonely spot, she kicked off her shoes and cast herself down under an elder tree, her slim fingers reaching out to touch the trunk and take strength from it, even as she drew from the soil beneath her. “Help me,” she whispered. “Make me strong.” She was answered, as always, by a reassuring flood of earth power, dark crimson. Brietta closed her eyes, pushing all the fearful thoughts away and letting the energies of the soil cleanse her.

When at last she felt clean and strong again, Brietta began a silent dialogue with the earth beneath her, telling it about the strange messages, the indifferent reactions of Helori and Mark. But where she had hoped to find reassurance, she found only more trouble. The soil showed her a little place, not far beyond the boundaries. Brietta knew it—she passed it every night on her way home. It showed her a figure in the moonlight, listening for Brietta's song as she walked the bounds, a figure that radiated an ineffable hunger...

Brietta sat up abruptly, her face ashen. “No. No, no, no, no,” she whispered wretchedly, hiding her face in her hands. It couldn't be true. Why should anyone want her? She had never been the type to flaunt herself, to show off bosom and thigh to catch men's gazes. All she wanted was this, the soil, and the deep magics. Why? She curled into a self-protective ball, hiding her face in her knees, trying not to cry.

Finally, still shaking, Brietta stood up and put her shoes back on. She had to get home. She couldn't stay at work till her usual hour—if a vampire was stalking her, then she had to be home safe before dark. She would have to go home early, and then go to Lord Larch the next day so that the clan could alert the peacekeepers. That was the proper way. They would protect her. If her loved ones did not care enough to listen, at least the peacekeepers, trained in such situations, would understand.

Brietta gave a flimsy excuse about a headache at the center, glad that Walter, who would have questioned her sharply, was otherwise occupied. At home, she curled up in her bed with the covers over her head, ignoring her mother's worried inquiries. She stayed that way, neither moving nor sleeping, for hours. She tried to meditate to force out the terror, but it was impossible. All she could think about was the glimpse she'd seen of that shadowy figure watching and listening...waiting for her. She'd turned her phone off, so there were no

disturbances from that source, but the torment of not knowing what horrible messages might be accruing was nearly as bad.

After dark, her sister Daria came in with a cup of tea and sat down on the edge of the bed. “Brietta, are you okay? Mama's worried. You're never like this.”

Brietta poked part of her face out from her hiding place under the covers. “*Now* she's worried,” she said, rather bitterly.

“What do you mean?” Daria held out the tea until Brietta was forced to sit up and take it.

Brietta explained, slowly and grudgingly, watching Daria closely to see her reaction. Daria was quiet for a long moment after Brietta finished. “But it's just texts, right? You know Mama would be worried if it were something more. It's not like her problem is not being protective enough,” the girl joked, nudging Brietta to try and make her laugh.

But Brietta didn't even smile. “It's not just texts, weren't you listening? The soil *showed* me.”

Daria twisted a long strand of dark hair around her finger. “But you know what they say about doing magic in an unbalanced emotional state. Maybe you just saw your fears—that can happen so easily.”

The older girl shook her head fiercely, glaring at her half-sister. “That's all very well when you're a student. I'm a druid, Daria. I can tell the difference between projected fears and visions. This was real.”

“All right,” Daria said soothingly. “I don't know. But it won't help if you hide away and make yourself sick. I saved some dinner for you—it's in the oven.”

“I'm not hungry,” Brietta grumbled, but at least sipped her tea. “I'm not going to make myself sick. Tomorrow I'll go to Lord Larch. It would be easier if I could just go to the peacekeepers myself, but it would be a terrible breach of protocol. I'd never hear the end of it.” If she was still around to hear the end of anything, she brooded.

Daria nodded encouragingly. “He'll know what to do—put it right. There's nothing to be so upset about, Brietta. I'm sorry someone is scaring you, but you're just doing what they want if you let yourself be so frightened.”

“Well, I'm sorry I can't stay calm when someone is stalking me and threatening to turn me into a vampire!” Brietta snapped and slammed her tea down on the nightstand so hard the liquid sloshed over the rim.

Her sister gave a long sigh and stood up. “I’m sorry I made you mad. I was just trying to help. I’ll be in my room if you want to talk more or sleep with me.” Faced with Brietta’s stony silence, she left the room, looking sorrowful.

Brietta gritted her teeth and got up, suddenly too restless to stay in her cocoon any longer. She began pacing her small room restlessly, her mind running through a thousand awful scenarios over and over. Picking up her tea again, she went to the window and stared out into the darkness moodily.

There was no noise to herald his arrival, and at first Brietta thought she was looking at a shadow cast by someone on the fire escape above. But then she saw the eyes. Glowing crimson like a bat, they were fixed on hers. Her teacup fell to the floor, shattering, and Brietta’s breath caught in her throat as she stared, willing herself to unsee him. But she couldn’t—there was a vampire, right there, outside her window. He drew his cloak away from the lower part of his face, and his ivory teeth bared in a knowing smile. There was a glint of light from an elaborately worked brooch at his throat. The force of his aura hit Brietta like a powerful blow—she could feel age and power rolling off him in waves. This was no newly-turned fledgling testing his limits. He was, if not ancient, still very, very old.

At last Brietta stumbled back from the window, drawing in a lungful of air and letting it out in a piercing scream. Though the curtain fell back into place, hiding him from view, she could still feel him there, and she thought she could hear a sound like laughter, cruel and mocking. “*Mother!*” she screamed, digging her fingernails into her palms. Her heartbeat thundered in her ears, and she felt dizzy, could barely keep her feet.

But no one came, and Brietta, still fumbling and clumsy in her terror, fled her room to the kitchen. Though she was too afraid to reason clearly, the lack of response to her cry had only increased her fear, for she knew her mother was at home—*what had he done to her?*

The cozy kitchen was the same as ever, though, and there was her mother, sitting at the kitchen table, gazing at the runestones spread out before her. “Mother,” Brietta gasped, feeling as though her heart would burst, and she fell to her knees beside Helori, wrapping her arms tightly around the solid frame. She couldn’t speak further, only let out terrified sobs and tiny, incoherent sounds.

“Brietta, what’s wrong?” Helori leaned down, effortlessly drawing her slim daughter into her lap. “What is it, darling?”

It was a long time before Brietta could find enough breath to make proper words. She gasped and choked, clinging to her mother, then finally managed to say, “Vampire...window...didn't come, Mother, *why?*”

“Shh. Take deep breaths, Brietta,” Helori said softly. “Tell me properly, what happened?” Her hand made little, soothing circles on Brietta's back.

Finally Brietta managed to tell her story, her face still buried in her mother's neck. Part of her was ashamed—she was never so fearful. But then, nothing so frightening had ever happened to her before. She breathed in the scent of her mother, of clean soap, rosewater, and baking. “Mother, he's going to take me. He's going to *turn* me.”

But Helori didn't seem alarmed, and her voice didn't change from its gently reassuring tone. “Darling, you didn't scream. Don't you think Daria and I would have heard? You must have had a bad dream.”

“It *wasn't*,” Brietta protested. “Mother, I saw him, I felt him. He was right there. Old—so old...and strong.”

“Brietta,” Helori said firmly, “what vampire is going to risk hovering outside your window in plain sight, where a peacekeeper or even a mundane could catch sight of him? I know it must have seemed very real, darling—I'm worried about you. You've been working such long hours. Maybe we can go away for a little while and take a vacation so you can rest. I know you're frightened, but a little sea air will blow all this right out of your head.”

Brietta clumsily rose to her feet, unable to believe what she was hearing. She *had* screamed. The vampire *had* been there—Helori, with her deep psychic sensitivity, should have felt him too. What was happening? And how could her mother not believe her, dismiss it all as a fantasy brought on by overwork? The last was the most hurtful, and Brietta's face became a rigid mask as she fought not to betray her anger. “Yes, Mother. I'm going to go take a bath. I'm sorry I disturbed you.” A flicker of her rage came through at the last words, and she turned and stalked off to the bathroom. At least it didn't have any windows.