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COLE
MUNRO
AN IMMORTALS AFTER DARK NOVEL

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KRESLEY COLE



MUNRO



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Dedicated to you guys, with all my heartfelt gratitude for your patience.



EXCERPTED FROM

THE LIVING BOOK OF LORE…

The Lore

". . . and those sentient creatures that are not human shall secretly coexist with man."

• Most are immortal and can regenerate from injuries, killed only by mystical fire or beheading.

The Lykae Clan

"A proud warrior of the Keltoi People was taken in his prime by a maddened wolf. The warrior rose from the dead, now an immortal, with the spirit of the beast latent within him. He displayed the wolf's traits: the need for touch, an intense loyalty to its kind, and an animal craving for the delights of the flesh. Sometimes the beast rises."

• Each Lykae possesses the Instinct, an inner guiding force.

• Mate for life. Above all things, they seek their fated one, revering matehood as other species do gods.

Those Best Forgotten

"Cross the Forgotten, and your future becomes history."

• A mysterious sect of warlocks, thought to possess a time-travel gateway.

• A supernatural sphere protects their home realm of Quondam.

The Turning

"Only through death can one become an 'other.'"

• Various immortals can transform humans or even other Lore creatures into their species through differing means, but the catalyst for change is always death, and success is not guaranteed.

The Accession

"And a time shall come when all immortals in the Lore must fight and destroy each other."

• A kind of mystical checks-and-balances system for an ever-growing population of immortals.

• Two major alliances have recently formed: the Pravus Rule and the Vertas League.

• Occurs every five hundred years. Or right now . . .



"A clan seer once predicted I'd be saddled with a harridan for a mate. I'm no' even sure what a harridan is—just know I doona want one."

—Munro Theodan MacRieve, lykae sentinel

"Some whisper that I sold my soul to a crossroads demon in exchange for my aim. Nonsense. No devil's bargain could make me this good."

—Kereny "Ren" Codrina, practitioner of impalement arts, leader of the circus of hunters



ONE

Dungeon of the Disremembered, Quondam

MODERN TIMES

The cracking sound of Munro's bones echoed in the cell as his friend's fist delivered another blow.

Brain rattling inside his skull, Munro bit back a growl. He'd long since stopped trying to reach Madadh, the legendary Mad Dog of the Highlands. The warlocks had *vassaled* the male with an obedience spell; Madadh's wolven inner beast was fully risen, his Lykae blue gaze vacant.

A mindless slave for the Forgotten to use.

And they wanted to do the same to Munro. He narrowed his eyes at the robed archwarlock controlling Madadh—Jels the Conniver. The male's pasty face was sunken, his bald pate reflecting the cell's torchlight.

Munro could break his spindly frame so easily, but he was in no position to attack—on his knees, his manacled wrists connected to a chain that descended from the ceiling. Magic reinforced all the metal, making it indestructible even to one like him.

Thoughts were foggy, but he held on to one critical fact he'd learned: the Forgotten couldn't vassal a Lykae unless he or

she unleashed their inner beast. Yet the warlocks had no magical means to summon the creature forth. "Give it up, Jels," Munro bit out. "No torture will make me loose my beast. Nothing can."

When a Lykae experienced more pain than he or she could handle, the beast would rise up to take it. Even mental anguish. But Munro would never succumb. Having lived with his twin brother's volatile beast for centuries, Munro had developed absolute control over his own.

Jels only smiled. "If you're betting on a rescue, don't. The Vertas army already assembled outside of our realm's sphere to free you and your men, but our new ally forbade a raid, so the alliance left you behind. No one cares about you enough to anger our ally. Not even your brother."

Who the hell was this ally? "My twin would never abandon me." Will would be prowling for Munro's freedom. "Sell that shite somewhere else."

Jels gave a wave.

Madadh's punch took Munro across the jaw, nearly dislocating it. His head snapped around, blood spraying the hem of Jels's purple robe. "Godsdamn it, Madadh!"

His friend's scarred face was blank, the mad dog now a subservient dog.

Jels tilted his head at Munro. "Why do you resist our thrall? I never expected it to take this long."

"I've been a warrior for nine hundred years . . . have known torture many times before. You waste your time."

As if Munro hadn't spoken, Jels said, "The process is simple. Once you release your beast, I will recite an incantation to mystically leash it. You'll still be aware of everything around you, but unable to physically react or refuse a warlock's order. After a while, your consciousness learns not to care about anything. All that will be left is blissful obedience."

Munro spat more blood. "In other words: hell. Why no' just kill me?"

"Kill?" Jels blinked his beady eyes. "The purpose of this trap was to secure a Lykae elder like you. We were delighted to learn that you planned an incursion against us."

Munro had heard that the Forgotten were creating new Lykae from humans and then controlling those rabid newlings with magic. So he'd gathered seven of his most seasoned warlairds for a mission to abduct the archwarlock for intel and leverage.

Jels could not have looked prouder of himself as he said, "Yes, we promptly dispatched the nymph Ariza to guide you into Quondam through a 'vulnerability'"—he made air quotes with bony fingers—"in our boundary."

As soon as Munro and his men had squeezed through that rift, they'd been as good as captured. Madadh had released his beast, falling under the Forgotten's control. The warlocks had then used the massive Lykae to attack the rest of Munro's crew.

Caught off guard, each warlaird had unleashed his own beast—and been vassaled, one after another. All but Munro, who'd been searching for any alternative. As usual.

He'd known Ariza for years. Why would she betray him? Whatever she'd hoped to gain had been for naught; the warlocks had seized her as well. "A lot of trouble," he told Jels. "Why do you want a Lykae elder so bad?"

"Your beast is an incredibly powerful alpha. We could have searched a thousand planes and dozens of eras for a beast so strong as yours."

Eras. Some said that the warlocks had a gateway that allowed them to move through time. Munro had researched theories of time travel, hoping he could use that gateway to save his long-dead parents—anything to alleviate Will's guilt over their deaths.

Anything to rescue his suicidal twin.

Munro had learned that history could never be changed, but beings could be brought forward. If one had access to a mystical gateway . . .

Jels continued, "Your bite will seed legions of newling slaves for us."

They wanted Munro to turn humans? Condemning innocent mortals to decades of rabid insanity—or death? The perversion of it! "The next bite I make will snatch clean your throat. I swear that somehow, someway I will seize the upper hand with you. By all the gods, you'll regret ever crossing my path."

"You can never win against me, because guile will always best brute strength." Jels's smug look faltered. "You have no idea what's coming, do you? The threat that can end all of us—*the Møriør!* But the Forgotten will be ready. We won't stop until we've amassed a Lykae army to protect us outside our realm. Until we've sacrificed enough beautiful nymphs to appease our dark god."

Munro's busted lips split into a grin. "You're crazed, you little fuck. Tell yourself whatever you need to."

A nod at Madadh set the male into motion once more; Munro braced. *This one's goin' to hurt—*

Madadh's claws plowed through Munro's face, obliterating his right eye.

Biting back a yell, Munro told Jels, "Ordering him to tickle me? You have to do better than that."

Another nod from Jels, and Madadh bent to grip Munro's thigh, readying to snap a femur. *Motherfucker!*

"Wait," Jels commanded when another warlock slinked inside the cell.

This minion whispered to Jels, "Ormlo has collected his prize."

"By all means, have him portal her in." The minion hastened away, and Jels turned back to Munro. "Do better than that? It seems I just have. We've obtained something I think you'll be very interested in." His tone raised Munro's hackles.

Jels crossed to the wall, unhooking the chain there that secured his captive. As the tension on Munro's arms eased, blood rushed into his limbs, setting off an explosion of pain to rival that in his maimed face. He fought to remain kneeling, keeping Jels in his limited sightline.

He had no hope of defeating Madadh without freeing his own beast. But he could at least snatch Jels's head from his neck. Munro tensed to attack—

A portal opened, and two beings crossed through it into the cell: a warlock and a raven-haired woman. She shuddered, appearing dazed. A mortal?

"Well done, Ormlo," Jels told the warlock. "Your team extracted her."

Ormlo too was bald, his head shining with sweat. Dirt smudged his cheeks, and he limped. "Not without loss of life on our side, Father. The humans were full of surprises."

Munro barely noted that Ormlo was Jels's son, too entranced by the lovely young female. Dressed in a formal white gown, she had olive-toned skin, irises the color of new pennies, and flowers woven into her mane of wild black curls.

Jels told Munro, "Meet Kereny Codrina. You wouldn't believe where—and when—we had to go to procure her."

She smelled of fire, spices, and sweet woman. At her ethereal scent, Munro's body shot tight, spine straightening.

Shock assailed him as his Lykae Instinct tolled one word: —*YOURS.*—

After nearly a millennium of waiting. *She's . . . mine.* His father's words filtered through his consciousness: "When you

find your mate, it feels like the hands of gods have reached out to touch you, like your soul's been branded."

Aye.

But her wide eyes grew glassy, and she tottered on her feet. Though Munro saw no blood marring her gown, he sensed magic surrounding her. "What the fuck did you do?" he growled, lunging for her.

Madadh clotheslined him, choking him to the ground.

As Munro thrashed against his friend's hold, his Instinct sounded once more: —*YOUR MATE DIES.*—

His beast howled inside him to fight for her, but Munro quelled it. If Jels vassaled Munro, he would have no hope of escaping with her, much less of saving her life.

When Ormlo drew away from her, she sank to her knees.

"Behold." Jels shoved up her sleeves, revealing black veins twining upward from her wrists. "Her lifeblood turns to stone, will reach her heart in minutes. I'm told there's no worse torment."

"You hexed her?" Rage tightened his chest, but he couldn't shake Madadh's grip with his wrists still bound.

As the black inched up her arms, her expression twisted, and she cried out.

"What do you want, warlock?" Munro bit out. "I'll do it! Anything!"

Jels tsked. "If only you had cooperated, then we wouldn't have had to steal her from her own wedding."

Wedding? Munro couldn't worry about that. "Bloody tell me what to do to save her."

"You have little time, Lykae. She fades like night douses day. I suggest a death by bite. It's much less excruciating than Ormlo's spell, and she might actually resurrect as a Lykae." He turned toward the door, saying over his shoulder, "Though

females rarely do." When Jels snapped his fingers, Madadh released Munro and departed with the two warlocks.

Before the cell door clanged shut behind them, Munro had lunged for her once more. "Kereny, my name is Munro MacRieve. I'm going to help you." He could only imagine what his mutilated face looked like, his missing eye. "Just stay with me." He looped his bound arms over her body, could feel her shudder as another wave of pain hit.

His mind turned to another human he'd grieved so long ago. *Mortals perish so readily. Am I to lose another?*

No! "I will no' let you die." But black continued to spread along her veins, would claim his mysterious female in moments.

Munro had only one hope of saving her—by turning her. Yet he would have to unleash his beast, becoming Jels's obedient pet.

Bile rose, but Munro choked it down. He drew her closer to warm her, to prepare her—and himself. Never had he tried to turn a human. He rubbed his chin over her slim shoulder, breathing deep of his female. Her scent helped to temper his panic.

All his life, he'd imagined biting his mate's soft neck to give her his wolven claiming mark. But this turning bite would be a world away from that.

One bite was dreamed of; one was unnatural.

She spoke in a hushed voice. "I know what you are, wolf. Do not do this to me."

Her words carried an accent he couldn't place. Eastern European?

She craned her head toward him. "Defy the warlocks. Defy their evil."

"I will do anything to save you. You're my mate."

"Mate?" She sounded aghast. "Then how can you think of abusing me like this? Don't infect me with that thing inside you."

"I will take care of you, teach you to control it." *If* she resurrected, she would awaken maddened from the ferocity that rose up uncontrollably in newlings. Harnessing one's beast took decades and was often unsuccessful. This would be his last conversation with Kereny for an age.

Unless she perished for good.

"My kind worship freedom." Tears slipped down her cheeks. She was so sweetly innocent. So gentle. "Ormlo told me what my fate will be if I resurrect. You would turn your mate . . . into a warlock's slave?"

"You will no' be a slave! I will free you from this place." Somehow. He used his mangled face to nudge her hair off her shoulder as he began to relinquish control to his beast. *Save her, beast. Bite her fiercely.*

She resisted him but had no strength left. "Leave me to an honorable death."

"I canna, Kereny. You will resurrect. Do you understand me? You must return to me!" *My beast is strong; it will light a firestorm inside her.*

"If you do this, I will despise you," she vowed. "You'll still have no mate."

His Instinct screamed *—RUNNING OUT OF TIME!—* "Then I'll spend eternity earning your forgiveness."

Between ragged breaths, she said, "You would transform me into an animal . . . enslaving me to those I long to see dead? There is no forgiveness."

Munro's claws and fangs lengthened, his body morphing. "Close your eyes for me."

Instead, she trained her gaze on his face. Hardened vampires

cowered at the sight of a Lykae's beast. She gasped but didn't look away. "I-I'm *begging* . . . no."

Voice gone guttural, Munro choked out, "And I'm begging you to return to me, little one."

With a primal roar, his beast took over completely. Existing in the background, Munro perceived his head whipping forward, his fangs sinking into the tender skin of her neck.

A sob escaped her lips as she writhed in agony. Her heartbeat slowed. *Beat-beat . . . beat-beat . . .*

The beast snarled against her cooling flesh, injecting its essence. *Ignite the fire inside her, beast!*

As Kereny shuddered with death throes, it pawed her closer to his body, rocking her, spilling blood over her wedding gown.

The beast drew back, but only to sink its fangs into her again. And again. Howling between frenzied bites.

Munro was dimly aware of Jels's laughter outside the cell. Then the warlock started his incantation. Dirty power coiled around Munro as Jels began leashing his beast.

Kereny's body fell limp. *Beat . . . beat . . .* silence.

When her heart went still in her chest, the beast released its bite. It threw back its head and roared until the dungeon quaked, quieting only when her lips parted.

Just before Munro succumbed to the vassal spell, her final breath escaped her, carrying her last words: *"I . . . hate . . . you. . . ."*



TWO

Five days later

She's *gone.*— Munro stood at the edge of an acid pit deep beneath Quondam. Ormlo, his warlock jailer, had ordered him to carry Kereny's corpse into the bowels of the dungeon to dispose of her.

"More than three days have passed," Ormlo said from behind him. "In all of our history, no mortal has ever resurrected as a Lykae after three."

Munro didn't need his Instinct or the warlock to tell him that Kereny wasn't coming back. He felt it; he knew. The Lykae fire hadn't taken hold.

She lay lifeless in Munro's arms. His bite marks covered her neck. Her limbs had stiffened in death and from Ormlo's spell, her body like a statue.

My female is dead. His gaze roamed over her, taking in the dried flowers intertwined with her raven locks . . . the fringe of lashes resting forever against her cheekbones . . . her pale lips. . . .

Between the times when Ormlo had commanded him to bite other mortals, the warlocks had left Munro in his cell with

her. He'd memorized the contours of her fine-boned face and stroked her hair. He'd explored her wee hands.

Thin scars crisscrossed the pads of her fingers. As he'd held her, he'd caressed those scars, wondering if she mightn't be a seamstress. And from what era had the warlocks taken her? Questions had swirled, with zero answers and dwindling hope.

With each day that his fated female hadn't resurrected, something inside Munro had died with her. His body had healed from the worst of his torture, but his mind . . .

"Let's face it, you failed," Ormlo added, rubbing salt in a fatal wound. "Your bite took her down instead of bringing her back."

Munro wanted these last moments alone with her, but he was a vassaled slave. He got nothing he wanted. And Loreans wondered why Lykae despised magic so much? Werewolves were the strongest sentient species in the mortal realm—yet this feeble twig of a male could control a warrior like Munro.

"Into the acid she goes. Be a good dog."

Canna cast her away like refuse! He resisted with all his mental strength, but his fingers began to uncurl their biting grip from her corpse. *No! Fight this!*

"What are you waiting for?" Ormlo demanded. "Dump her."

Fight! With each of Munro's heaving breaths, the lace on her wedding dress rustled. *Swish-swish.*

Ormlo sidled closer. "I *said*, be a good doggy and watch her boil."

Munro shook harder. *Swish-swish-swish-swish.* Yet he still found his arms descending.

He could only watch in horror as Kereny plummeted into the acid, hitting the piping surface with a gruesome splash. *Nooo!* He tensed to retrieve her.

"Ah-ah, not another inch closer."

His body wouldn't obey his mind. A helpless puppet, he

stood by as the acid melted her skin until he saw the white of her bones. Her lifeless eyes flashed open, staring at nothing before she fully sank.

Ah, gods, no.

The warlocks had taken a female full of life and rendered her into nothing. Her final resting place would be this hellhole.

Despair seized him, and his vision blurred. Lykae believed mates were two halves of a greater whole; without her, there was no godsdamned point to his existence.

Where your mate goes, you follow. His father's words, spoken just before he had joined his own beloved mate in the afterlife, echoed in Munro's head.

Now he stood at the edge of this pit, one step from joining Kereny. Unable to follow her in, he felt his sanity draining away. Losing it would mean losing this pain. Could anything be more seductive at that moment?

But even in the shadow of looming madness, Munro's rational mind searched for an angle. Didn't he have an option his father hadn't? Munro knew from his time-travel research that history couldn't be changed, which meant the original Kereny still existed in her time.

Munro was currently in a land of time-travelers. He could force Ormlo to send him back for her.

She was vulnerable in that nebulous past, had already fallen prey to warlocks. What if they took her again? What if some other calamity ended her mortal life too early?

Grief morphed into a fierce need to protect her. Munro had been put on this earth for just that purpose. All he had to do was remove a mystical leash, defeating a spell these warlock pricks had perfected over millennia.

The vassal was working because his beast was risen. What if it rose up in a fury, until no leash could hold it? A flame might

injure, but it could also cauterize if hot enough. His vision cleared as the answer came to him. The beast fed on emotion; one emotion seethed inside Munro.

Rage.

He had lifetimes of it at the ready—all of the experiences that had shaped him. Rage over the murder of his mate. Over his mother's beheading and his father's suicide centuries ago. Over his brother's devastation.

Yet if Munro fed his beast rage, it might grow so strong that he never regained control.

Risk he'd have to take.

"Good doggy," Ormlo said. "Now, let's go bite a few more mortals. I think you tapped yourself out on your mate, since none of yours have resurrected. But we'll keep at it."

Munro's eyes narrowed. *You want to be leashed to a powerful alpha beast? Then hang on for the fucking ride, warlock.*

He called upon the creature and opened the floodgates, letting raw rage boil up like this putrid acid. *Rise, beast, as never before.*

And then Munro would tear this place to the ground until he had reunited with Kereny. Even time couldn't stop him from reaching her.

Where your mate goes . . .



THREE

Circul Vânătorilor (Circus of Hunters) Fairgrounds, Transylvania

A CENTURY AGO

I do," Jacob Howard said, his proud green eyes glinting in the big top's lights as he promised himself in marriage.

Ren's fiancé cut a striking figure in his three-piece suit with his blond hair tied in a queue. One could never tell he had a pair of revolvers holstered under his coat.

His hands were warm against hers.

Alfonso, the circus's minister and sideshow barker, asked her, "Kereny Codrina, do you take this man . . ." His words grew distant as a wave of déjà vu swept over her.

Damn it, not another one. All evening, she'd been feeling them. So much effort had gone into this wedding, and she didn't want to ruin it now.

She'd taken particular care with her appearance, combing her hair till it gleamed, then braiding flowers into the long waves. Her white full-length gown had been her mother's wedding dress, fashioned in the traditional Transylvanian style, with wide sleeves, lace cuffs, and two formal aprons.

The circus's cooks had spent all day preparing a feast.

Tonight spirits would flow, and musicians would play. A last hurrah before battle.

Most of the members of the *Circul Vânătorilor* were part carnie/part hunter—stouthearted, foulmouthed soldiers in humanity's Night War against monsters. They'd all flocked here to the vast Cursed Forest from around the world, drawn by tales of human freedom fighters turning the tables deep in the Carpathians. Of late, many had come to fight alongside a Transylvanian girl who'd become a reaper of immortals.

But tomorrow's battle would be one of the greatest challenges in the circus's four-hundred-year history.

And Ren was to lead them all.

She inhaled the scent of the chipped wood covering the big top's floor. That pine smell always fortified her.

". . . to have and to hold from this day forward, till death do you part?"

Everyone seemed to be staring at her. Kindly Vanda, the ninety-six-year-old fortune-teller, cleared her throat just as Jacob squeezed Ren's hands.

Ah! "I do!"

Worry creased Jacob's brow, but she pasted on a bright smile. She wanted this marriage.

He'd first asked her to wed him when he was nine and she was thirteen, and then every few months thereafter. She'd thought him too young for her, like a little brother. Yet over the years, he'd grown from a darling boy into an attractive man.

Her right-hand man. While she managed the circus and oversaw the training of performers and hunters, he was their liaison with weapons dealers.

A year ago, she'd finally told him yes, and they'd set this date. Now they refused to postpone the ceremony just because a deadly pack of Lykae newlings was making its way here.

Another wave of déjà vu swept her up. She swiped a curl from her forehead, could have sworn she'd already experienced this moment.

By the time Ren snapped out of it, Jacob had slid a ring on her finger. The ring was a touch ostentatious for her taste, but it'd belonged to his mother, some grand dame from Britain, a place Ren knew she would never get to see.

In his Italian accent, Alfonso intoned, "By the powers vested in me, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss your bride."

As she stood on her toes, she wished her parents could have been here. She wished monsters weren't prowling closer with every second.

Cheers broke out when her lips touched Jacob's. She sighed at the contact. His soothing kisses were always a pleasure—yet gentlemanly Jacob had made sure the two of them never progressed too far beyond them.

He slanted his head, growing more ardent. So sweetly *pleasant*. She wanted to lose herself in this kiss, but a sense of awareness made her tense. A few seconds later the camp dogs signaled an alarm. The lions and bears roared from their cages.

As the cheers in the tent died down, she drew back from Jacob with a frown. The newling pack wasn't projected to arrive until tomorrow night.

The animals fell silent, and the air grew still. Did some other threat dare descend on the circus? As she listened, she gazed at the faces of her loved ones.

Vanda, a native Transylvanian like Ren, stood arm in arm with Puideleu, an elderly lion tamer from the Congo Basin. Inseparable for ages, the pair were like her grandparents. Swedish strongman Björn and Russian poodle-trainer Olga were the siblings she'd never had. Jacob had long been her best friend.

Hearing nothing unusual, Ren asked Puideleu, "What was the status of the last scout check-in?" Their outposts dotted the forest in every direction.

"Each station radioed in an all-clear before the ceremony started."

She relaxed a fraction. Their surveillance net would have caught a large force swooping in. "Maybe we have kobolds tunneling to the surface. They've probably been maddened by the scents from the cooktent."

"As have we all!" Vanda raised her crooked finger, eyes merry as she declared, "Those little pests can have the beef *minci*, but they'd best not touch our plum brandy."

Laughter rang out.

Puideleu patted Vanda's hand and laughed with her. The fortune-teller grinned widely, looking like she'd already hit the brandy. Ren had considered talking to her adored friend about her "tippling," but the woman was nearly a hundred and had been the only one of her family to survive a centaur stampede fifty years ago.

Cheers, Vanda. "To be on the safe side, let's radio the scouts every quarter hour—"

The main tent flap flew open. A shirtless giant of a man limped inside, his broad chest heaving.

Who the hell is this? Closing in on seven feet of height, the stranger had pale skin covered with what looked like blood. His hair was drenched in it, and dried crimson obscured his features. His brawny frame had not a spare inch of flesh, his muscles rippling in relief. Slashed leather breeches clung to his narrow hips.

With those glowing, ice-blue irises and black claws, he must be a Lykae. What if he was connected to the approaching threat?

She canted her head. No, he wasn't a newling. Those

creatures never reverted to their more humanlike half, and this stranger's inner beast—the spirit of the wolf that lived inside each Lykae—wasn't fully risen.

Ren had never seen a non-newling Lykae before. He looked almost human. And for some reason, he beheld her as if he were seeing a ghost.

Lykae weren't evil per se—not like warlocks and vampires—but this one was obviously aggressive.

Jacob's hand eased toward one of his revolvers. Puideleu drew a hidden rapier from his cane. Other hunters silently readied.

But Ren possessed the only weapon that could take this Lykae down. Under her breath, she commanded in Romanian, *"Hold."*

The hunters stilled.

As she took the Lykae's measure, deciding the best strategy, his gaze remained riveted to her. Vibrations of power emanated from his towering body. She'd fought monsters for years, but she'd never had such an awareness of one's strength.

The air between them crackled. Though she couldn't make out his features under all that blood, she found his power—his very *being*—compelling. When shivers raced over her skin, she wondered if she was losing her mind.

His canines and claws lengthened, and his hands balled into fists—as if he was about to seize her.

Björn said in broken Romanian, "I can strike him from behind, boss."

A human take a Lykae unawares? Not possible. In the same tongue, she answered under her breath, "Fuck right off, Björn. He's *mine*. A monster dares to interrupt my wedding? He'll feel the bite of my blade." Her bespelled hunting knife was strapped in her thigh holster.

Björn stood down with a nod. The others awaited her next

move. Normally she would incapacitate her opponent at once, but she wanted to know three things: where this male had come from, if he was connected to the newling pack, and how many more the circus should expect.

She also wouldn't mind knowing why he focused only on her. "Do you speak English, stranger?"

His lids grew heavy, as if her voice was music to him. "Alive. You are . . . alive?"

She sighed. "Are any of us, truly?"

Guzmán, the Brazilian contortionist, snickered. Trish, the dancer from America, chuckled. Vanda looked fascinated by this stranger, her gaze wide with excitement.

The Lykae seemed not to notice anyone's reactions.

Ren asked him, "Where have you come from?" Portal, forest, or village?

"You could be a dream." His voice was deep and raspy, his accent a thick Scottish brogue. "The sweetest dream." He spoke to her as if no one else existed. "Never seen anything so beautiful."

His words sent a misguided jolt of exhilaration through her, but she wanted answers. "Were you with the newlings in the woods?" That pack had been making its way through the Cursed Forest for weeks, never varying its course toward the nearby populated valley. The circus had set up at the head of the valley, a last stand to protect the innocent humans who had no idea their lives were in jeopardy.

"Newlings?" The stranger looked even more confused. "Nay. I've come from . . . verra far away to reach you. I fought my way back to you, Kereny." How did he know her name? With his accent, it sounded like *Care-nay*. "I told myself I only wanted to check on you. Make sure you were protected." His gaze flicked in the direction of the woods and back. "You fucking are no'."

"What is your interest in a mortal like me?"

"You are *mine*." He hit his chest with a fist. "My mate."

Her jaw slackened. "Mate?" *He's insane!*

Jacob's tension redoubled, and low murmurs broke out among the hunters.

How dare this beast degrade Ren in front of everyone! She was even more determined to vanquish him, adding him to her many victories.

"Aye. I'm taking you to my home in Louisiana."

The gall! "And if I don't wish to be taken?"

"Too bloody bad." He inhaled deeply, as if to suppress his temper. "You are no' safe so close to a forest like this one. I alone can protect you." His gaze slid to her new husband. Jealousy seethed from the wolf as he growled, *"She belongs to me."* He looked like he wanted to rip Jacob apart.

Question time was over. "Wolf! Eyes on me. *Now.*" Usually her tone of authority made people jump to obey her.

The Lykae never averted his predator's eyes from Jacob, just went eerily still, every sinew in his body coiled to spring.

"I won't tell you again"—she clapped her hands—"eyes on your *mate*."

The wolf blinked as if he'd awakened from a daze, then returned his attention to her.

"That's better." She feigned a seductive smile, determined to hold his interest until she reached her knife. A seasoned performer, she could play everything from an innocent lure to a provocative femme fatale. She decided on the latter now.

"If I'm your fated one," she purred, "then you should get a taste of what I'm like." She bent forward, grasping the hem of her gown. She eased the material past her slippers, past her calves, closer to her thigh holster.

For her knife-throwing act, she wore daring costumes, so

she kept her legs smooth. The Lykae appeared very appreciative of the view, his lips parting, his blue eyes ablaze with lust.

His fascination with her body brought on a heady mix of fear and thrill. But when her fingertips brushed her knife handle, focus suffused her. In a throaty voice, she asked, "Will you have more from me?"

His brows drew together as if she'd given him an agony of pleasure. He seemed helpless not to nod.

He never saw the dagger she threw until the hilt protruded from his chest. Bull's-eye. Right in the heart.

She cast him a cocky wink. "Got you."

He scowled at the knife. Snatched it free and tossed it aside. "Joke? You ken what I am." He frowned when his legs grew unsteady. "Takes more than a splinter . . . to fell . . . a Lykae."

"That's why my blade is bespelled to knock you unconscious." Passed down through her mother's line, the knife would incapacitate an immortal for hours.

Body quaking, he rasped in bafflement, "Kereny?" *Care-nay?*

"I don't *mate* with your kind; I *hunt* them. We all do. And we're quite good at it." She knew her expression was pitiless. "Cheers to the end of your life, monster. You will never wake up again."

Disbelief clear on his face, he collapsed to his knees. When he failed to rise, he threw back his head and bellowed with frustration—a gut-wrenching, earsplitting roar to end all roars.

It pained her ears and hit her stomach like percussion. Outside, the lions roared alongside him, the bears growling their upset. The corralled horses neighed with fear.

Shoulders sagging, he finally fell silent. He shot her one last betrayed look, then crashed backward in a cloud of sawdust.

Out cold.

She and Jacob traded an uneasy glance. The hunters' gazes

darted. These were brave women and men, but that primal sound must've awakened the entire forest. Would it bring the newlings early?

Making her demeanor brisk, Ren announced, "The banquet will have to wait. Björn, radio the scouts to be on alert, and set up a perimeter watch of the fairgrounds. Six hunters in each direction."

"*Ja*, boss." He hastened away.

Ren retrieved her knife, then swiped the bloody blade across the Lykae's pants. Though she had hunted all kinds of "Loreans," as immortals called themselves, she didn't often kill human-looking ones. Still . . . "Will somebody lend me a sword?"

The sound of a dozen weapons being freed from scabbards filled the big top.

Jacob said, "If we behead the Lykae here, it will get messy."

True. Decapitated immortals were often slow to relinquish life, making executions a grisly business. At best, the creature's jugular would spray for dozens of feet, soaking everyone around. At worst, a headless Lorean might make a final kill.

As she debated what to do, Ren absently twirled and flipped her knife with one hand, a series of moves so practiced she could do them in her sleep. "Right, then. Take him to the trench."



FOUR

Best wedding I've ever attended!" Vanda's grin lit her eyes. "And what exciting entertainment."

The tent had cleared out, leaving only Ren, Jacob, Vanda, and Puideleu.

Though Ren's nerves were jangling as the four made their way to the exit, she cast Vanda a warm smile. "Puideleu's going to take you back to your wagon now. You two leave early in the morning." Ren had ordered them to evacuate the fairgrounds ahead of the battle.

Puideleu nodded, the pleated wrinkles on his face deepening as he scanned the blustery night. "The woods are stirring."

As the wind gusted, the great trees surrounding the fairground swayed. But Puideleu wasn't referring to the weather.

At any given time, the Cursed Forest was a hotbed of supernatural activity. Invisible spring-trap portals slammed shut behind the unwary, vanishing travelers forever. Rocks wept blood and trees whispered. Monsters haunted every valley and ridge within it.

Yet tonight, the forest seemed alive with movement. Howls,

yips, and screams carried from the Carpathians. "I've never heard so much activity before." She flipped and twirled her knife to allay her uneasiness. "Puideleu, after you take Vanda back, check with Björn for scout reports."

He nodded. "Of course."

A breeze toyed with the colorful headscarf atop Vanda's silver locks as she crossed to give Ren a hug. Her familiar scent of lavender and liniment enveloped them. This woman had been her mentor since Ren's parents had died nearly seventeen years ago.

Vanda pressed a kiss into her hair, saying, "You will always be a little wild, my fierce Ren. As wild as that wolf you captured."

Before Ren could ask about that puzzling comment, Puideleu escorted Vanda from the tent.

Alone with Jacob, Ren lifted her dress to holster her knife. The weapon was perfectly weighted to her hand, its edges as pure as devotion. Esoteric writing had been carved into the bone hilt, the surface worn down through centuries of her family's use. Wood-grain patterns adorned the crucible-steel blade, but it still shone like a mirror.

She considered changing from her mother's dress, but she didn't dare take that much time. Though the effects of her blade lasted for hours, a Lykae in the camp equaled a live grenade.

Ren caught Jacob's gaze on her legs before he glanced away with a blush. She frowned as she smoothed her dress in place. When the wolf had leered at her body, Ren's senses had flared to life. Now, she felt awkward.

"After you," Jacob said, his voice thickened. Out into the squally night they went, winding around tent stakes as they took a shortcut to the trench.

Though the circus traversed the countryside from one immortal threat to another, they always returned to their

previous spots, and this one was her favorite. Soaring stone pines and braided brooks circled the fairgrounds. In the distance was a heart-shaped boulder flanked by two oak trees. She met Jacob there to steal kisses. The oaks leaned toward each other, growing closer over the years—just as she and Jacob had done.

A misty gust buffeted them as they skirted the far side of the living quarters, a collection of individual wagons. Painted on each side panel was a description of a *Circul Vânătorilor* act.

Hers read: The Great Kereny, Transylvanian Blade Huntress. That was her stage persona for her knife-throwing act, but also her reputation among immortals in the forest.

She was proud of her wagon and excited to share it with Jacob now that they'd wed. Inside were her treasured *scientifiction* novels, costumes, and an arsenal of various weapons.

It was the only home Ren had ever known. She and her parents had shared it until they'd been taken from her much too soon.

Past the wagons stood a multitude of booths, the Ferris wheel and carousel, and the animal cages. Battle was coming, and like a wardrobe change, the fairground had been transformed according to her defense plans. Gone were the juggling balls and the candied treats. Out had come the pikes and mounted machine guns.

Olga's carpentry crew had added scaffolding to the structure of the Ferris wheel to make a sharpshooter tower. Björn's earthworks detail had dug pitfall traps, as well as a trench filled with pikes and oil.

This rain was problematic for the trench, but Puideleu's bad leg had told him the weather would clear tomorrow, and his prediction success rate hovered close to a hundred percent—

"You can't turn it off for even a second, can you?" Jacob asked, reclaiming her attention. "We're going to be fine tomorrow.

Thanks to you, we have the numbers and the discipline. Not to mention the strategy."

"And thanks to your skillful negotiating, we'll have more than enough ammunition." A weapons dealer was arriving at dawn to restock their depleted supply of grenades and bullets. "We're going to blow that pack to kingdom come." As if to punctuate her statement, lightning flashed, and the rain intensified.

Ren despised immortals. They didn't go bump in the night; they *were* the night—a great, ravening darkness that might relent but always returned.

Fitting that the circus called the struggle against them the Night War.

Ghouls, shifters, and demons kept Ren and the hunters busy—as would those newlings—but she didn't feel as if they were turning the tide of the war. She dreamed of taking down high-value Lorean leaders to strike fear in the hearts of immortals everywhere.

She wanted to send a message: *We know you exist, and we'll be hiding under* your *beds from now on.* Then maybe they'd think twice about preying on humans.

"I love it when you get bloodthirsty," Jacob said. "Speaking of which, are you bent on killing this wolf?"

She nodded. "I can't keep stabbing him with my blade. Sooner or later, he'll get the upper hand."

With his charming grin, Jacob said, "I didn't mean we shouldn't kill the Lykae. But *I* can do it. Maybe you should leave off committing *mate-icide*."

Ren punched his arm. "I will catch grief for this mate nonsense till the end of time." Carnies were boisterous; *hunter* carnies were impossible. "Should I expect a kobold suitor next? Perhaps a pus demon on bended knee?"

"It's too comical. The monster huntress a monster's mate?" He chuckled.

She loved Jacob's laugh. It sounded cultured, as gentlemanly as everything else about him.

He hailed from a wealthy line of British barons. Unfortunately, his father and uncle—younger sons with no chance of inheritance—had moved their families to Prosperity, a settlement in the Canadian wilderness.

A wilderness rife with Wendigos. Those monsters had slain Jacob's family in horrific ways, driving him and his surviving uncle into the Night War.

Not long after the two had joined the circus, Jacob had strayed too far from the fairgrounds. Luckily, she'd been in the woods herself. When a viper shifter had targeted him, she'd saved Jacob's life with her blade. They'd been inseparable ever since.

"Well, what do you say?" he asked with his usual *jolly-good-show* tone. "Shall I do the honors?"

She smiled up at him. "Thank you for the offer, but mate-icide is in my future. The Lykae is my kill to make."

Jacob frowned. "Why does everything onerous or gritty have to fall to you?"

Her parents' voices echoed in her mind: *We fight evil immortals wherever and however we can. That is our noble duty.* Ren shrugged. "Because that's my lot." She'd accepted it.

"Hmm." As quickly as his frown had appeared, his brow grew smooth once more. "Well, you know you have my support."

"I know I do, Jake." He was a dear man who never had an unkind word to say about anyone and who considered Puideleu and Vanda to be his own grandparents.

Now that Ren and Jacob had married, she expected her love for him to grow and change. They were two oaks now free to intertwine. With that in mind, she rose on her toes to give him

a quick kiss. *So pleasant.* "Let's get this over with and return to our wedding night."

Another blush as he said, "Yes, *let's*." He gave her an encouraging nod. "Right by your side, Ren. Always."

The torch-bearing hunters that had gathered for the execution parted to let her and Jacob through.

The wolf's long body was stretched out beside the trench. As soon as Ren decapitated him, others would kick his headless corpse down among the pikes.

She drew closer. Rain had washed away much of the blood on the Lykae's face. In the torchlight, his features appeared chiseled. Proud, straight nose. Wide jawline. Strong, cleft chin.

And that *body*. Aside from his chest wound, it was flawless. As raindrops danced over his rigid muscles, something like elation pulsed through her. *What is happening to me?*

Björn handed Ren a sword, and she moved into position. Yet as she raised her weapon, the Lykae's right hand twitched. Maybe he was dreaming about his home in Louisiana.

Protectiveness toward this deluded male welled inside her. Who was he and how had he known her name? Damn it, why did he believe they were fated? Once she ended him, she'd never have answers to her questions.

Trish muttered, "What a waste." Others nodded in agreement.

"What are you waiting for, boss?" Björn asked.

Everything in Ren balked at the idea of slaughtering this creature in cold blood.

With her thick Russian accent, Olga said, "Keel him, boss. Before he vakes."

Jacob said, "The blade works for hours."

"Then keel him so vee can get to the banquet. Some of us vould like to *eat*."

"Ren?" Jacob quietly queried.

The circus didn't harm immortals unless they preyed on humans. But the wolf *did* plan to prey on Ren, forcing her to be his female. And Jacob would be in danger as long as this monster lived. As her mother had taught her: *Never get between a Lykae and his mate.*

Mate. Surely a fated tie between an immortal and a human wasn't possible. Had he planned to turn her undying? She shuddered. That was her worst fear.

Her parents had shared that fear. A flash memory arose of finding their bodies in the woods with monster corpses all around. . . .

She bit the inside of her cheek, forcing herself out of that memory into the present. If this Lykae was determined to end her freedom, she had no choice but to end his life.

Whenever she let a blade fly, she all but entered a trance. Sounds faded away. Peripheral sights grew muted until her vision became a tunnel of focus on the bull's-eye. Over the years, she'd begun to view all of her goals with that undivided concentration.

Right now, her target was to ensure her freedom. She adjusted her grip on her sword. *Time to kill a wolf.*

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