

Chapter One

Call me cursed, for that's what I am.

I am Brock Rashwe, son of Lieves Rashwe, son of tree elves, and brother to the wind, earth, and water. Among my Elvin people, I became the Vaer—the Bringer of Death—an abomination unleashed from a vampyre's bite. Yet, Celeste is my blessing through my curse, the light in my darkness.

Chills racked my body and I stifled a shudder. Despite draining a murderer's *kajh*, life essence, with my power in the last village, the hunger still tugs inside me. Celeste confirmed he was guilty, but I tasted his glee whenever he'd taken a life and bathed in their blood. The vileness of his deeds seeped into me as though I had done the killings. The copper taint upon my tongue and the adrenaline coursing through me remind me of my actions.

Shadowdancer shifted under me and I pulled Celeste tighter to my chest. Even though he is the largest horse I have known, he acts more human than animal. Instinctively, he seems to sense when there is danger about, especially to Celeste.

Through the forest in the land of humans, we maneuver closer to the barrier of my Elvin home, Tamlon. As we move past a group of fallen logs, my gut clenched at the memories that flooded me. A year ago, the vampyre attacked me here. I gave him a hand to help him rise from the forest floor. I should have known he wasn't human. His sallow face seemed to glow in the moonlight. Poking out from rags lay his arms and legs, which resembled skin stretched over sticks.

So cadaverous was his face, I'd have thought him dead if he hadn't moved.

My fingers brush the bite marks on my neck. Now I am cursed from his bite, for neither food nor drink fills me. My lineage both Elvin and distant human tainted by a vampyre did not bring the thirst for blood, but for *kajh*.

Two days has passed since my last feeding. The hunger grows, soon to be unbearable. Any humans I drained never sustained me for more than a day or two. Other species like Elvin, or magical creatures sated my hunger for weeks. Yet, I am repulsed by the idea of draining one of my own species.

It is only Celeste whom I can touch and not drain out her life. I nuzzle her neck and breathe in her scent: lavender, musk, and a trace of the soapstone she used this morning during our bath.

Celeste, the witch the prophecies told me about, would be my redemption—although, at the time, I thought her death would not only bring my healing-but also rid my people’s land of the poison that choked it from our enemy—the Warloc. The true significance of the prophecy eluded me until *after* I made the decision not to harm her.

“Will the elders allow me into Tamlon?” Celeste glanced at me over her shoulder. “Aren’t humans forbidden in your land?”

“Your power heals the land breaking the Warloc’s frozen winter and blight corrupting the trees. Both should assure my Elvin elders acceptance of you.”

“Perhaps the rules forbidding contact with humans can be abolished as well.” She leaned back against me.

Summer heat prickled along my neck and flowers filled the land as if in celebration of our defeat of the Warloc.

“Do you think we’ll find much on the prophecies of the four Nivel told us about?” She let Shadowdancer have more lead and we slowed to a walk. “You said the scrolls were vague concerning you become the Vaer and finding me.”

“Yes.” The prophecies and Nivel told me to find the witch, pierce her heart, and draw her blood. Thank goodness I didn’t listen to either of them. “And we learned they can’t be interpreted directly.”

“Since Nivel won’t be with us, is there another elder or medicine woman or someone we could speak with?”

I shook my head. “No. Not that I know of Nivel is the oldest of us and is the only one with magic or prophesy.”

“You don’t have any prophets or even healers?” After she shifted in the saddle, she raised an eyebrow looking back at me. “What happens if one of you is injured?”

“Ah.” I chuckled. “We’ve healers, they just use herbs and such, not magic. As far as prophets ... I guess that ability died out long ago as well.”

“But what if the prophecies are outdated or new ones needed? The Warloc’s progeny strives to restore the Warloc with anything she can.” She turned away pulling Shadowdancer’s reins to maneuver around thick underbrush. “You can be certain he’s giving her everything to help her succeed.”

If she does, the world will be thrown into darkness and slavery. And no doubt Celeste and I will be first on her list to kill. “After we visit Nivel’s vaults and make copies of the prophecies of the four, we’ll speak to the council to find out if they know anything. Then we’ll search the village of Vicsburg for Mirhana, my sister.” When Celeste didn’t make a comment, I hugged her and nuzzled her neck. “Don’t worry. We know that you, me, and my sister are three of the four destined to stop the Warloc and his offspring. We only need to discover the fourth.”

“As easy as finding a witch with a garnet dagger?” she teased.

“Easier, because I have you now.”

She patted my hands wrapped around her middle. “Hopefully, we’ll find your sister as soon as we travel to Vicsburg. Maybe she knows about this fourth person.”

My thoughts drift back to Mirhana, my twin. “I have no memory of her, yet the emptiness of having lost something has been constant for as long as I can remember like a missing color in a painting. Nivel said even though she’s Elvin, she has human features. I don’t know why he never told me before that she was alive and raised by witches.” I suppose time will allow me to forgive him.

Shadowdancer balked and slowed to a halt. Not paying attention, I jerked forward against Celeste’s back. “Why have we stopped?”

“Because of the cliffs.” Her fists clenched the reins.

“Cliffs?”

Celeste looked between Shadowdancer’s ears, the landscape ahead burst with clusters of oak, ash, willow, and pine trees blowing in the breeze. This far from the coast, there were no sounds of water. The sky teemed with robins and blue jays chirping at us.

“All is well.” I nudged Shadowdancer with my legs. Did Celeste daydream?

Her horse refused to budge. In fact, he took several steps backward.

This didn’t make sense. The cliffs broke off the land two days journey from here if Shadowdancer galloped without stopping and grew an extra pair of hooves.

I let out an aggravated huff. “Celeste, make this blasted animal move.” We had half a day’s ride to Tamlon, my tree city.

“Where?” She turned to stare at me. Her blonde hair fell in waves like sunlight almost to her shoulders. No longer did she need to wear the makeshift wig of my chopped hair as a disguise. Every day she became more beautiful. Though eighteen, her grey eyes shone with wisdom older than I. “There are cliffs and the ocean before us.”

“Are you dreaming?” I dismounted and stepped forward to the nearest oak.

When I turned to confront her about her illusion, I saw her lean forward in shock. I couldn’t hear her, but she appeared to be yelling my name.

In her hand, the garnet dagger flashed. Crimson light shot forward, blinding me for an instant.

The Elvin barrier kept humans away. She did not know I was safe. To her, it must have looked as if I’d fallen off the cliffs.

“Wait!” I shouted, but she did not end the garnet dagger’s radiant beam. Around me, the land trembled. Pine trees shot up into the air, with their roots hanging like waving fingers. If she did not stop, she’d destroy my people’s land. I forced my legs to walk forward against the wind howling around me. I was only five steps from her, but her power kept me off balanced. I gritted my teeth and trudge on. A

willow tree snapped overhead and I dove forward onto my stomach. Half of my body pierced the barrier, the other half hidden.

“Brock?” Celeste screamed as she scrambled off Shadowdancer, with tears running down her face, she collapsed by my side. “What happened? I cannot cure you if you’ve no legs to heal.”

I shook my head at the absurdity of the situation. She thought my legs were gone?

“I should’ve made you stay with me.” Tears sparkled in her grey eyes.

“Nay.” I took a breath to calm my laughter. “What you do not see is the barrier. No human has crossed into our land for thousands of years.”

Her head cocked to the side. Her fingers brushed my forehead as if she checked for fever. Her power surged into me, then flickered, as it accepted her touch and fed on her healing energy. The hunger for *kajh* in me abated somewhat. But, like a sleeping ogre, it would awaken all too soon with a vicious appetite.

I pushed up on my hands and knees. “See? I’m whole.” Standing, I clasped her hand in mine. “Close your eyes.”

“What of Shadowdancer?”

“I’m not sure how the barrier was created, but I need you to trust me.” I glanced from her to the horse. “Obviously, the illusion affects you both.”

“Aye. I am nauseous every time I view the cliffs.” She released my hand.

“We’ll need to cover Shadowdancer’s eyes.”

With a nod, Celeste dug into her pack. She pulled out her robe from Father Morgan’s tower.

My eyebrows shot up at the brown wool. Celeste and I met as prisoners of Father Morgan and his torturous monks. I thought she’d want nothing to do with her memories there. The years she spent starved, tortured, and then her gift of healing twisted and used to heal those on the brink of death and release so the monks could begin the process again. Soon, the prisoners feared Celeste more than the monks.

“I kept it with me, just in case. Never know when either you or I may need to pose as a monk.”

She tied the material around Shadowdancer’s head. Again, she placed her hand in mine, the other clasping the reins. With a tight smile, she closed her eyes.

I led her forward, holding her free hand in mine. At my laugh, her eyes flew open.

“It’s like another world.” She inched ahead.

“It was better before your magic ripped these trees apart.”

She gasped at the fallen pine and willow. Even the oaks had branches snapped off and scattered across the rolling grass.

Though Shadowdancer’s reins came with her, the horse reared outside the barrier.

“Why can he not come?”

“I don’t know. Wait here.” I went back through the barrier. The monk’s robe lay trampled on the ground underneath his hooves.

At seeing me, he calmed down, but whinnied. I stroked his neck. Since we did not have horses in my land, perhaps the barrier restricted horses as well.

After all, horses meant humans.

He carried both of us easily. Or if necessary, I used my Elvin speed and race alongside them.

I put the monk’s robe over Shadowdancer’s eyes again, and he swished his black tail. I whispered soothing words, while I kept one hand on his neck and coaxed him through the barrier.

Perhaps physical contact maintained by my kind was necessary to bring someone across, as I had done by holding Celeste’s hand.

“There.” I gave the horse a pat and took off the robe. “Nothing to worry about.” I stuffed the robe back into the pack. “Celeste, the elders will punish me for what your magic did to the trees along here.”

She did not answer me. Dread filled me to the marrow of my bones, and I turned around. Only the forest greeted me.

My love was nowhere.

Chapter Two

“Celeste.” No answer. Alarm choked me, as I shouted her name. A flock of ravens scattered and flew through the air, then silence.

“Celeste!” I yelled repeatedly, as I searched the area. A sudden chill swept over me. What if the Warloc’s progeny had captured her? Or worse, what if the barrier had more than one defense against humans?

I shook my head. If I wanted to find Celeste, I could not dwell on such thoughts.

Pushing my worry aside, I took one last glance at the barrier behind us, in case; somehow the protection had drawn her back through to the human side. Only the sparse elm and oak trees swayed in the wind. There was no trace of her. I returned to the spot where I had seen her last, hoping to find an answer in her footprints.

I studied her tracks. They circled from where I’d left her and then vanished.

Fear weighed heavy in my heart, strangling my hope. What other means devised by the ancients to keep humans out awaited us? I clenched my fists. Whatever had taken her would not be alive once I found it.

Why hadn’t I kept Celeste with me when I went back for her horse? I should have led them both through at the same time.

I crouched down and looked at her prints again. The pattern scattered as though she walked in a circle. Closing my eyes, I imagined her gazing in wonder at my lands.

Even though she caused disaster when she ripped up the trees with her power, this land was a dream compared to the land of the humans where they hacked down trees and burned their own kind with their accusations during their witch trials.

Still, I could not fathom what happened to her. Again, I walked over the area of her steps. Shadowdancer shook his mane, and then continued to eat grass.

I missed something. Some clue to where she was or who took her. As the sun disappeared and the sky darkened, I stared down at her footsteps.

With a frown, I traced her steps. Where did she go?

I noticed an old oak tree bent over the path, a branch from one of her footprints. Moss hung over the branches like shawls the human women wore. I squinted at her footprint in the dirt, and noticed the trunk sliced the edge off as if she walked up the tree. But she did not laugh at me from within its branches.

At my frustration, I slapped my palm against the trunk. My hand grazed something beyond where I should have met bark. I jerked back from the shock surging into my fingers.

I placed my hand in the middle of the empty space. Where the oak sliced her footprint in two along the ground, my hand went through the trunk.

Magic.

I tethered Shadowdancer to a nearby willow and patted his neck.

“Wait for us here. None will harm you.” As a precaution, I tucked one of my arrows underneath the blanket spread over his saddle. Any of my kind who saw it would recognize my mark upon the shaft. Of course, by now, word of my return and with a horse whispered from branch to branch like dashing squirrels throughout our land.

I glanced back at the tree. What lurked inside? With a prayer to the gods, I unsheathed my sword and then crept inside the oak.

For a moment, lights danced in my vision, then blackness. After a few blinks, my eyes saw the truth of it. Inside, instead of hollowed out trunk, caves. Hundreds of them.

Where would I find her in this maze of caverns? Nearly pitch black, but my Elvin sight saw well enough. Wait! Where had her tracks gone? Only mine were scrambled across the dirt floor. I dashed back to the tree entrance, found them and kept my eyes on them as I hiked deep into this maze.

Impatience filled me until her tracks stretched before me in a line. Why did she not turn back? Her steps led up and to the right.

I would not call out to her yet. I jogged forward. For whatever creatures may lurk here, I wanted surprise as my ally. Within the path where Celeste's footsteps led, another labyrinth of caves greeted me.

I wanted to take the passage to my left, but her prints led straight ahead. I plunged ahead and followed her tracks, but my body moved like a sleepwalker, thinking there is a door where there is wall.

Inside, the hollows grew shiny as though cut from obsidian. When I touched the side, the smoothness drifted into my fingers, making me want to trace its pattern.

With my hand dragging along the wall, I turned and followed the groove of the cut. What or who carved these caves inside this magical oak, if not done by magic? What monster prowled in here must have taken millennia to furrow these paths?

My stomach tightened at the thought.

The path of black stone zigzagged through another set of caverns. The swirls in the grain drew my attention.

After two more turns, I stood outside the tree opposite the side I began. In excitement, I glanced at the dirt for Celeste's footprints.

None.

My breath pierced me. Somehow I had been tricked. Taken my eyes from Celeste's tracks and led back outside. With a curse, I spun around and entered the tree again.

When had I diverged from her path? Panic set in when I noticed my steps alone led further into the labyrinth.

How long had I drifted?

Another cave and still no sign of which way Celeste had gone. I followed my steps back until I found her footprints.

I nearly put my tactics aside and shouted her name, when I caught a glimpse of my tracks that spiraled around hers.

Concentrating, I forced my legs to mimic her path. No use in both of us lost. Or me wandering in the caves at random. Her footsteps seemed erratic. Some scattered in the dirt, but then wound back.

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For miles, I hiked as the caves went up and down. In the distance, a red light flickered. I wanted to run, but feared I might lose my way again.

From around the corner, the glow waned. Was this Celeste, using her dagger as protection? Or another trick to lead me astray? This tree would seduce me out again if I allowed it.

This place smelled of limestone, mildew, and bats. I had no choice, but to keep with her footprints. When I entered the next cavern, the dirt floor turned to smooth stone, the color of glass. I could not follow her path through this.

My hand flew to my heart in a vow. "Gods, I promise whatever task you ask of me, I will do. Please help me find Celeste." I would do anything to have her safe in my arms.

She was my light, saving me through the darkness of my curse and myself. If not for her, I would have drifted to the path of the Drow.

Long ago, before we sequestered ourselves from the humans, the Drow separated from us. They lived in shadows and used their magic for self-gain and harm rather than for the benefit of others. Some said their skin became dark lavender for the darkness in their hearts, others said their eyes turned red from the bloodshed.

In the distance, a flickering along one of the cave entrances made me let out a thank you to the gods. It was Celeste using her magic dagger. It had to be. I tore through the cave and followed the light, which ebbed like the sun overrun by clouds. Another turn and still the ground did not show her footsteps, only darkened glass.

I neared the source of the light. Down a corridor, the stink of rotting flesh and urine filled the air.

I held the tip of my sword high, and then pressed the edge of my tunic on my free arm over my nose and mouth. The red glow dimmed as though I moved farther away from the source instead of closer.

I bit my tongue from the stink and anxiety.

The ceiling rose above me hundreds of feet. At the same time, my feet slipped down a slope into a nook.

Once landed, to my right Celeste stood. Her dagger rose, and the garnet gem sputtered in a magical shield around her.

“Celeste?”

Inside her protection, Celeste did not move as though frozen. Her arm trembled. Sweat beaded her brow. Her eyes followed me.

A groan echoed sounding like rocks grinding upon each other. The ground beneath me rumbled in answer. “Leave me to my meal, Elf,” a creature said.

The floor oozed into a form, and ridges in the ceiling pooled down into an emerging figure. The glassy stone creature had arms lined with tree-root-like veins.

His massiveness swallowed the light from Celeste’s magic inside him. Though he had no eyes or features that resembled a face, I sensed his stare on me. His body made of mounds of black quartz, yet he did not appear solid.

My curse would be useless against a creature of stone. Or would it? I would use everything I could to rescue Celeste.

With each breath I took, his form grew larger. Red from the garnet’s magic swirled inside him. Soon her magic from the dagger would be spent. And her body devoid of all its power.

“Leave or I take you as well.” The creature waved his rock arm.

“Nay. If Celeste comes with me, then I will spare your life.”

“Come closer. You will beg me to spare you. Even offer me the witch as your bribe,” he gabbled.

Chapter Three

I raised my sword. Yet, I could not cross the path of light between Celeste and the monster. Her magic, protecting her, erected an obstruction between the creature and me. “If you let her go, I promise not to kill you.”

His laughter was like stones smacking together when he spoke. “Steel not hurt me. More like I break your blade, and then your bones.”

I braced for the impact and charged the creature. The instant my sword hit his body I flew backward from the impact.

“You test my patience. No matter my promise, I devour you if you provoke me more.”

“Release Celeste!” I shouted and ran again toward him.

My sword struck his upper arm. The blade snapped in two. Unbelievable, Elvin forged metal did not break.

I ducked, but his arm slammed into me. I crashed against the far wall. My head spun from the blow. He was too powerful and I couldn’t get close to him long enough for my power to latch onto him.

“Celeste.” I choked to breathe as blood tinged my tongue. “Help me fight him.”

“Selfish.” The creature turned its faceless form to me. “If she helps you, she dies. Hours I have fed upon her now. Even the strongest, the Warloc tossed my way lasted only a few moments. Her strength will give me power to shed my imprisonment. Then I’ll make all Elves pay—especially Nivel—who bound me here.”

My skin prickled. Just what had my ancestor Nivel done?

“No Tree Elves be left alive. And I start with you.”

It shocked me when his other arm reached for me faster than I thought possible. When he squeezed me to his chest, his veins like trees, tightened by the second.

Sparkles of colors danced in my eyes. I could not breathe. His laughter made blood drizzled from my ears. A sharp pain each time I drew a breath had me taking shallow ones.

Perhaps a chance remained. I exhaled my air, at the same time, shoved my head against his chest, and grunted from the searing in my side. I did not know what effect my power would have on his form if any. My lungs burned, but this must work, needed to work.

He jolted, and with a gasp, he dropped me.

I gulped air. The veins on one of his arms withered.

“What have you done?” He screeched and flicked me aside as if I were a gnat.

“Gave you fair warning.” My boots skidded across the floor as I stopped. “Now let us go, or I’ll have to kill you.”

“You cannot. I-I am immortal.”

“Then why do I taste your fear? The power trails from you.” As I said the words, the red pulse whirling in his body once dulled, now brightened. I glanced back at Celeste. Her arm was barely up, which kept her protective shield over her.

“She weakens as I strengthen.” The roots coursing through his rock form glowed and then regenerated. “Gift of healing. Aye, that serves me well.”

Celeste fell on her knees; her dagger shield crouched over her. The shield flickered smaller, dimmer. I could not waste any more time.

My power manifested against the creature for a moment. Would it again? Clutching my fists, I turned to Celeste. If my plan had a remote chance of success, she would have to trust me and not hesitate.

“When I open my hands.” I raised them in front of her, closed. “Release your protection.”

She frowned. Then after a moment as though she tried to think of another solution, but found none, nodded.

“Excellent.” The creature’s voice grated like rocks tumbling down a mountain. “With her defenses gone, I devour her quicker.”

Doubt closed my throat. I knew I must destroy this creature. I must channel his *kajh* enough for us to escape. Every breath I took, my rib pierced me with fire. I couldn't twist or the stabbing pain buckled my legs.

As if to frighten me, the creature stomped closer. I waited until he loomed over me, but made sure Celeste saw my fists. She gave me a weak smile.

Instead of shouting, I splayed my fingers wide. A swoosh echoed. She had dropped her defense.

With a cackle like grinding rocks, the creature lunged for her. I thrust my hands onto the creature's arms. He was mine. As my power licked the life from him, he froze. The veins of his tree roots withered and then rotted inside him. My ribs mended together.

I almost shouted my triumph, when pain crashed into me. I wanted to throw myself off him.

Even my teeth vibrated with pain. What was happening? Again, the power of static warning surged. I did not jerk my hands away. Instead, I allowed my power to drink.

Then his victims bore into me. Sorcerers, necromancers, and humans crossing the barrier met their doom here. Many of them connected to the Warloc, whom we had battled on Beltane. Instead of saving them, he abandoned them when their magic diminished enough for the creature to swallow their flesh. Not even their bones remained.

Within moments, the roots borrowed into the ground like a lame man straining for water just out of his reach. The leaves still moist from a morning rain shimmered. How was this possible?

I had touched objects, trees, and my power never opened. Why now with this creature?

Was it because of the magic used to make him? And while all creatures had enchantment in them, giving them life, they didn't have enough *kajh* for my power to grasp. A caterpillar crawled over the outside of the tree along the bark, and I almost laughed from the tickle. Then a flutter deep within the tree made the leaves shiver.

His liquid rock form hardened.

"Let me smash him into a thousand pieces." Her voice sounded strained as if she had been screaming.

I held out my arm to stop her. Even if the creature was created from rock and not truly living, I heeded Nivel's council that Celeste should never kill. Celeste and I were opposite forces, hers healing and mine death. He warned me that she should never take a life. Otherwise, she would become more evil than the Warloc.

Instead of arguing, Celeste's legs gave out and she collapsed.

My power soaked up his *kajh*. Fullness filled me, as if I had stuffed myself at Yule and could not fathom another morsel, and strength returned to me. Even my ribs had healed. With this feast, I hoped to have enough nourishment for weeks, maybe longer.

As he died, his hardened body blackened. Still I drank his essence in. His massive form became solid rock towering over us. My power narrowed, and then subsided. I removed my hands and turned to Celeste.

"What took you so long to find me?"

"If you had stayed where I left yo—"

A rumble sounded from the creature. I took a step backward, as his form crumbled.

"Follow me." I held out a hand to Celeste.

Earlier, when the patterns of the rocks made me drift from Celeste's tracks, my instincts led me outside. Maybe it was the protection of the Ancients in case any Elvin ventured in this web of caves hidden within an oak tree and directed me outside.

She dodged the creature's head, the size of a boulder, as it tumbled from the body. She grasped my hand.

Soon, cracks snaked up the walls around us. They were going to collapse any moment.