

ONE

It was all I could do to open my eyes and take in my surroundings. I turned my neck and squinted against the bright light infiltrating the window in a garish display of brilliantly colored poppies. Blinking a few times, I tried to make sense of the scenery before me but my memory still wasn't with the program. I attempted to sit up but found I couldn't move. It didn't feel as though I were strapped down—it was more like my body decided to go on strike.

“She’s awake!”

It was Christa’s, voice. Relief washed through me. Whatever bad situation I was in had just gotten more bearable.

“Chris?” I started, attempting to shield my eyes against the glare but I couldn't lift my arm.

Something is very wrong, I thought, a lump forming in my throat.

“I’m paralyzed,” I croaked. At least my voice still worked.

I blinked against an onslaught of tears and forced myself to focus on the bails of straw forming the ceiling of my abode. Where the hell was I? It was like I was playing hostage to Bilbo Baggins.

“Jolie, don’t try to move,” said a man and his voice was decidedly unhobbit like. It took me a second to realize it was Rand.

Rand... my warlock boss who I was massively and totally in love with.

It was Rand who first enlightened me to my powers as a witch and although my life had since taken several twists and turns, (some good and some really really bad), I wouldn't have changed it for the world.

Rand leaned down into my line of sight, his pitch black tee shirt contrasting against his tan complexion. I wanted to smile but I wasn't sure if I could. None of that mattered anyway; what did matter was Rand's stunning face smiling down at me—the aquiline features of a Roman nose, chiseled cheek bones, deep dimples and a strong and well-sculpted chin. Eyes the color of molten chocolate and hair a matching shade. Although his hair was mussed and dark circles decorated his eyes, he was male beauty personified.

I felt the heat of his fingers against my face and an electric current passed through me at his touch. It was the same feeling I always got whenever Rand touched me—I never had figured out what it was--maybe

his energy. I closed my eyes against the feel of him, afraid I might start crying.

“Jolie, you’re going to be alright,” Christa said and grabbed my hand with an encouraging squeeze.

At least I could still feel my hands even if they weren’t working. I glanced up at Christa and immediately noticed her swollen eyes—she’d been crying. I could only assume it was concerning my predicament.

“What happened to me? Why can’t I move?” I whispered as panic began to stir in my stomach, sounding like a grumbling ogre in a cave.

“You defeated Dougal, Odran’s fairy,” Christa said in a tight voice. She quickly looked away and began dabbing her eyes. I closed my eyes again, trying to remember what had happened, what it meant that I’d defeated Dougal. Attempting to remember was like wading through tar—completely exhausting and more so, useless.

“And because of it, you’ve lost a lot of power, Jolie,” Rand added. “You absorbed Dougal’s negativity thereby neutralizing most of your strength and now you need to heal.”

And that was when the memories came pouring back as if someone had dumped a pitcher of realization juice over my head.

It was a freaking miracle to surpass all miracles that I was still alive.

Dougal just happened to be the strongest of the Fae King, Odran’s, fairies. And I, like a dumbass, had challenged him to a duel whereby I had to defend myself against his fairy magic. Doesn’t sound like a major deal? Yeah, that’s what I’d thought too but that was before I was stuck in bed, as immobile as an engorged tick.

So, somehow I’d managed to prevail over Dougal’s magical ambush and now my victory would force Odran and his fairy league to uphold their end of the agreement by allying with us in an impending war. Ah, yes, now the pieces of the puzzle were falling nicely into place. If only I wasn’t paralyzed, I might have considered it a good day.

“What do you mean, I absorbed Dougal’s negativity?” I asked.

Rand heaved a sigh and sat down on my narrow cot-like bed. His weight caused mine to shift, the straw of the bed poking me like the bite of a thousand ants.

“While you were defending yourself, using your own magic, you expended your life force. In the process, you absorbed some of the hostile negativity Dougal used to attack you.”

“Oh my God!” Christa yelled and collapsed on top of me in a new deluge of tears. “Your life force!”

Rand chuckled, shaking his head. “Christa, Jolie just needs to sleep it off for a few days. It’s similar to a bad hangover.”

Christa sat up and wiped her tears away, looking a little bit embarrassed. If she was embarrassed, I was relieved. A hangover I could handle, paralysis was something entirely different...

“And speaking of a hangover,” Rand started, leaning over me with a mysterious smile. He grabbed hold of my shoulders and lifted me up, pushing me back into the soft down of my pillows. Now propped in a sitting position—well, more like a slumped-over position, at least my line of sight was more interesting. Rand reached to the wood table behind him and presented me with what appeared to be a tanker of something that smelled like...ale.

“Beer?” I asked.

Rand shook his head. “It’s a fairy potion meant to aid in your healing. One of the elders gave it to me this morning.”

“Can’t you just heal me, Rand?” I blurted, remembering the many instances he’d used magic to heal my upset stomachs, headaches, cramps, the list went on.

Rand shook his head. “Unfortunately not. My magic is useless here.”

By “here” he was referring to a fairy village in BFE, otherwise known as Glenmore Forest, Scotland.

Christa eyed the tanker of fairy juice suspiciously, her eyebrow arched in exaggeration like a cartoon character. And in her fairy provided blue gingham dress combined with the yellow ribbons in her dark hair, she looked like Pollyanna.

“Are you sure that stuff isn’t the tainted mead Odran was trying to make her drink the other night?” she asked.

The tainted mead in question had been exactly that—mead tainted with a love charm to get me to acquiesce to the King’s sexual advances. And the stuff had almost worked-- I’d narrowly escaped with my virtue intact. One thing I’d learned about the otherworldly is they’re a randy bunch...

“Yes, I tried it myself,” Rand answered and turned his smiling eyes on me. “We almost lost you once, I wasn’t about to take my chances again.”

His words, though meant to be comforting, had the exact opposite effect.

I had almost died.

It felt as if the weight of a semi had suddenly descended on me as I considered how fortunate I was to have survived at all.

“Jolie,” Rand said, grabbing my attention. He gently tipped my chin up so it would be easier to swallow and held the tanker to my lips. I gulped a large mouthful before the taste of something akin to vinegar hit my tongue and I started to gag.

“Ugh,” I protested as Rand dabbed the nasty stuff from my lips.

“You’ve got perhaps five more sips.”

He repositioned the foul stuff on my lips and I had a vision of the black tar like substance bubbling into my mouth, reluctantly making its slimy way down my throat like a slug.

“I think she’s gonna ralph,” Christa observed.

I came damn close.

“She should get some rest,” Rand said, facing Christa.

Christa nodded and dropped her eyes, fiddling with a piece of straw which had escaped the bedding or the ceiling. She glanced up again and offered Rand an apologetic smile.

“Rand, would you mind if Jules and I had some girl talk?”

“Of course. Take all the time you need.” He stood up. “I’ll just be outside.”

Christa nodded and we watched his heavy stride as he neared the door. I wasn’t sure if Christa noticed how his black kilt revealed the tiniest hint of his taut backside but I sure as hell did. He opened the wooden door which looked like it would be better suited to a makeshift fort and threw us both a grin. As soon as the sound of the door closing reverberated through the small cottage, Christa faced me.

“Jolie, I thought you were going to die,” she said and started crying again, tears blurring her green eyes until they resembled glittering emeralds.

“Did I come close?” I asked, my stomach dropping at the idea.

She nodded. “You were in a coma for three days.”

A coma! A new bout of anxiety visited me, turning my stomach sour.

“Sounds like I’ve been through hell and back,” I said and offered a weak smile.

“And I was so worried about Rand, Jules.”

I wore my surprise. “Why? Did Dougal or Odran hurt him?”

Christa shook her head. “No, no. Rand is fine. I mean, no one hurt him. He just...seemed to fall apart where you were concerned.” She sighed, long and deep. “He sat by your bedside day and night, Jolie. He didn’t even sleep.”

Warlocks don’t actually require much sleep so that wasn’t as big a surprise as it otherwise could have been. But, still, the idea of Rand assuming the role of ever vigilant caregiver was something worth considering.

“I didn’t know what would happen to him if you...well, you know...died,” Christa nearly choked on the word and glanced away.

“He seems okay now.” It was all I could think to say. I still hadn’t moved past the fact that I’d been in a coma and nearly merged into the express lane of death.

“Yeah, he’s okay,” Christa said with a smile and then dropped her gaze to her fidgeting hands. “I just...I just wanted to tell you that I couldn’t imagine what my life would be like without you.”

I smiled and attempted to squeeze her hand but the attempt was useless. “Thank you, Chris.”

She nodded and stood up, smoothing down the skirts of her blue dress. I couldn’t see the outfit the fairies had magicked for me but given the circumstance, fairy scrubs were probably in order.

“Guess I better go let Rand back in,” she said, clearing her eyes as she started for the door. She opened it and Rand poked his head in, the sunshine outside acting as a halo around his head until he looked like an angel. All that was missing was a choir and organ belting out the notes to Gloria in Excelsis Deo.

“How is she?” he whispered.

“Seems to be better,” Christa answered. “You probably want some time with her?”

“I can hear you,” I said. “My ears are still working just fine.”

Rand didn’t say anything more but by the fact that I heard the door shut and Rand was the only one to approach my bed, I figured Christa had left.

“I don’t remember feeling like this after dueling with Dougal,” I said, starting to get annoyed.

Rand nodded and took a seat on my bed. “Your adrenaline was piqued. I knew it would be a matter of time before his fairy magic drained you.”

“So, is this paralysis thing just temporary, I hope?”

“Yes, but you have to rest, Jolie, that’s the only way you’re going to heal.”

Did I mention Rand is English and therefore has that wonderful and melodious British accent? Granted, Rand is insanely hot but I think the accent makes him even hotter. But, as it was, I had bigger things to think about than Rand’s hotness. There was that whole subject of the fairies and our new alliance. Another thing I’d learned about otherworldly creatures was that they had a way of appealing to their own self interests. And to say Odran hadn’t wanted to join our war was an understatement.

“Is Odran still on our side?”

“Yes, the fairies are perhaps the most honorable of creatures. Odran will not go back on his word.”

Odran and honor didn’t seem likely bedfellows.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

Rand ran a hand through his longish hair. “While you were sleeping, we discussed plans to go forward.”

I just nodded, allowing all of it to sink in. And what a lot of it there was.

Bella’s plans to become Queen of all otherworldly creatures and Rand, believing in the ideals of democracy and probably more so in the lunacy of Bella, stood against her. Not surprisingly, Bella had declared war against us.

So far, she had recruited half the vampire population, the majority of the witches and virtually all the demons as well as endless packs of werewolves. Until the fairies agreed to join us, we were exponentially outnumbered. Now we could wage war on a more even battleground.

“When can we go home?” I asked.

“It’ll be a few days, Jolie,” he answered. “You’re in no shape to travel. You need to rest and let yourself heal.” He stood up. “And having said that, I should leave you to get some sleep.”

But, I didn’t want him to go. Now that we were alone, there was so much more to say although I didn’t know where to start. We’d been through so much together already—confessing our feelings for one

another but never acting on them. Rand had told me a long time ago that love between a witch and a warlock wasn't the same thing as what humans consider love—it was all encompassing, a “union of souls” he'd called it. Well, after what had happened with Dougal, when certain death had seemed imminent, now seemed as good a time to talk as any.

“Rand, I'm not tired. There's so much to talk about, so much that's happened,” I started, hell bent on making him stay.

He started to shake his head. “Jolie, you need to rest.”

“I can't think about sleeping right now; I'm not tired and I've got way too much on my mind.”

“That's a side effect of the potion,” he said with a grin. “Just close your eyes and you'll be asleep before you know it.” He looked as if he was about to stand up and I was suddenly seized with the need to keep him with me.

“Rand, I never slept with Trent.”

The words tumbled off my tongue. It was weird because the thought of Trent, my ex boyfriend (and werewolf), hadn't even entered my mind until I'd blurted it out. Rand paused and there didn't seem to be any emotion registered on his face. He picked at the seam of my coverlet before glancing down at me again.

“That doesn't matter. Your recovery is what matters.”

But, it did matter. It suddenly mattered more than anything. I wanted, no needed him to understand that Trent had never meant anything to me. He was merely a pothole along the Interstate Rand.

“I wanted you to know because I'm sure that's what you thought happened that night and I bet it really did look that way with him half naked in my house or had I been half naked? I can't remember now.”

It was like I was waging a war with my mouth and it was winning. Words just came flying out and there wasn't anything I could do to stop them.

“He was half naked, if I remember correctly,” Rand said, a smile toying with his lips.

“Is that what you thought?” I insisted. “I mean, that we, er Trent and I, had done it? Did you think we had? Cause it looked that way, didn't it?”

Rand chuckled. “It had appeared that way, yes.”

“Were you bothered by it? I mean, did it bother you to think we’d been together?” It bothered me that I’d never cleared up this tidbit with him.

Rand dropped his eyes again and seemed like he was attempting to memorize the pattern of the hardwood floors.

“It caused me sleepless nights, yes.”

Because I was possessed by the verbiage demon, I didn’t even have a chance to ponder the fact that Rand was admitting things I’d never thought he would. Course, I’d never thought I’d actually have the guts to ask all these questions. Maybe the fairy potion wasn’t such a bad thing...

“Why didn’t you ever ask me if I loved him or if I was happy with him, at the least? You could have asked me if we’d had sex, Rand.” I paused for a breath. “I would have told you eventually.”

“Because it wasn’t my bus...”

“You could’ve asked, you know? I really wanted to tell you at the time but it just didn’t seem right. I mean, it had been super obvious that you were spying on me since you’d walked like two miles to my house in the rain and who does that?”

“Jolie...”

“And I knew Trent was just loving the fact that you thought we’d done...it. He had sooo many issues with you. God, he was such a jerk. What in the heck did I ever see in him?”

Rand appeared to be controlling a smile. He leaned into the pillow next to me, his kilt riding up and revealing the muscular swell of his thigh. I committed the image to memory for use the next time I needed a little one on one time with my hand.

“I don’t know what you saw in him.”

And neither did I. It was a good thing I was paralyzed or I would have jumped on Rand and sexually assaulted him right then and there. I suddenly started feeling a fuzzy warmth penetrating through my body like I’d just had something hot to drink on a really cold day. Maybe it was the potion but I suddenly felt sluggish and my eyelids felt even heavier.

“Yeah...jerk...right?” I managed.

Rand nodded and traced my hairline. “Granted, he was a jerk. Still is.”

I couldn’t help my yawn and I couldn’t even cover my mouth.

“You’re getting tired, Jolie,” Rand said, running his fingers through my hair.

And just like that, the feeling of heaviness was gone, replaced with what felt like adrenaline bubbling through me. I had to restrain myself from spewing out another litany of meaningless drivel.

“Are you glad I told you about Trent and me?” I couldn’t keep the words in—they’d mutinied and won.

Rand was quiet for exactly four seconds. “Yes.”

“I’m glad I told you then.”

“You know I have deeply rooted feelings for you, Jolie.”

Well, I’d always known we had something between us. How deeply rooted his feelings were for me, I’d never been sure. Mine, on the other hand, were as deeply rooted as a super old tree.

“I...never really knew for sure,” I said.

Suddenly, the bubble of anxious verbiage seemed to deflate in me and I expelled it with a sigh. I was exhausted again.

“How could you not know?” he insisted.

I tried to comprehend what he was saying but it was getting harder to keep my eyes open.

“Jolie, are you listening?” Rand asked with the hint of a smile.

I really was trying to listen but finding it near impossible. I felt my eyes close for a few seconds before I forced them open again. I’d wanted to have this conversation with Rand for a while and now that the opportunity was here, coupled with my liquid courage, I was suddenly a narcoleptic.

“Um, what? Yeah, yeah I’m listening.”

But I wasn’t listening, I was falling asleep.

“We can talk soon, Jolie,” Rand whispered and ran his fingers down my cheek.

“No, Rand...” Yawn. “We should...talk now.” Yawn.

He chuckled and pushed up from the bed. “Jolie, you need to heal.” He grabbed hold of my hand and his warm electricity coursed through me.

“Don’t go,” I whispered.

“I thought I nearly lost you to Dougal,” he said gently. “It would have killed me, Jolie. I’m not going anywhere.”

I remembered the feel of his warm and lush lips on mine before the craptastic fairy potion took me to the Land of Nod.

#

I woke up with a start and this time my visitor wasn't exactly someone I was thrilled to see.

Odran.

Anxiety beat a path down my spine at the sight of the King of the Fae. Hopefully he wasn't here to demand a rematch.

"I'm still not feeling good. Can't this wait until some other time?" I pleaded while attempting to wiggle my toe. No feeling...Nothing. Maybe I needed more of that god-awful fairy potion because I didn't feel a damned bit better.

Odran shook his mane of hair and like a great lion, lumbered over to my bed and sat down, uninvited. Tendrils of his incredibly long and beautiful golden hair splayed over his naked shoulders like a cresting wave. Like Rand, Odran too wore a kilt but his was purple and blue, colors of fae royalty. But, unlike Rand, I couldn't say I was much interested in what Odran wore beneath his kilt. Gorgeous though the King of the Fairies was, fending off his sexual advances was in a word...exhausting. And I so didn't have the time nor the interest for it now. Well, I guess I had the time...

"Nay, Lass, I doona want to trouble ye with talk ah war."

The spectrum of Odran's conversation vacillated between war talk or sex talk and I could definitely say I preferred the previous. I frowned but didn't say anything. I'm sure he wanted to trouble me with talk of less noble subjects such as the carnal interests of the Little King.

"I doona want," he started and then stopped, fisting his hands in a great show of frustration.

"Out with it," I prompted impatiently.

He faced me in surprise, like most people wouldn't dare talk to him like that. Well, screw it, he wasn't my King. I didn't vote for him, as Monty Python would say.

"I hope ta change yer mind regardin' this war, Lass."

I started to shake my head but he interrupted me.

"Nay, please listen."

I attempted to cross my arms against my chest in the universal sign of "I'm not amused" but forgot my arms weren't working. "Go on," I muttered, although I regretted the words as soon as they escaped. Odran should not be encouraged.

“Ye have ah gift, Lass. Ah gift that all the creatures ah the Underworld would fight ta ‘ave. Yer gift is too precious ta risk in ah war.”

My gift was my ability to bring the dead back to life. How I gained this ability, I have no clue. It just sort of happened one day and ever since then, my life had changed dramatically. I’d been the victim of kidnapping and attempted homicide. Great gift, huh?

“I want ye ta reconsider ma offer.”

His offer was to abandon my life with Rand and Christa and join the fairies whereby they could exploit my mad skills and let the rest of the otherworld creatures destroy themselves.

“I won’t reconsider, Odran,” I said and then eyed him. “I hope you aren’t breaking your word?”

Suddenly, the King’s somewhat docile manner was thrown out with the kitchen trash. He stood up so fast, he nearly fell over and proceeded to bash his fist into the wall, the plaster powdering the ground below him.

“I am King o’ the Fae!” he roared. “I doona break mah word!”

“Hot damn, Odran,” I started, only slightly freaked out. His bark was worse than his bite. “Calm down. I believe you, jeez.”

The blood in his face seemed to fade a bit but he didn’t make any motion to sit down. Instead, he started pacing the room, arms crossed against his impressive expanse of chest. He was the epitome of some mythological being. But, his wealth of muscles, immense height and unappeasable sexual drive was lost on me.

“Ye ‘ave ah way boot ye, Lass. Ye are difficult.”

Wasn’t that the pot calling the kettle black? “You aren’t much fun yourself.”

“I will not offer again, Lass.”

What was he offering again? Ah, yes, the chance to live with him in fairyland with unlimited access to my bed until he tired of me. And then I’d keep the homefires burning while he proceeded to fornicate with the willing female population.

“I think I’ll pass.” I paused. “But, thanks for the offer.”

I was spared Odran’s response when the door thrust open, and Rand, who could also be compared to a mythological being in his own right, appeared.

“What the bloody hell was that noise?” His gaze settled on Odran as he took the few steps separating him from the King. “And what the hell are you doing in here?”

Odran frowned, his hands on his hips. “The lass shows no respect.”

A crimson wash stole over Rand’s cheeks and his jaw was tight. “What did you do to her?” he demanded as his eyes found the remnants of plaster on the floor. “Are you alright, Jolie?”

I nodded. “I’m fine. Odran had a little temper tantrum but he’s calmed down now.”

“Temper tantrum?” Rand repeated. “I don’t appreciate you scaring Jolie, Odran, especially when she’s trying to recover!”

“He didn’t scare me,” I mumbled, though neither paid me any attention.

Odran dropped his hands from his hips and his face flushed like he was going to explode again. Before this became warlock vs. fairy, I thought I should intervene.

“We were just discussing our plans to move forward,” I said and gave Odran an encouraging glance. “Weren’t we, Odran?”

His eyes narrowed but he succumbed by nodding. “Aye.”

Rand wasn’t fooled but chose not to comment, instead saying “Jolie is tired.”

Odran didn’t say a word and without even a glance in my direction, lumbered out. Rand watched him and didn’t turn to face me until Odran disappeared.

“What did you do to make him so upset?”

“He tried to persuade me to leave you and Christa.”

Rand shook his head. “Well, I suppose that’s preferable to what I assumed he was doing here.”

“And what would that be?” I asked even though I knew the answer.

“Chatting you up again.”

“And if I’d been into it, you certainly have a way of ruining any chance I get of hooking up with anyone,” I said with a smile.

Rand looked entirely uncomfortable and started to say something but then stopped.

“I’m kidding, Rand.”

He nodded and took a few steps closer to the door before turning to face me. “Yes, well, good. That’s good.”

He took another two steps and turned around again, running his hands down the front of his shirt nervously. “Well, rest and I’ll come and check on you in a bit.”

Then he turned and walked out.