



Tricia Barr

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THE AMARANT SERIES:

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STEAMY ROMANCES:

Devilish

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Death. So much death everywhere.

In all directions, bodies were being lifted into the air, their souls ripped out and ascending in a miasma of blackness and misery overhead. And at the heart of all this chaos stood a man, reveling in the nightmare he was creating like a

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dark king.

This can't be real. Please don't let this be real!

And just like that, the vision was over. Vaeora was once again standing in front of her mirror, surrounded by her familiar bathroom in the soft morning light.

The pretty face framed by sylph blond hair was staring back at her in disoriented fright, pressing her hand to her chest. Her wits coming back to her, Vae exhaled heavily and splashed cool water on her face from the sink in front of her.

It was just another episode, she thought with exasperation.

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Ever since Vae was a little girl, she had been plagued by haunting hallucinations. Often times, they were just like dreams swallowing her consciousness when she was awake, doing her daily activities. Then there were the worst of them, an accessory to an epileptic seizure.

They were horrible to grow up with, especially in an orphanage. One way or another, the prospective parents always found out about her *condition*, about what a freak she was. Vae thought she would never get adopted.

So imagine her surprise when the most wonderful wealthy family opened their arms and their hearts to her.

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When they witnessed one of her episodes for themselves, she was sure they would return her to the orphanage, like a broken product needing to be exchanged.

But they didn't. For the first time, someone took an interest in her and her problems. They took her to a doctor, got her the best medical help money could buy. And when she was fifteen, she was officially diagnosed with a brain tumor. The size of a pea, it was lodged neatly under her cerebral cortex just above the pineal gland, making it inoperable.

Vae never imagined something so unremarkable yet so dire could be wrong with her. Throughout her

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childhood, even the orphanage workers thought she was possessed. This diagnosis was both a relief and a damnation. Because if something was physically wrong with her, something this vital, she knew her time on earth would be short. No one knew when that little kernel of cells would decide it was time to grow. Tomorrow? Next year? When she was fifty?

The doctors said that, for now, the tumor wasn't posing a major threat. Her seizures were brief and harmless, as were the hallucinations. They could give her pills to help prevent the episodes, or at least make them less common, but for the time being, that

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was all that could be done. As much as she hated these waking nightmares, she hated that she'd have to be dependant on drugs for the rest of her short life, especially when they often just put her in a fog.

It had been three years since she found out about her tumor, and she had lived quite a remarkable life since then. Her adoptive parents gave her everything she could ever ask for: a top rate education, frequent vacations all over the world, every technological toy she might ever need or want, and enough love to outlast her when the tumor finally took her down.

Presently, Vae was back from her

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first semester of college for fall break, and—joy, oh, joy—she had a check-up appointment scheduled for her first full day back in New Orleans. To be honest, she was quite over this whole thing. She already lived every day like it was her last, so what did it matter what the doctors said today? She couldn't care less.

Knock, knock.

“Come in,” Vae called, drying her face and leaving her bathroom.

The woman she had happily called her mother for the last five years opened the door and leaned against the doorframe. She was such a lovely woman, with a petite bird-like frame

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and carefully maintained brown highlighted hair that bounced off her shoulders.

“How are you doing?” she asked. An innocent question, but Vae knew she was referring to her appointment today.

“I’m fine.” Vae shrugged. “Mom, it’s not like they’re going to tell me anything I don’t already know.”

She sighed and looked down. “I know, honey. But these check-ups are important. Maybe not to you, but certainly to me and your dad. We just want to know that you’re going to be around for a long time, that you’re going to get a full life—”

Vae put her hands on her mom’s

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shoulders, hoping to prevent a motherly cry. “Hey, you have already given me a full life. I’m only eighteen and I have seen more of the world than most people ever see in their entire life. Everything after this is just a concession prize.” Her eyes were still misting up, so Vae knew she had to redirect the conversation. “What do you say we get some ice cream after? At the café we went to all last summer?”

Her mom’s face fell even farther. “Oh, honey, I wish I could,” she said, brushing her hand down Vae’s hair. “But I rescheduled a meeting for the appointment to this afternoon.” She looked at Vae like she was telling her

someone died.

Vae laughed lightheartedly. “It’s okay, Mom. I know how important your job is. We can just raincheck.”

Her mom nodded, looking up in an attempt to keep tears from falling. “Yes, we will go tonight after dinner, I promise. Your father, too.”

Vae smiled. “Perfect. See, it’s already better than what I had planned.”

Her mom laughed and ruffled Vae’s hair. “Breakfast is on the table whenever you’re ready. Then we’ll head out.”

“Okay, thanks,” Vae said. “I’ll be right there.”

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Her mom disappeared down the hall, and Vae quickly got dressed for the day.

* * *

“I’m afraid the prognosis is not good,” Dr. Clement had said from behind his desk. “After looking over the images from the MRI, it appears that the tumor has gotten much larger since your last scan. It’s now about the size of a cherry.” He sighed and paused, as if this next part was going to be difficult for him to say. He cleared his throat and then proceeded. “If the tumor gets much larger, it could become cancerous, at which point we could attempt to treat the cancer, but

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growth of that magnitude and rate reduces the likelihood that treatment would be successful. I'm sorry."

Vae's mom had broken down into sobs, but Vae herself just sat there, nodding in indifferent understanding like someone had just told her about an unpleasant weather forecast.

Even now, as Vae thought about the day's events while she walked along the sidewalk toward a French Quarter café, she couldn't find it in herself to care. It wasn't like he had expressly said, "You're going to die." Like everything else since this started, it was just another big what-if. What the scan revealed didn't really change anything,

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except for maybe how much more doting her parents were going to be over her while she was home on break.

Vae must have been staring blindly down at the sidewalk in front of her as she pondered her fatal unconcern because a heavy object smacked right into her shoulder.

She looked up at the guy she bumped into, offering an apology at the same time he did.

“I’m so sorry, I—Vaeora?” said a wonderfully nostalgia-inducing voice.

At the sound of her name, she really looked at him with more than just a passing glance. The handsome guy standing in front of her with that

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adorable boyish smile and feathery light brown hair was suddenly so familiar to her that her heart leapt with joy.

“Sam?” she asked with unchecked excitement.

“Oh my god, I didn’t think I would ever see you again,” he said with a delight that matched her own, then wrapped her in a warm bear hug. He still smelled like summer rain, and the smell instantly brought Vae back to the days of their shared childhood in the orphanage. “Geez, how long has it been?”

They slowly pulled apart, and, brushing her hair back over her shoulder, she said, “Um, I think five

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years, since I left the orphanage.”

“Wow,” Sam said, and Vae didn’t realize how much she had missed seeing that smile. “Well, how have you been? What happened since you got adopted? Does the family treat you well?”

“Yes, they’re amazing,” she said honestly. “I can’t imagine they could love me any more if I was their birth child, and vice versa. It feels like we were made for each other. What about you? Did you ever get adopted?”

He scoffed and shrugged. “Nope, it wasn’t in the cards for me.”

Although Vae had expected as much, she had always hoped that Sam

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would have gotten adopted by a great family like hers. Sam was such a wonderful person, he deserved to know the love of a family. But Sam was like her, a broken child, stigmatized by a similar darkness that had followed from birth. That was what bonded them in the first place. They were the only ones who understood each other, who weren't afraid of each other, and they became best friends in the darkness together. Sam was her brother just as truly as her adoptive parents were her parents.

“Oh, Sam, I'm so sorry,” she sympathized sincerely, wanting to offer some physical gesture of comfort but

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unsure whether they were on such a level.

“Nah, don’t be,” he said, waving his hand at her. “I’m doing just fine.” And looking at him, she believed him. He seemed pretty happy, comfortable in his skin in a way that Vae never saw him at the orphanage. She wondered what had changed, if it wasn’t a good family coming into his life. “Hey, are you free right now? Wanna grab a bite and catch up?”

There was nothing she wanted more in the whole world. “Yes, I’d love that,” she said.

They walked together to the café, ordered up a couple po-boys, and told

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each other about the parts of their lives they had missed since Vae got adopted. She had always meant to reach out to him, to go by the orphanage and call, but she was just a child, and there were so many doctor's appointments, and a family who were determined to shower her with enough to make up for those appointments. She just never got the chance. But she always had Sam in the back of her mind, and in the warmest corner of her heart.

From what Sam said, he had a pretty tough time on his own, being tossed from foster home to foster home, but he said he found a great community of people that treated him like family,

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and he was looking forward to turning eighteen so that he could go out on his own. He already had a job and was saving up for a studio apartment. His story sounded a bit sad, yet he was so happy. That was the thing about Sam, nothing could ever keep him down.

After the sandwiches, they put in an order for some frappucinos. Anything to draw out their time together before Vae was expected home, not just because she wasn't exactly looking forward to seeing her dad's sad face at the bad news from the doctor, but also because she had missed Sam terribly, and she worried that she may not see him again once they parted ways.

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The counter clerk called her name for the drinks.

“I’ll get them,” she said, scooting out her chair to stand up.

“No, let me,” Sam insisted.

Before Vae could argue against his chivalry, the worst happened. The familiar tightness seized her spine and spread throughout her entire body, shockwaves of pain surging into every nerve as she collapsed to the floor. She tried to squeeze her eyes shut, unwilling to see whatever twisted visions this seizure had in store for her, but no part of her body was under her control, not even her eyelids.

As she knew it would, the world

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darkened around her, and she completely forgot about the convulsing of her extremities. But it wasn't the oxygen deficiency affecting her eyesight. It looked as if a storm had moved in overhead, casting the inside of the café in shadow. The wallpaper on the walls appeared to age and decay in seconds, and all the people that had gathered around her in concern turned to ash layer by layer and fell away, their empty skulls the last thing to disappear.

And she couldn't do anything, couldn't even cry to express her horror. She was stuck, forced to watch every terrifying second.

Suddenly, the ground rumbled and

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shook beneath her body. To the right of her, the earth pushed up through the floor, cracking and upending the tiles. Then the floor opened up, an ominous red glow emanating from it like it was the mouth of Hell itself come to swallow her whole.

Slowly, a man rose up out of the hole, naked and covered in mud. Vae recognized this man, only from hallucinations she'd had of him before. He was death incarnate, and right now, he had his sights set on Sam, who was the only one around her still alive and was hovering over her, completely unaware of the demon looking down on him.

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Sam! she screamed inside her head, but her mouth wouldn't open to let the warning escape. *Sam, run! He's going to kill you!*

But Sam couldn't hear her. The man bent down, closed his hand around Sam's neck and yanked him up off the ground. Sam's feet dangled above the floor as he gasped for air. Vae knew what was coming next. She had watched the man do it before, but never to someone she knew. Never to someone she cared about.

Sam's body arched backward, and his jaw opened way too wide, and Vae could actually see his soul being ripped out of his body. *No, no, NO!* her mind

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shrieked. Lifeless, Sam's body dropped to the floor beside her, his vacant eyes staring at hers, and she screamed at the top of her lungs.

She didn't realize that the seizure had stopped, that she was closing her eyes or that her scream was really coming out, until she heard Sam's voice.

"Vae? Vae, what's happening?" he asked frantically, gripping her shoulders.

She stared at him for a moment as she panted heavily, disbelieving that he was really okay, really alive and looking down at her with concern.

After a few seconds, she realized

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what happened, that she'd had another seizure, and that everything she had just seen was only a hallucination. The more reality set in, the deeper her embarrassment became.

“Vae, oh man, are you okay?” Sam continued to ask as he scanned her face, concern pulling his handsome features tight.

Vae sat herself up with Sam's help, and the crowd that had gathered slowly dissolved, giving her the illusion of privacy.

“Yea, I'm fine,” Vae told Sam as he helped her back into her chair.

“What just happened?” he asked, clearly not buying her answer. “I

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thought you were dying.”

Vae put her hand over her forehead, as if to shade herself from her humiliation at having an episode in public, and right in front of Sam. The timing could not have been worse. “Nope, not dying, just making a fool of myself,” she said in a hushed tone. “Do you remember when I used to...see things? Back at the orphanage?”

Sam looked in both directions before leaning forward and asking in a similarly clandestine tone, “Did you just have a vision?”

Vae shook her head. “They’re not visions, they’re hallucinations,” she objected. “After I left the orphanage, I

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found out that I have a brain tumor. It's what's responsible for all the nightmarish things I see. And in the last few years, I've started having seizures along with them. So, on the bright side, I'm not cursed, I'm not a freak of nature, I'm just broken."

Sam continued to look at her for a long moment, and she felt as if he was trying to see through her, into her soul.

She blushed under his scrutiny, and suddenly wanted very much to get away from him before she died on the spot from mortification. "I'm so sorry you had to see that."

Sam shook his head and reached across the table to put his hand over

hers. “For one, Vae, you’re not broken. But I’m not entirely sure your visions are just the result of your tumor. I’ve come to learn that not everything can be explained away by science, that some things in this world really are...magical.”

Vae frowned at him, at a loss for the words to convince him that he was wrong about her.

With his free hand, he picked up a napkin off the table and held it just below the edge of the table between them. She was about to ask what he was doing when he whispered a strange word, and then suddenly the napkin lifted up off his hand and floated in the

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air.

She gasped and blinked hard to make sure she wasn't still seeing things. Then the napkin gently wafted back down onto Sam's hand, which he then closed and balled up the napkin.

"Turns out I'm not exactly cursed either," Sam said quietly. "I'm a witch."

Vae looked from him to his hand, looking for any sign of trickery with napkin or joking on his face, but she found neither. Sam looked dead serious.

"A witch?" Vae asked, drawing out the words as she decided on a tone.

"I know it sounds insane," he said. "But it's true. The community I told you

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about, well, they're witches. They found me and taught me about what I was and how to control it. That little spell was nothing but the tip of the iceberg. And I bet they can tell you for sure if what you see is real or not. Would you let me take you to them?"

Vae didn't know what to say. After the fit she just had in front of him, she felt she owed it to Sam to humor him. But what if these people were some kind of cult and they had brainwashed him? But then again, she did just see him levitate a napkin, which as far as she could tell was not just some parlor trick. And she trusted Sam. She knew he would not lie to her, that was never

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in question. But these people she didn't trust at all. If they were a cult, some devil-worshippers or something, what if they tried to hurt her if Sam brought her around? But then again, what if they were planning to hurt Sam?

"I don't know, Sam," she said finally. "If this is some kind of voodoo thing where they sacrifice animals, I just don't think that's something for me."

Sam laughed. "It's nothing like that. No cutting off the heads of chickens. These are good people. They helped me, and I'm sure they can help you. There are healers there as well. If they prove you aren't having *visions*, they might be

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able to do something about your hallucinations, or even your tumor itself. It would be worth it to give them a chance.”

Well this was interesting. Her hallucinations had been such a huge part of her life for so long, she had never even imagined life without them. But here was Sam, saying his so-called witch friends could get rid of them for her. Maybe she could just check them out. Really, what harm could it do? Even if these people did end up sacrificing her on a horror-film style altar, she already half expected to die at any moment. She had very little to lose.

“Alright,” she said, shrugging one

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shoulder. “Why not?”

“Okay, great,” Sam said. “I’m actually heading over there tonight after work, if you’re available.”

“Umm, I could be,” she said. “I’m having dinner with my parents, but I might be able to get away after. What time do you get off work?”

“Nine o’clock,” he answered, his excitement making his boyish smile ever more charming. “I’ll call you when I get off and see if you’re ready?”

“Okay, sounds like a plan,” she said.
This was going to be interesting.

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CHAPTER
2

“So where exactly is this place?” Vae asked as Sam pulled out of her driveway.

“If I told you that, I’d have to kill you,” he said in a serious tone, then burst out laughing. “I’m just kidding.

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It's an abandoned warehouse down town on the river's edge."

"An abandoned warehouse?" she asked skeptically. That sounded less cult-like and more serial-killer-ish.

"It used to be an old canning factory, and it was falling apart," Sam explained. "The local witches took it over and repurposed it as their gathering place. It's sort of a haven for us."

Vae nodded, beginning to regret that she had agreed to this meeting.

"Are your...friends expecting me?" she asked. Maybe it wasn't too late to

bail.

“I didn’t tell anyone I was bringing someone, buuuut that doesn’t mean they aren’t expecting you,” he answered cryptically.

“Hmm,” Vae nodded indulgently. Sam really did believe these people had some kind of powers. It was a bit hard for Vae to swallow, even after she witnessed Sam levitating a napkin in thin air with her own eyes. Somehow, there had to be a simple explanation for that, just as there was for her hallucinations, for everything, even if that explanation was that Sam was lying to her. But she wasn’t quite ready

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to believe that either.

As Sam drove, their surroundings grew grungier and less well-lit. Compared to the posh gated neighborhood Vae's parents had raised her in for the last five years, this part of New Orleans was practically a shanty town. Lots of industrial buildings that were falling apart, and a few residences that already had.

He pulled into a large parking lot, and Vae's nerves were sizzling all through her limbs as he put the car into park and unlatched his seatbelt. Sam got out of the car, and Vae still hadn't unbuckled her seatbelt. He gave her an

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amused look through the windshield, then came around to her door and opened it.

“Are you going to stay in there all night?” he asked.

“No, just taking it all in,” she said. “It’s not every day a girl gets introduced to an abandoned warehouse full of supposed witches in the dead of night.”

He laughed, seemingly amused by her blatant skepticism. “I’d hardly call nine-thirty the dead of night.”

Vae got out of the car and crossed her arms as she followed Sam to the rusty warehouse along the river. A chill

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prickled her skin, and she wasn't sure if it was just from the cool breeze, or from the heebie-jeebies this place was giving her.

Sam led her to a pair of barn-style doors and pulled them apart. The soft glow of candle-light painted the small entry room a cozy orange, and the warm smell of melted wax filled her nostrils. Directly opposite the sliding doors was a table draped by a red cloth, and behind it sat a middle-aged Milano woman, who stared at them through narrowed eyes as she shuffled a deck of tarot cards. With all her dangling jewelry and swaying clothes of

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exaggerated color, she reminded Vae of the witch-doctors one could find peddling fortune-telling skills on the corner of Jackson Square.

“Sam, I see you’ve brought a friend,” the woman said. “You know I can’t just let her in because she’s your girlfriend. You may have a bed here, but it doesn’t mean you can use it for fun.”

Sam laughed at the woman’s insinuation and Vae blushed furiously, stammering to correct the gypsy woman that she was not his girlfriend. “You know I only have eyes for you, beautiful,” he said, winking at the woman. “Actually, Adelle, my friend

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Vae here suffers from...let's just call them 'episodes', and we were hoping you could tell us if there's anything supernatural to them."

Adelle took a long, speculative look at Vae, and then nodded and said, "Very well. Come closer, child."

Vae was hesitant, wondering what methods this gypsy would use to determine Vae's so-called normalcy, but Sam nudged her forward until she was standing right up against the table.

Adelle shuffled her cards a few more time, then laid them out face-down in a pretty line across the table. "Pick a

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card,” she said.

That’s it? Tarot cards? What’s this going to prove? Vae thought.

She looked down at the cards, her eyes lazily scanning the fading backs of these well-loved pieces of cardstock. Without a clue as to what this woman was looking for, or how this could possibly divine anything of importance, Vae reached for a card at random and flipped it over. On its face was a circle with different symbols on it, floating in the clouds surrounded by a handful of strange mythological beasts.

“I knew it,” Sam said behind her.

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“The Wheel of Fortune,” Adelle said. “It’s been a very long time since I’ve come across a Seer. Where on earth did you find her, Sam?”

“The same orphanage I grew up in,” Sam replied.

“You think I’m a what?” Vae asked.

“A seer, child,” Adelle answered. “You see things, don’t you?”

Vae’s breath hitched at the gypsy’s declaration. “How did you know that?” Vae turned around and looked at Sam. “You said you didn’t tell anyone, but you told her, didn’t you?”

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Sam put his hands up and shook his head in happy objection.

“He didn’t tell me anything,” Adelle said. “The cards did.”

“How?” Vae asked. “How can a random card draw tell you something like that?”

“Ah, so you don’t believe in any of this,” Adelle said, nodding her head in understanding. “Magic, witches, visions—I bet you think it’s all the stuff of fairytales. Am I right?”

“Nail on the head,” Sam said with a slight chuckle. Apparently, this was all very amusing to him.

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“Your visions, in what form do they come?” Adelle asked, leaning forward. “In dreams, during the day?”

“Like I told Sam, they’re not visions,” Vae protested. “What the cards didn’t tell you is that I have a brain tumor, and these ‘visions’”—she air-quoted “—are the result of epileptic seizures. They are just hallucinations and nothing more.”

Adelle studied Vae for a moment, and then gave her a knowing smile. “Ah, but you don’t really believe that.”

This is getting ridiculous.

“Look, whatever they are,” Vae

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prefaced, reigning herself in before she insulted anyone, “Sam said that maybe there was something you people could do to take them away.”

“Seeing is a very rare and powerful gift. Why would you ever want to get rid of it?” Adell asked.

“I’m not just talking about the hallucinations,” Vae said, hope tugging at her chest. “I want it all gone. The seizures, the tumor, all of it. Sam said there are healers here. I’ve had no luck with medicine, so maybe magic can help.” She shrugged.

“But you don’t believe in magic,”

Adelle taunted.

“I’ll try anything, if it means living a normal, healthy life,” Vae confessed. A strange vulnerability set in, making Vae feel unusually exposed. She had always accepted that this tumor was a part of her, that it was a crutch she would never be rid of, but admitting to herself that such a thing was something she wanted somehow shed the layers of the protective wall she’s built around herself.

Adelle nodded, then replied with less hostility, “I’m sure you will find what you need here. You may go inside.”

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“Thanks, Adelle,” Sam said, then gestured for Vae to follow him toward a door to the right of the table.

Just as Vae was walking through the door, Adelle called out, “Oh and Vae, come see me when you want to know the meaning of your visions.”

Vae gave the woman a curt nod and proceeded through the doorway, happily closing the door behind her. They had stepped into a huge interior courtyard, with flowering vines growing up the columns and banister of this old warehouse’s metal construction. There were bookshelves lining the walls, and decorative metal benches all around. It

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was like Vae had walked into the library of her dreams.

Vae turned away from the simple beauty around her and looked at Sam. “So, can you explain to me how that card I drew meant anything?”

Sam smiled. “Any time anyone walks into this building, Adelle gives them the card test. It identifies the presence of magic in someone. If you had been just a normal, un-magical person, you would have drawn a suit card. Only a witch can draw a Major Arcana card, and whichever one you draw usually says something about your type of magic or your destiny, or

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something like that.”

“So how did the Wheel of Fortune say that I was a—a Seer?” Vae asked.

Sam shrugged. “Heck if I know. Card reading isn’t my thing. But Adelle is really good at it. She called it when she said I was the most powerful witch in centuries.” He stuck his tongue out.

Vae raised one eyebrow at him and frowned. “Sam, you promise you didn’t tell her about me before this?”

Sam abandoned his smile. “Vae, I didn’t bring you here to pull the wool over your eyes. You’re my sister, blood or not. All I want is to help you.

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Nothing that happens here is trickery or manipulation, I promise you that.”

Guilt saturated her at having doubted him. He had nothing to gain by lying to her, and she trusted that he wouldn't hurt her like that. But if Sam was being true, then Adelle's card reading had merit. Did that mean its results were correct? Did magic really exist? Could it be possible that the things Vae saw were visions of things to come?

She truly hoped not.

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CHAPTER
3

“So, what now?” Vae asked, looking all around her and admiring the truly magical décor of this seemingly derelict place.

There were people of all ages moving about in here, some going in

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and out of rooms on the aisles of the second story, some sitting in the benches down here, reading or conversing. None of them seemed anywhere near as openly weird as Adelle had been. The older teenagers in the corner could even be her classmates for how normal they appeared. Still, she felt out of place.

“I’ll try to find some of the healers,” Sam said. “I know you’re not quite ready to pursue the whole Seer thing, so for now we can try to do something about that tumor.”

Her belly fluttered with hope, but she squashed it before it could open the

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gates to disappointment. *Getting rid of this tumor would be a miracle*, she told herself with a note of melancholy. *Visions are one thing, but nobody can work miracles.*

“Sam, my boy,” called a male voice from across the warehouse floor.

Vae and Sam turned in that direction to see an attractive light-skinned black man jogging toward them.

“Ready for today’s lesson?” the man asked when he caught up to them. “I, for one, am very excited to see how you do.”

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“Yea, I’m definitely ready,” Sam said eagerly. “But first, have you seen Evangeline around? Or Belinda?”

“No, not tonight,” the man said, shaking his head. “Why?”

“Well, we are in need of their healing services,” Sam replied, gesturing to Vae and himself together. “Marcucio, this is Vae—she’s a bonified Seer. And Vae, this is Marcucio, the man who runs this whole operation.”

“Vae, it’s a true pleasure,” Marcucio greeted, taking her hand with both of his. “A Seer, huh? Wow.”

“Yea, that’s still a little up in the

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air,” Vae responded nervously, withdrawing her hand.

“She doesn’t believe in magic,” Sam said. “Thinks it’s mumbo-jumbo.” Sam laughed.

“Ah, I see,” Marcucio said. “Well, I don’t think that Evangeline or Belinda can cure doubt.” He winked at Vae, in a comfortable way as if they were old friends.

“No, er, well, it’s more complicated than that,” Sam said, and Vae appreciated his prudence about her tumor rather than sharing it with everyone.

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“Alright,” Marcucio said. “Well, whatever it is, Vae, you’re welcome to wait for them. Evangeline should be coming in a bit to help one of our younger witches with a—preventative issue.” He cleared his throat, as if the topic were taboo. “In the meantime, you’re welcome to watch Sam’s lesson. If that doesn’t turn you into a believer, nothing will.”

“Oh, good thinking,” Sam said, patting Marcucio on the shoulder.

Marcucio looked up, and Vae followed his eyes up to the plate-glass ceiling through which the clear night sky could be seen. “Well, the weather is

Tricia Barr

perfect for your next lesson. Let's head outside."

Sam clapped his hands together with excitement. "Yes, I have been dying to learn this spell. You're in for a real treat, Vae. Come on."

Vae raised an eyebrow as she followed them back out into the large parking lot, wondering what exactly she was going to witness. She knew very little about the kinds of things magic could supposedly do, and had no idea why any particular spell—or whatever they called it—would be dependent on the weather. She was doubtful, but Sam had told her to keep an open mind, so

Foresee

she tried to abandon all her assumptions and resigned to watch with fresh eyes.

The three of them walked with purpose to the center of the parking lot. Sam and Marcucio faced each other, and Vae stood back with her arms crossed, giving them space for whatever they were about to do.

“Now, Sam,” Marcucio began, “this spell usually requires a circle of five witches or more. Are you sure you want to attempt it on your own?”

“Absolutely,” Sam said eagerly, bouncing slightly on his heels.

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Marcucio smiled, as if hoping that Sam would say that. “Alright, then close your eyes and concentrate,” Marcucio instructed. “And repeat after me.” and he went on to say a slew of words in a foreign yet beautiful language; it all just sounded like pretty gibberish to Vae.

Sam closed his eyes and repeated the words in a strong and clear voice. He chanted them over and over again. Vae watched them curiously, seeing nothing happening, nothing changing.

A strong gust of wind blew, instantly chilling her bare arms and pushing her hair into her face. She raked it back behind her ears in vain as

Foresee

the wind continued to blow, and finally gave up and clutched her arms around her in an attempt to warm herself. She looked around, thinking it strange that such a strong and cold wind should come up out of nowhere on what had previously been a calm and pleasant evening.

The wind grew more ferocious, rocking the branches of the trees that circled the lot and howling as it rushed between the parked cars.

Sam and Marcucio seemed completely unphased by this rogue zephyr, both maintaining keen concentration as Sam chanted on.

Tricia Barr

Overhead, what was only moments ago a clear star-sprinkled sky was now a witch's cauldron of churning clouds, rapidly roiling in from the horizon to swallow the indigo directly above.

“What the...” Vae muttered, staring upward at the building storm with perplexity.

When she looked back at the lot in front of her, she could see that a crowd was emerging from the warehouse to gather around the lot, watching Sam as if he were some spectacle.

*Wait... Could Sam be doing this?
...No, that's not possible...*

Foresee

A loud crackle of thunder made her jump just as a spider vein of lightning rippled across the sky and cast a brilliant flash on everything around her.

The lightning must have pierced the heavens, for a downpour immediately followed, soaking through Vae's hair and clothes in seconds. The audience behind her erupted in applause, not a one of them seeming to care that the heavy and cold rain was drenching them like sewer rats. In fact, many of them began to dance, offering their faces to the cascade as they spun and frolicked.

A howl came from Sam's direction,

Tricia Barr

and when she turned to look at him, he, too, was reveling in the storm. And when he spread out his arms as if to embrace it, two more bolts of lightning sliced through the sky behind him, giving the optical illusion that they were coming out from his upraised hands.

“I did it!” he yowled. “I did it!”

The crowd behind Vae rushed forward to congratulate Sam, mobbing him like he was a celebrity. And Vae just stood there, fanning out her hands above her eyes to shield her face from the unrelenting shower, suffering from a crisis of belief.

Foresee

Did Sam really just cause this storm? The sky had been completely clear all day, with no sign of rain in the forecast. Yet just as they came outside to perform a spell with the specific purpose of causing a storm—or so Vae assumed—one comes along, and in full blast. Was it possible?

Vae stared blankly at the falling rain, her mind replaying everything she had seen since meeting Sam yesterday: Sam levitating the napkin, Adelle knowing about her “visions”, and now this storm responding to Sam’s incantation.

And then her mental projector went

Tricia Barr

back even farther, rerunning episodes from her childhood with Sam, the strange things that used to happen. There was one instance in particular that always stuck with her.

One day, one of the older boys at the orphanage—a chubby freckled boy that no one had adopted and likely never would at his age—had cornered Vae and Sam in their room while everyone else was out playing in the yard. Vae didn't remember what issue he had with Sam, but he was determined to beat him up that afternoon. He began to punch Sam, and Vae slapped and tugged at the boy to

Foresee

get him to stop, but he was simply too big for her attempts to have any impact.

Suddenly, the boy was knocked backward and sent flying across the room. Sam was still curled up into a ball, desperately shielding his face with his hands, so he hadn't physically done it; not that he could at his small size. When the boy got up off the floor, his nose was streaming blood, and he was clutching his abdomen like he was in extreme pain. He tripped to his feet and ran out of the room. Vae and Sam never did figure out what happened, and they never talked about it after. It was just one of the many odd occurrences that

Tricia Barr

seemed to follow them like flies on livestock. But the boy never bothered them again.

Thinking about it now, there was no logical explanation for how that boy was forced away from Sam. With all the evidence fresh in her mind, it was hard to deny that inexplicable events were abundant when it came to Sam. Maybe Sam really did have powers. And if that was true, maybe her hallucinations *were* visions. That was the scariest possibility of all.



CHAPTER
4

“That was amazing!”

Everyone had gone back inside the warehouse and was now drying themselves with towels and napkins, or wringing out their drenched hair and shirts.

Tricia Barr

Sam was practically glowing as he wrapped a large, thick coat over Vae's shoulders. "I can't believe I did that!" he said. "Marcucio said it usually takes a circle to bring rain, and I did it all by myself! Can you believe it?"

"I think I can," Vae muttered to herself, battling with her view of the world, and what it would mean if all this was real.

"So, what did you think?" he asked her, goading her out of her stoic silence.

"Umm, that was...something," she managed to say.

"Still skeptical?" he asked.

Foresee

“Honestly, I... I’m not sure.”

“Well, that’s a start,” Sam said with satisfaction.

“That was great work, Sam,” Marcucio said, coming up to pat Sam on the back. “You truly are a remarkable witch! I don’t think there’s anything that you can’t do.”

“Thanks,” Sam said.

The two continued to talk “shop”, and Vae just listened with a newfound interest.

“That was quite a show, wasn’t it?” Adelle’s smooth, low voice said softly

beside her.

Vae turned to the middle-aged psychic. “Yes, it was...something.”

“I know it will take some time for you to fully accept who and what you are,” Adelle said. “But when you are ready, I am here to guide you on your journey. I can help you decipher what your visions mean, what they are trying to tell you—”

“They’re not visions,” Vae insisted, cutting the psychic off. “They can’t be.”
For all our sake’s, they just can’t be.

Adelle bowed her head respectfully. “As you wish. But just remember, I’m

Foresee

here if you want to explore an alternate path.” She walked back to her room at the front of the warehouse and closed the door.

“Oh, and Vae,” Marcucio said, bringing her attention back to the pair of men. “Evangeline is here, and she’s finished with her troubled young witch, so she can see you now if you’d like.”

“Yes, that would be lovely, thank you,” Vae said politely, a nervous knot forming in her throat.

“Great, follow me,” he said, nodding his head and walking in that direction.

She paused a moment.

Tricia Barr

“Don’t worry,” Sam whispered. “I’ll be right here with you.”

“Will it be some big ritual, like what you just did?” she asked nervously.

Sam shook his head. “No, not all magic is a big event like what I did out there. This will be simple and low-key, kind of like going to a therapist. Evangeline is our most powerful healer, you really have nothing to worry about. I promise.”

He took her hand, and together they followed a few steps behind Marcucio. He took them to a quiet and dim room at the back of the warehouse. It, too,

Foresee

had a glass ceiling, and was covered with more vegetation than the main lobby. In fact, this room might even be a greenhouse, with rows and rows of little plants, all surrounding an open center that had chairs and recliners laid out in a circular pattern.

An African beauty with a mane of thick and shiny black ringlets was tending some herbs on the edge of the sitting space. Like most everyone else, she was dressed in street clothes—comfortable jeans and a cute blouse. She looked normal; Vae would have never suspected anything supernatural about her.

Tricia Barr

“Evangeline,” Marcucio announced their presence. “We have a special visitor for you. This is Vaeora, Sam’s close childhood friend.”

“Oh, I didn’t know Sam had friends,” the young woman said with a teasing wink at Sam. “It’s nice to meet you, Vaeora.”

“Thanks, you can just call me Vae,” Vae offered.

“Sure,” Evangeline agreed with a smile. “What ails you, Vae?”

“Well, I don’t know if there’s really much you can do about it,” Vae said with a nervous laugh. This wasn’t the

Foresee

sort of thing Vae had ever openly told anyone about, so she didn't quite know how to say it. "But, um, pretty much all my life, I've had a small tumor in my brain, and it causes me to have seizures and *awful* hallucinations."

Evangeline's pretty ebony face wrinkled with sincere sympathy. "Oh, you poor thing, how terrifying that must be."

You have no idea, Vae thought. "Is there anything you can do? Even if it's just giving me a potion or something to make the hallucinations go away, or the seizures less frequent?"

Tricia Barr

“Yes, I’m sure we can do something,” Evangeline said. “Thank you for having the bravery to open up about your problems. It’s never easy to seek help. But you’ve come to the right place.”

“Thank you,” Vae said, deciding that she liked Evangeline very much.

“If you’ll all excuse me, I’ll leave her in your capable hands,” Marcucio said. “And, Vae, I hope we see more of you.” He took her hand with both of his and gave it a warm squeeze, then left the greenhouse.

“Well, let’s get started,” Evangeline

Foresee

said.

“What can I do to help?” Sam asked, as always full of enthusiasm.

“You can gather some herbs,” Evangeline said. She took a small notepad and pen from her back pocket, scribbled some things down, then tore off the top sheet and handed it to Sam.

“Great, I’ll get right on it,” Sam said.

“Um, what are the herbs for?” Vae asked, curious and hesitant.

“Some of them will go into a salve I will apply to your temples to allow magic to better penetrate, and some

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will go into a sort of tea mixture I will ask you to drink every morning.”

At the mention of having to ingest anything, Vae’s eyes got big.

Evangeline laughed. “Don’t worry, almost everything that goes into the tea you can find at a grocery store. It may not taste the best, but it’ll be perfectly safe to drink.”

Vae gave an apologetic laugh. “Sorry, I’m just really new to all this.”

“No worries,” Evangeline said. “We all were, at some point.”

Sam came back with a wicker basket

Foresee

full of freshly cut greenery, all of which smelled so wonderfully spicy that Vae's discomfort melted away. Evangeline picked out a few and put them into a mortar bowl with some water, then began to grind the concoction with the stone pestle until it was a smooth paste.

Once she was satisfied with its consistency, she dipped her forefinger in and swabbed a dab of it on both of Vae's temples. Vae just watched all this with a morbid curiosity, part of her beginning to get excited that this might actually work.

Evangeline sat in front of Vae with her legs crossed. "Ok, now just relax,"

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she instructed. Then she placed her index and middle fingers on Vae's temples, closed her eyes and softly recited words with the same sounds as those Sam had used earlier. Evangeline's voice was melodic and soothing, and though Vae couldn't understand her words, she found herself captivated by them. Before Vae knew it, her eyes were closed as well, and her breathing was slow and easy.

Evangeline repeated the same phrase several times. Vae wasn't sure how long they had been sitting there in this silent meditative state, but when Evangeline finally stopped chanting,

Foresee

Vae felt as though she had just received an hour long massage. Every inch of her body and mind were relaxed and happy. Could it have been magic, or just the pleasing sound of Evangeline's voice that had soothed Vae into a sort of dreamlike trance?

“There now, all done,” Evangeline announced with a smile. “I felt your tumor. It seems to be in a dormant state, and at least for the moment, I don't believe it's a threat to you.”

“Really?” Vae asked, shocked to hear this after the doctor's frightening prognosis.

Tricia Barr

“Yes. Unfortunately, I don’t have the skills or the power needed to destroy the tumor completely, but I was able to alleviate quite a lot of its activity, so I do believe you won’t experience near as many seizures as before.”

“What about the hallucinations?” Vae asked. “Can I expect those to be less frequent also?”

“Oh, that’s right, I nearly forgot you said you suffered from hallucinations as well,” Evangeline said, brow furrowed. “I actually didn’t see any connection to hallucinations with the tumor. It does make sense that the two would be

Foresee

related, but I sensed no relation. I can't say what's causing you to see things, but I can tell you it's not the tumor."

Vae was not expecting to hear this at all. More and more evidence since she walked into this crazy warehouse was pointing to Sam's conclusion—that her hallucinations really were visions.

"Let me grind up the herbs for that tea," Evangeline went on. "It will help ease any further symptoms you may experience. Should the seizures start to return, just double the dosage to a cup in the morning and at night." In a different stone bowl, she began to grind a new mixture of herbs.

Tricia Barr

“Do you believe me now?” Sam asked her quietly, coming to kneel beside her. With a moist hand towel, he gently wiped away the paste from her temples.

“I don’t want these to be visions, Sam,” Vae confessed. “They’re hellish and terrifying, waking nightmares. I don’t want to believe that what I see could actually happen.”

Sam frowned as he pondered, then shrugged. “Well, maybe you are meant to stop them from happening.”

“Me?” Vae asked. “With what, my book smarts? Who am I to stop an

apocalypse?”

“I don’t know,” Sam said, “but you’re in just the right place to figure that out.”

Evangeline had dusted the now powdered herbs into a ziplock bag and handed them to Vae. “Here you go. If the bitterness bothers you, you can add honey, but avoid any unnatural sweeteners. And if anything changes and things get worse, please come back and see me. I will do whatever I can to help you.” She smiled.

“Thank you, truly,” Vae said, at this point so afraid that this healer’s magic

Tricia Barr

wasn't going to work.

“I have a feeling you'll be seeing her around,” Sam told Evangeline as he walked Vae toward the exit. “She's one of us. She's a seer.”



CHAPTER
5

The days that followed that strange night were the best Vae could remember. More than a week had passed, and she hadn't suffered from another seizure since the café with Sam. Amazingly, she hadn't had another

Tricia Barr

“vision” either. The only conclusion she could draw was that Evangeline’s healing magic worked! Was that too much to hope for? Would her lifelong struggle with this tumor become a distant memory? Could she actually hope for a normal, happy, *long* life?

And perhaps Evangeline had been wrong about the hallucinations. They must have been related to the tumor, to the seizures, because now that the seizures had stopped, they had taken the visions with them. Vae religiously made a cup of that tea every morning. She detested the taste, but she made sure to drink every last drop each time.

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Foresee

Now that she found something that finally worked, she wasn't about to miss a single dose.

Life finally started to feel like living. Vae started making long term plans, which she had never really done before. A friend from college invited her to a wedding that was six months away, and Vae excitedly RSVPed. She even went out and bought a dress for the occasion. Vae's happy attitude seemed to be contagious, as her parents were smiling and laughing more, and being just a tad bit less overbearing; Vae saw less and less of that sad crease in their foreheads when they looked at her.

Tricia Barr

Whether or not the visions were from Vae's tumor or from her so-called seer ability, she enjoyed coming back to the warehouse with Sam. Everyone was so friendly and open. Whenever she had questions about they were doing, they explained it to her without frustration of her ignorance. It really was a place of strong community and learning; a true shelter.

She may not have accepted she had anything supernatural about her, but there was no more room for doubt in her mind that these witches did. She watched many of them do miraculous things that there just was no other

Foresee

explanation for. And Sam was the most talented of them all. She watched him sing to a flower to make it bloom, watched him levitate much larger objects than just a flimsy napkin.

Vae learned that all magic was done with spells, incantations spoken in an ancient language passed down through the centuries. Most of the witches today no longer knew what the words they spoke meant, they only knew what would happen if they spoke them while concentrating on the task at hand.

One night, Sam was experimenting with igniting a candlestick, and

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encouraged Vae to say the spell to light it. Vae wasn't confident to begin with, and, as she expected, no matter how hard she focused, the wick remained cold and lifeless.

“See, I'm no witch,” she said with a laugh.

“I guess not,” Sam laughed in return.

The best part of this whole experience, though, was getting to know Sam again. The two of them hung out every night, outside of the warehouse, and were even texting each other inside jokes during the day while Sam worked.

Foresee

Vae wasn't quite ready to admit it to herself yet—especially since she was due to go back to school soon and wouldn't see Sam again for months—but she might be feeling *more* than just brotherly affection toward him. Their time together recently rekindled something that had sparked long ago. He had grown—they both had. He was handsome and funny and charming in an unexpected sort of way. Maybe now that she might have an actual future, free of episodes and looming cancer, some day along the road it would be okay if this friendship turned into something more. She was in no rush.

Tricia Barr

Every time that Vae came to the warehouse with Sam, Adelle lurked in the shadows, watching her. She was waiting for her, and Vae knew it. But the visions had stopped, so she saw no reason to explore this part of herself.

After a week and a half of vacation, it was time to return to school. Vae was in her room, packing up her things in preparation. Fall break was about to end, and Vae was almost sad to be leaving. She had found a new sort of family with the witches at the warehouse, and once she went back to school, she wouldn't be able to see any of them again until the semester was

Foresee

over. But on the other hand, she was looking forward to getting back, to declaring a major and getting a degree and maybe even moving on to bright career. She felt like that was a real possibility now. Nevermind the fact that she had no clue what she actually wanted to do with her life.

As she put her last pair of folded jeans into her suitcase, the world around her darkened. Curiously, she looked out her bedroom window, wondering—hoping—that clouds had just rolled in. But then the stucco on her walls began to flake, and the walls themselves crumbled and fell away like

Tricia Barr

ashes in the wind. Everything disintegrated, and she was standing alone in gray void.

Panicked and confused, she spun around, desperately looking in all directions for anything, anyone. Suddenly, she stopped her rotation, for a fog of black smoke materialized before her, snaking up from the intangible ground and taking the shape of a man's body.

It was that same man again. No, he wasn't a man. He was a monster. A demon. Maybe even the devil himself. He stood in front of her, dressed in a

Foresee

black suit, and he was smiling wickedly at her with eyes as black as night.

“I’m coming for you, Vae,” he said.
“I’m coming for all of you.”

He lifted his arm, and as she tried to turn tail and run, her midsection was caught by an unseen force, and she was lifted up into the air. She tried to free herself, but her arms and legs, her entire body, was stuck in place, immovable. She couldn’t even scream.

The man laughed as he stalked slowly closer, a dark, resonating laugh that echoed through the void in which she was trapped and made her insides

Tricia Barr

coil with revulsion.

Now he was only inches away, face to face with her, and there was nothing she could do. Before she could wonder what terrible things he had in store for her, she felt an impossible tug deep inside her. Not of any organ or physical part of her. No, something was tugging at her very soul. And she knew what was coming next. She had seen it in her visions countless times; she had seen done to Sam.

Without her permission, her spine arched backward, her head turned toward the missing sky, and her jaw

Foresee

stretched painfully open. With a pain worse than death, her soul was ripped out of her body, and everything went black.

Complete and utter nothingness.

...

And then through the blackness, there was a piercing sound, and it grew louder and louder until it was deafening.

“Honey, honey, what’s wrong? What’s happening?” her mom’s worried voice was barely audible beneath the loud siren.

Tricia Barr

Vae opened her eyes to realize that she was on her knees on the floor of her bedroom, and that deafening sound was the terrified scream coming out of her open mouth.

She stopped screaming, and, panting, she fell into her mom's arms, squeezing her for dear life.

"It's okay, honey," her mom said. "You're safe, it's okay. It's over. You're home." Her mom kept saying reassuring things trying to calm her, but Vae was beyond calming.

The hallucinations weren't gone.

Foresee

Magic hadn't stopped them.

The visions were real.

* * *

That afternoon, Vae went to the warehouse on a mission. She didn't tell Sam she was going. She needed to do this on her own.

It was time to talk to Adelle.

When she arrived, the parking lot was mostly empty. This time of day, very few witches were around. Most of them worked long hours at one job at least, some two or even three. But she

Tricia Barr

knew Adelle would be here. Adelle was the guardian of this place, and as a retired woman living on social security income, she didn't work. This place was her job. Also, the witches saw her as their elder, and they all chipped into support her. That was only one of the reasons Vae loved these people so much. They helped each other without question, and without fail.

Vae got out of the car and bravely crossed the empty black top, feeling like she walking to her own execution. She was afraid of what Adelle would tell her about herself, but she couldn't go on ignoring the visions any longer.

Foresee

She stood before the door and took a deep breath as she raised her hand to knock. But before her knuckles could touch, the door slid open, and Adelle was there, smiling almost smugly.

“I knew you would come, sooner or later,” she said, stepping aside to welcome Vae in.

Vae didn't bother asking how Adelle knew she was there; this woman was mysterious, to say the least. She came in and followed Adelle's gestures to sit at the table across from her.

“So what kind of witch are you?” Vae asked bluntly as the woman settled

Tricia Barr

in her chair. “Evangeline is a healer, and you called me a seer. You don’t seem like the spell-casting type. The most I’ve seen you do here is read cards.”

“Very perceptive, child,” Adelle said with an amused smile. “I am what they call a medium. I commune with the spirits on the other side. That is why I’m so good at readings, I am able to connect with the spirit realm through them. In a way, that’s what we all do. Where do you think your visions come from?”

Vae had never thought about that.

Foresee

She had only just begun to accept that these were visions at all, so she had no chance to consider their supernatural origins.

Adelle took her tarot deck into her hands and started shuffling them. “Now cut the deck,” she instructed, and Vae did. Then Adelle closed her eyes. “Spirits, help this young seer to understand the messages you have been sending her. We beseech you, what do her visions mean?”

With her eyes still closed, Adelle laid out four cards face down in a row. She opened her eyes and flipped over

Tricia Barr

the card at the farthest right. It depicted a man hanging upside down with by his foot, and at the bottom it read “The Hanged Man”.

Adelle cocked her head with narrowed eyes. “Interesting,” she mused, studying the card before she moved on to the next card.

But when she flipped it over the second card, it was a replica of the first. Another “Hanged Man”.

“What?” Adelle gasped, her back shooting straight up in alarm. She flipped over the third, then the fourth, and they were all the same card. Adelle

Foresee

shook her head. “No, it’s not possible!”

“I don’t understand?” Vae said, confused. “Why are they all the same card? I thought there was only one of the Major Arcana in each deck?”

“There are,” Adelle verified with caution.

Suddenly, Adelle’s body stiffened, her head faced straight forward, and a strange milky gray covered both her eyes.

“Adelle, what’s going on?” Vae asked tremulously.

Tricia Barr

The candles around the room flickered, and a darkness settled that had nothing to do with the wavering flames. It was happening again.

Just as in her room this morning, the walls flaked away, and the table at which she and Adelle sat was now in the middle of a grassy field under an overcast autumn sky. Terrified that the man in black would come at her again, Vae leapt out of her chair and looked in all directions.

There were enormous rectangular stones forming two wide circles around them. Vae recognized this place. She

Foresee

had never been here, but she had studied it in school and watched documentaries on it. This was Stonehenge. What were they doing here?

“Vaeora Clairmont,” Adelle said in a voice that sounded like hundreds of voices in stereo. “A dark presence rests here. If you do not make a choice soon, he will be released and wreak havoc on the world.”

Make a choice? What choice?

“Thousands of years ago,” Adelle went on, rising from her chair and slowly walking around Vae, and the

Tricia Barr

world around them changed rapidly, the sun rising and setting in reverse over and over again, like the world was rewinding. The landscaped changed until the stones disappeared, and the field in which they stood was completely empty. “There was a tribe blessed with powerful magic. But they strayed from the purpose we gave them, and in their hubris, they trapped the four most willful elemental spirits into the bodies of their kin, cursing them to reincarnate for all time. These four were called the Bound Ones. A dark spirit, escaped from purgatory, saw the power they wielded and forced himself to be reborn into their tribe. His name

Foresee

was Joran, and he had the ultimate power—that of life and death. He could bring any soul back from the dead, or rip a soul out of a living body. With his powers, he even found a way to make himself immortal. He was the ultimate, unstoppable force in the world.”

Vae watched as Adelle continued to circle her, listening to the medium’s words intently. She knew who this dark spirit was. The man from her visions.

“Joran sought to change the world for the better by taking away our free will,” Adelle continued. “He planned to use his powers and those of the Bound

Tricia Barr

Ones to conquer the world, nation by nation, and create an empire over which he would be judge, jury and executioner, killing anyone he found unworthy of life.”

Adelle stepped aside and waved her hand in a gesturing motion past her. In the distance just beyond Adelle, Vae saw five people approaching. One of them was unmistakably the man in black. Joran, as Adelle called him. The others were two men and two women, all dressed in primitive clothing made from chewed leather, cotton and animal skin.

Foresee

“But the Bound Ones were pure of heart, and they refused to let the world fall to Joran’s will. They rose against him, and with their combined powers, they trapped him in the earth, where he would suffer without dying for eternity, and where his powers could never reach another living soul.”

The group came before them, and the scene Vae witnessed was beyond any special effects she had ever seen in any movie. Joran was lifted off the ground by a rogue wind, a wind so strong it made Vae run for cover behind Adelle, who remained perfectly still.

Tricia Barr

Joran struggled to release himself from the wind's hold, but then his whole body was engulfed by flame. The horrid smell of burning flesh filled the air, and Vae put her hands over her nose and mouth to block it out. She wanted to cover her eyes, too, for it was a truly horrifying sight, but the temptation to *know* was too great.

But Joran's torture didn't end there. Water droplets rose up from the grass at their feet and from the leaves of the trees surrounding the clearing to form a ball that enveloped Joran's head, drowning him as he burned. The three elements swirled around him, an

Foresee

unrelenting knot of coiling ethereal snakes.

The ground beneath Joran cracked and rumbled, then pulled apart and opened into a deep fissure, seemingly penetrating all the way to the earth's core. Vae had to stumble backward to avoid falling in, whereas Adelle seemed to float in midair where the ground had fallen away from her feet.

Angry thick roots ripped themselves out of the ground and wrapped themselves around the elementally imprisoned mass, then pulled him down, down into the pit. The ground

Tricia Barr

came back together, closing over his earthly tomb as if the ground had never been disturbed.

Vae got to see the four others embrace each other and begin to cry before the clearing faded, and she was back in the entrance room of the warehouse.

She was shaking all over, struggling to process what she just saw.

“Why... Why did you show me this?” Vae asked, turning to look at Adelle, who was once again sitting comfortably in her chair on the other side of the table. “That man is still buried under

Foresee

Stonehenge. What am I supposed to do about any of this?”

“His people never stopped supporting him, never stopped looking for a way to raise him from his prison,” Adelle answered. “They have been hunting down the Bound Ones ever since, and they have located them. When they fail to get them to free him, they will come looking for a witch powerful enough to do it.”

Adelle’s face nodded at her, and Vae understood.

“Sam,” she gasped. “They’re going to try to use Sam to raise Joran.”

Tricia Barr

“Exactly,” Adelle confirmed.

Vae shook her head. The vision she’d had of Sam came back to her, where she saw Joran kill Sam. She couldn’t let that happen to Sam. She refused!

“What do you want me to do?” Vae asked.

“You have to die,” Adelle said simply.

“What?” Vae stammered, taken aback. How could that possibly help? She couldn’t help Sam if she was dead!

Foresee

“They will come looking for Sam in a matter of months,” Adelle said. “Right now, Sam is complacent. He will not go with them willingly, and that will not bode well for Sam. He needs to go with them. He needs to raise Joran.”

Vae frowned deeply in confusion. “I don’t understand. You want Sam to raise Joran? How could you want that? He’ll kill everyone. He’ll kill Sam!”

“The Bound Ones are about to awaken to who they really are,” Adelle explained. “They are about to become powerful enough to defeat Joran once and for all, and Sam is the only one who

Tricia Barr

can help them. If Joran is not raised now, events will not line up the way they should and he will ultimately win. The visions you've had your entire life will come to pass. The world as you know it will fall."

Vae didn't understand any of this. She didn't see how she fit in at all. And how could they know that raising Joran would solve anything. That monster should stay in that prison forever.

"Joran will rise sooner or later," Adelle added, as if knowing Vae's thoughts. "It is up to you whether he is defeated upon rising, or conquers the

world.”

“How can that be up to me?” Vae pleaded. “How can my death affect any of this? And how can you expect me to just die? You want me to kill myself?” At the thought of suicide, a bolt of white hot fear shot through the top of her skull and down all the way to her feet. She couldn’t do that. She wasn’t that kind of person.

“Not kill yourself, just accept death,” Adelle corrected. “That tumor in your head, if you choose to ignore this warning, it will stay dormant, and you will live out your life healthy and

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happy. You will have the family you always dreamed of, a fulfilling career, and an easy yet meaningless death at an old age. But Sam will die, murdered by the witches who support Joran, and when Joran does eventually rise in a century or so, he will destroy the Bound Ones and the world as we know it.

“But, if you chose to serve the purpose you were meant for, the tumor will awaken and grow, spreading cancer throughout your entire body, and you will die in a month. Sam will use every bit of his magic and knowledge to try to save you, and he will fail. This will cause him to hate magic, hate his

Foresee

powers, and seek to rid himself of them. He will be in the prime position to go with the witches who seek him. They will offer to teach him to control his powers, or to take them away completely, and he will willingly free Joran from his tomb. Sam will realize his mistake and join forces with the Bound Ones, giving them the key to defeating him once and for all.”

The room was silent when Adelle finished her ultimatum. Vae had no words. She felt numb all over. This was a lose, lose situation. If she chose life, Sam would die, and the world would suffer for her selfish choice. If she chose

Tricia Barr

to save everyone, she would sacrifice herself, all of her dreams and hopes for the future would die, and so would she.

“How long do I have to make my decision?” Vae asked, her voice dry and monotone.

“Until the sun rises tomorrow,” Adelle answered.

The silence that followed was like the gavel hammering down on her fate. She had less than a day to decide. What if she had never come to Adelle? She wouldn't have even known of this choice. But that was the way destiny worked, wasn't it? Vae was meant to

Foresee

come to Adelle for answers today. It could not have happened any other way. Neither could anything else in her entire life. Her visions, meeting Sam in the orphanage and bonding with him, coming back here and running into him now, it was all meant to be this way. And she was meant to die.

Apparently, the spirits felt their conversation was finished, for the milky haze left Adelle's eyes and she came back to her senses.

“Oh, child, I am so sorry,” she said with the first real show of empathy Vae had seen from the medium. Though

Tricia Barr

Adelle had been used as a puppet, she must have been privy to the whole exchange.

“Excuse me, I need to think,” Vae said, making for the door to the warehouse. “And please, don’t mention any of this to Sam.”

“Of course not,” Adelle nodded, and Vae fled to one of the benches to dwell.



CHAPTER
6

Vae wasn't sure long she had been sitting on that bench in silence.

She didn't know where to go or what to do. What was anyone supposed to do when they learned they fate was

Tricia Barr

sealed? She didn't want to go anywhere. She especially didn't want to go home. Home was a reminder of everything she was leaving behind if she chose right. Her loving parents, her schooling, any hope of a career and happy life.

How could anyone possibly make this choice? It was so unfair. And yet, hadn't her whole life been unfair?

No, she couldn't think about it that way. Sure, the tumor sucked, and so did the seizures and the visions. But they were what had brought her so close to Sam, and she wouldn't trade his friendship for anything. And despite

Foresee

her faults and vulnerabilities, she had been chosen by two wonderful people whom she was grateful for every day that they were her parents. Nothing about her friendship with Sam was unfair, and nothing about the love and life her parents had given her was unfair. Few orphans ever get to live the life she'd led so far. She was lucky.

It was just a horrible shame that she had to let it all go.

But did she? What if the spirits were wrong? What if these bound people or whatever could still defeat the bad guy? Or what if he never got free at all? No

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one would have to suffer. She could warn Sam about the bad witches. She could take him away somewhere they'd never find him. The two of them could live a happy life together. She was done pretending she didn't have feelings for him, because her time had run out.

She imagined the two of them, exploring the world, falling in love, getting married and having children. Their life could be an adventure. Did he feel the same way? Did it even matter?

Vae hung her head and buried her face in her hands, hopeless.

After a moment, she felt someone

Foresee

sit down on the bench next to her.

“You’ve been here for a long time,” Marcucio’s voice said. “Are you waiting for Sam? He doesn’t usually get off work until late.”

Vae lifted her head to look at him.

“No,” she said. “I just...needed a place to think. I couldn’t think of anywhere else to go.”

“This is the best to think,” Marcucio said, leaning back against the bench, getting comfortable. He looked around at the pretty flowers that climbed all over this warehouse. “I often come here

Tricia Barr

just to think myself. There's a magical, calming energy here. That's what attracted us here in the first place."

They sat quietly for a moment. Vae had nothing to say. Her soul felt so heavy, and yet so drained.

"Would you like to talk about what's bothering you?" he asked.

Vae shook her head, listless.

"Does it have something to do with your visions?" he asked.

Marcucio's intuition was, as always, dead on. He was as enigmatic as he was

charming.

“Have you ever felt like the weight of the world was on your shoulders?” she asked. “And that no matter what choice you made, you would still lose?”

“I think we all feel like that sometimes,” he said. “But I think you have to define to yourself what it is to lose. Ask yourself what really matters to you. Once you know the answer to that question, you’ll know what choice to make.”

She looked him straight in the eye. Did he know what her visions were about? Was his magic talent mind-

Tricia Barr

reading? Because that advice was spot-on.

“If you ever want to talk about your visions, my door is always open,” he said. “The burden placed on seers is greater than that of any other witch, and I can’t begin to imagine what choice you’re struggling with. All I can say is trust your visions. You were given them for a reason. They will never lead you astray.”

Vae sighed and closed her eyes. That was the last thing she wanted to hear. What she really wanted him to tell her was that visions could be wrong.

Foresee

That she could choose herself and still save the world.

“I have to run, but I’ll be back this evening to walk Sam through another lesson,” Marcucio said, standing up. “Will I see you?”

“I’ll be here,” she said with a nod.

“Great,” he said, smiling.

A group of witches entered behind them, their chatter filling the large room, so Marcucio waved and took his leave.

The warehouse became quite busy

Tricia Barr

after that. More and more witches arrived as night fell, as they always did after getting off of work or coming back from school. Vae got swept into their activities, watching some of the younger witches learn new spells, savoring all of this. Whatever her choice, she would be leaving them soon to return to school.

Vae stuck around to see Sam. She *needed* to see him. Her heart needed to see the man her choice would affect the most.

“Hey, how long have you been here?” Sam asked when he saw as he walked in.

Foresee

“A while,” she said. “I’m going back to school tomorrow, so I wanted to get my fill of this place before I left.” *Get my fill of you.*

“I knew it would grow on you,” he said with that charming smile.

She couldn’t help but smile back. Oh no, she was in deep, wasn’t she?

“Sammy boy,” Marcucio said, entering the warehouse. “Ready to play with fire?”

“Play with fire?” Vae asked.

“Literally,” Sam answered. “You’ve

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seen me light candles before, but tonight we are going to practice controlling fire on a much larger scale.”

“I’ll get the hose ready,” Evangeline teased as she passed by.

“Haha, very funny,” Sam said sarcastically.

“Actually, Evangeline, would you mind?” Marcucio called out to her.

“Hey?” Sam asked, looking offended.

“It’s just a precaution,” Marcucio told him. “Fire is the most precarious

Foresee

and impulsive element to work with. If something should go wrong, we'll need to keep you from barbequing yourself."

Sam frowned and rolled his eyes.

"Are you sure this is a good idea, Sam?" Vae asked, following them out into the parking lot. "I just mean, why fire?"

"Why not?" Sam asked jovially in reply. "It's the last element I have to master, and I want to be a master of all of it."

Vae frowned. She appreciated Sam's enthusiasm for magic—for life in

Tricia Barr

general—but she didn't want to see him put himself in danger just for sport. He could really get hurt. If she chose to let the tumor take her, she wouldn't be around to talk him out of stupid stunts like this. And as wise as Marcucio was, he was only enabling Sam's reckless curiosity.

“Just make sure to stand back,” Sam told her as they got the middle of the pavement. “I'd hate to burn you.” He winked at her.

I think you already have, she thought.

Sam and Marcucio squared off, just

Foresee

as they had that first night before the storm. They were both grounding themselves, closing their eyes to concentrate. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Evangeline standing against the wall next to hose spicket. Vae was relieved that the witch had taken Marcucio's words seriously.

“Now Sam, the preparation for this spell is a bit different,” Marcucio said. “You’ve started small fires before, but candles are easy. Those small flickering flames are not as demanding. But this one most certainly will be. Fire feeds on anger. It will find those memories inside you that bring out your darkest

Tricia Barr

self, and it will fuel them. Truly controlling fire comes when you have true control over yourself. You must not give in to the anger. Understand?”

Sam nodded.

Vae had rarely ever seen Sam angry. He was just about the happiest person she'd ever known. That was one more con in choosing to follow her destiny. If she did, Sam would hate his powers, hate himself, at least that's what the spirits foretold. She didn't want that to happen him. She didn't want to snuff out that warm glow inside him.

Marcucio told Sam the spell to

Foresee

recite. Sam closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and said the phrase. Instantly, Sams' hands ignited, making Vae jump in surprise.

“Sam!” she yelled, running to him and wondering what she could use to put out the flames.

“It’s okay, Vae,” Sam laughed. “This is part of the spell.”

Vae turned her fretful eyes on Marcucio, and he nodded. Were they insane? No one ever said he was going to light *himself!* What were they thinking?

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But as Vae got closer, she realized that Sam's hands weren't actually burning. They were on fire, that was for sure, but his skin—or even his jacket sleeves—weren't being affected by the flames. It was as if the orange light was just dancing on his fingers.

“Woah,” Vae gasped.

“I know,” Sam said, nodding smugly at her. “Pretty cool, right?”

He put his hands together, marrying the two flames, and the miniature pyre grew tall, reaching skyward. It was incredible to watch. Sam really was the most powerful witch

Foresee

in the world. To be able to do this with fire, it was almost god-like. If she died, his zeal for this stuff would die. Could she really do that to him? He may even abandon his powers completely, and what good would that do anyone? He couldn't help defeat Joran if he gave up his powers before the good guys got to him.

Sam's smile grew wider, yet though his eyes reflected the fire's orange glow, they themselves grew dark as he watched the fire bend to his will.

"Let's see how hot I can make it," he said, and the fire that climbed

Tricia Barr

heavenward in his hands went from orange to blue.

Vae could feel its heat, and she was standing several feet away. The heat was so potent that she had to back up, and so bright that she had to shield her eyes.

That was when she heard Sam curse angrily. She dropped her hands and squinted at him to see that he had lost control of the flames. The fire returned to its natural orange state, and it was no longer contained to his hands but slithering up his sleeves and across his jacket.

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Marcucio rushed to help him pull off his jacket before Vae could reach him, and they threw it on the ground and stomped on the flames. Evangeline joined them shortly with the hose, dousing the last of the fire, and hammering the nail in what was left of Sam's suede coat.

“Sam, you know I was just kidding about the barbeque thing, right?” Evangeline said, dropping the hose and pulling him in for a hug. “You were almost a Sam kabob!”

As soon as Evangeline let Sam go, Vae jumped into his arms and squeezed

Tricia Barr

as tight as she could.

“Don’t ever scare me like that again,” she warned.

Sam closed his arms around her back. Oh, his arms felt so strong, so warm—and not just because they had recently been on fire. “Sorry,” he laughed. “I can’t promise that, but I’ll try.” He lifted his hands, but she held on a little longer, not ready to let go yet, and he closed his arms once again, holding her until she decided to pull back.

When she did, their eyes met, and he looked at her with a question mark

Foresee

in his eyes. It was a look of possibilities, and for Vae, it was a look of hope. Maybe Sam did have feelings for her. Maybe he just hadn't realized it until now.

“What the heck happened?” Marcucio asked, still panting from the Russian dance the two had executed on Sam's jacket.

“I don't know,” Sam said, shrugging defensively. “One minute, everything felt good—I mean, like, *really good*. And then, I don't know, it was like some switch flipped.”

“Something angered you,” Marcucio

Tricia Barr

said knowingly.

Sam stared at Marcucio for a moment, considering, rationalizing. Then he rubbed the back of his neck and looked down. “I don’t know why, but I suddenly remembered an incident from the orphanage. A gang of older boys was pounding on me, and I couldn’t do anything to defend myself. Suddenly, I had this thought, of how good it would feel to find them now and burn them.”

Marcucio sighed. “Sam, I told you not to give in to your anger. Anger gives the fire too much power.”

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Sam shook his head. “But it wasn’t the anger that at those guys that made me lose control... It was the fear of how good that thought felt. I scared myself. That’s when the fire started to hurt, and I couldn’t contain it anymore.”

“How interesting,” Marcucio said. “Fear gives fire more power than anger. Well, let’s not revisit this particular element until you’re a little bit older, huh?”

“Aww, come on *Dad*,” Sam complained teasingly.

“No, seriously,” Marcucio said. “I may be rushing through your lessons.

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You're not quite ready for fire yet. You need to mature a bit more."

"Are you calling me immature?" Sam asked.

"I know I do," Evangeline snickered.

"Hey?" Sam said, giving her a playful shove.

"And you just proved my point," Marcucio said with a chuckle.

"I'm not immature, I'm playful," Sam said. "Right, Vae?" He looked at her, and this time, she could have sworn there was something else in that

look.

“Come on, kids, let’s go back inside,” Marcucio invited.

“Actually, after that fiasco, and all of Evangeline’s talk of barbeque, I could go for some food,” Sam said, making Evangeline laugh and roll her eyes. “Vae, wanna grab a bite with me?”

Vae’s heart leapt. “Yea, sure,” she said, smiling from ear to ear.

“Cool,” Sam said, draping his arm over her shoulder and leading her to his car.

Tricia Barr

Vae wasn't sure, but...was this a date? Or just two friends going out to eat? She was going to take it either way.



CHAPTER
7

“I can’t believe you seriously want barbeque after tonight,” Vae said as the two of them sat in a booth in a restaurant, waiting for their food to arrive.

Sam laughed and shrugged. “I am a

Tricia Barr

very simple guy, when it comes down to it.”

“And apparently very open to suggestion,” she teased. “If I start dropping the word ‘cake’ casually in conversation, are you going to take me out for dessert, too?”

“Actually, cake does sound really good,” he said, and she threw her head back in laughter. When they both stopped laughing, they shared a long look, and Sam was definitely looking at her differently, she was sure of it.

“I’ve really enjoyed catching up with you this past week,” he said. “It’s like

Foresee

we picked up right where we left off, like nothing has changed since you left. Except that you've blossomed into a really beautiful young woman, and I have become even more ruggedly handsome." He raised an eyebrow in an attempt to give her jokingly debonair expression.

She giggled. "You think I'm beautiful?" she asked.

"Of course, I do," he said. "You'd have to be blind not to see how beautiful you are. How just all-around awesome you are." They subconsciously leaned closer to each other, they're

Tricia Barr

faces close enough for her to feel his breath on her face; he smelled like cloves and rain. They were so close, it would just take a few more inches to...

And just like that, their lips touched. It was the softest of kisses, but it was enough to fill Vae's heart with joy, with hope.

When their lips reluctantly parted, she couldn't keep her thoughts—her secret plot—to herself any longer.

“Run away with me, Sam,” she whispered.

“What?” he asked, still a bit dazed

Foresee

from their kiss.

“We could get on a plane right now and go anywhere you want,” she said. “We could see the world together. Just the two of us.”

Sam gave a nervous laugh. “Where’s this coming from?” He had pulled back and was looking at her curiously.

“I just...I just want to keep you safe,” she admitted.

“Is this about the fire earlier?” he asked. “Look, that was just an accident. Not all of my magic will turn out that way. A lot of it is really mundane,

actually.”

“No, it’s not just that,” she said, but she didn’t know how to explain what she was feeling. She couldn’t tell him the truth.

“Well, what’s going on? What would make you suddenly want to run away?” he asked. “Couldn’t you and I just...stay here and be together?” His eyes were imploring her for understanding, and she couldn’t give it to him.

“Actually, I’m supposed to go back to school tomorrow,” she said. “I was only here on break. After tonight...I’m not sure when I’ll see you again.”

Foresee

“Hey, that’s no big deal,” he said. “It’s not like you’re going away forever, not like when you left the orphanage. We’ll call each other every day, and you’re coming back for the holidays, right?”

Oh, if only it were that simple.

“And college, that’s a big deal,” he said. “You’re willing to throw that all away just to have a European fling with me?”

Finally, she found the words to give him, words that were a half-truth.

“Sam, my days are numbered,” she

Tricia Barr

said, lifting her hand to touch his cheek. “This tumor isn’t going anywhere. Who knows how long I have left. I just want to savor every moment with you, because any one of them could be my last.”

“Oh, Vae.” Sam’s handsome face creased with affection. “Nothing is going to happen to you. You heard Evangeline. The tumor isn’t a threat to you. And if that ever changes, I’ll move heaven and earth to keep you safe and healthy.”

That’s what I’m afraid of...

“Trust me, you and I, we have

Foresee

plenty of time,” he said, then leaned in and kissed her, like he was taking possession of her, like he was saying, “You’re mine, and I’ll take care of you.”

As she was giving in to the swoon his lips were pulling her under, a vision exploded like a firework against her closed eyelids.

But for once, what she saw had nothing to do with Joran. In fact, this vision wasn’t terrifying at all. It was only heartbreaking.

Sam was kissing another girl, a pretty brunette who looked slightly familiar, but Vae couldn’t place her. She

Tricia Barr

saw the two of them holding hands as they walked down a boulevard together. Then the vision jumped to the two of them singing a baby to sleep in a darkened nursery. And forward even further to the two of them much older, Sam wrestling a little boy and girl with his eyes and bright smile, and the brunette giggling from the sidelines.

And with a clarity that broke Vae's heart, she understood. Sam was meant to end up with this girl. Not Vae. The life she so briefly envisioned for them was never meant to be.

Vae broke their kiss and turned

Foresee

away.

“What’s wrong?” Sam asked.

“Nothing,” Vae lied, and just in time, the waiter came by with their food. Once they started eating, Vae changed the subject and just enjoyed Sam’s blooming affections for the rest of the evening.

* * *

When Vae got home that night, she walked out onto her backyard after everyone had gone to bed.

She closed her jacket and hugged

Tricia Barr

herself against the chilling night air, looking up sadly at the indigo sky.

“I’ve made my decision,” she whispered to the night, knowing the spirits in their infinite reach could hear her. “I choose Sam. I choose the path that will lead him to his happy ending, even if that means it’s not with me. I choose to die.”

After she spoke the words, she waited. She wasn’t sure what she had expected. A lightning bolt to come out of nowhere? A shooting star to streak across the sky? Or maybe some itch the center of her brain alerting her to the

Foresee

change?

But she felt the same. There was no noticeable difference in the night or in her body. Though somewhere inside, she knew nothing would ever be the same again. She had made her choice, and now she would have to accept the consequences that came with it.

Vae expected to be sad. But there was a sort of comfort in accepting one's fate, in knowing exactly when one would die. After all, it wasn't like death was a new concept for her. She had been planning to shake hands with death ever since she learned about the

Tricia Barr

tumor stowing away in her head. She had been preparing for it all this time. At least now, there was no more guessing. In one month, she would die. Simple as that.

And even though she was going to have say goodbye to this world, she was happy to be leaving it. She would go out knowing her death meant something, and that was more than most people on this planet ever get. Sam would suffer because of her passing, but in the end, he would find his way to the girl he was always meant to be with, and they would have a happy life together. Vae couldn't even bring herself to envy this

Foresee

stranger, because she knew that any girl that could win Sam's heart would have to be amazing.

Vae was ready to die, and she was grateful that she had one last wonderful month to savor her family, her friends, and Sam. And she was grateful for the visions, for the first time in her life, for guiding her down the right path.

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