

## CHAPTER 15 ~ ENGLAND - JULY 12<sup>TH</sup>, 1612

Olivia opens the journal and runs her finger along the enticing inscription at the top. Ignoring the tingle that shoots up her arm, she reads it aloud, "England - July 12th, 1612 – Julien Laurent - SOV." Her heart begins to race as the smell of damp wood overwhelms her senses. Her hand stops, and she looks around. "Do you smell that?" Heads turn to look at one another with a shrug.

"Smell what?" Clara asks.

"The dampness of a forest." Everyone shakes their heads. "Odd." Lowering her gaze, she continues. "Two vampires, Julien Laurent and—" Her voice trails off, leaving everyone staring in anticipation.

Patricia leans in, slapping her palm off the table. "Liv? Liv, where'd you go?"

As Olivia's eyes dart from side to side, her finger continues to trace each line. Helen reaches out, but Clara grabs her hand. "No! Don't touch her. I believe she's actually inside the entry." She spins toward Cassian. "You said you could see into her dream last night— feel her emotions? Can you do that now?"

"Yes, I've felt connected to her since she first read the journal. She does feel a little anxious at the moment. As for the mind link, that was a bit different. She was calling out for help in her dream. I'm not sure if it will work in this situation."

"You have to try, please. We need to know where she is— what she sees. We need to be sure she's not in danger." Clara clasps her hands and peers down at Olivia's finger as it continues to fly over the page. "We don't want to disturb her as long as she's safe. Hopefully, we can bring her out by removing the journal if we need to."

"Hopefully?" Patricia's voice raises, flames prancing in her eyes as she slams her hands on the table and glares at her mother. "Why would you bloody send her in there if you weren't sure?"

"I had no way of knowing that she would mentally disappear inside the journal." Clara peers over at Cassian, her eyes pleading. "Please, make sure she's okay. I'm depending on you to let us know if we need to bring her out."

Cassian's lips tighten as he gives her a stiff nod. "I'll do my best, Ms. Redfearn." Closing his eyes, he opens his senses and reaches out to Olivia's mind.

Standing in the middle of a dense forest, Olivia can feel the chill of the night air settle on her skin. She reaches out to wipe the dew off a leaf, gasping as her hand swipes through the branch. Stumbling forward, she rubs her thumb and forefinger together, looking down at her moistened digits. "How is it that I can feel the moisture but not the leaves?" Her eyes flit from one tree to another as she takes in the sights and sounds.

"Yes. This is quite curious, isn't it," Cassian says, grasping the branch next to her, but she doesn't acknowledge his presence. He reaches out to touch her shoulder, but his hand travels straight through. "Yes, curious indeed."

The sound of thundering hoofs captures their attention, and they spin to see two deer darting directly toward them. Behind the deer, two men are gaining on them quicker than humanly possible. Olivia ducks behind the tall birch, watching as the deer pass.

"Father. Mr. Windsor," Cassian mutters as the rapid footsteps suddenly halt.

Olivia's heart begins to race as a branch snaps nearby, and she peeks out from behind the tree to see Julien standing only a few feet away. Somehow, he looks younger with his long black hair and beard to match. At least different from when she saw his image the evening before. He's wearing a vest-type coat, his sleeves are puffy with ruffled cuffs, and he has long leather boots that meet his breeches— something straight out of the Jacobean era.

She peers over at the three large stones on her right, noticing that their placement is reminiscent of a castle. "Lancashire Forest?" she asks as if someone can hear her.

As Julien turns toward Olivia, his gaze focuses beyond her, and Cassian steps forward with his hand on his chest. "Father? You can see me?"

But he quickly drops his hand, spinning with Olivia as she follows Julien's stare to the glow coming from between the trees behind them. He starts in their direction when a man with dirty blond hair and a reddish beard grabs his sleeve. "Hey! Where the hell do you think you're going?"

Olivia follows Julien's gaze, walking toward the light. As she approaches the tree line along the outskirts of old Lancashire, she can hear a distant chant. "Burn the witches! Burn them all!"

"Olivia," Cassian calls out, trying to grasp her arm once again. When he fails to connect with her, he withdraws, opening his eyes to the three ladies around the kitchen table.

Questions fly at him from all directions. "Did you see her? Is she all right? Where is she?"

The questions come so quickly that Cassian is unsure who has asked what. Finally, he raises his hands and nods. "I saw her. She's fine. She's in Lancashire Forest, but I was unable to communicate with her."

"What do you mean you couldn't communicate with her," Patricia asks. "I thought you had some kind of mind link, and if you couldn't communicate with her, how do you know she's all right?"

Drawing the corner of his bottom lip between his teeth, Cassian shakes his head. "I'm not exactly sure why. I could see and hear her, but she had no idea I was there. It's almost as if we were on two different planes. I touched the very same tree that her hand passed through. I'm afraid I can't explain that." He scans the faces around the table, his lips tightening into a pensive smile. "I am, however, quite certain that she is safe. From what I can tell, she is nothing more than an observer."

Raising her hands, Patricia closes her eyes. "Thank you, Goddess!"

Clara stares at her, taking a deep breath before turning her attention back to Cassian. "I do believe you may be right. I have heard of such a scenario before. Could you tell if you would have been alive during that time?"

Patricia scoffs. "He's never really been alive. He has no heartbeat, for pity's sake."

"My heart beats. The blood it pumps might be a different temperature than yours, but it still circulates," Cassian spits back. "I should remind you that I am the son of two originals, not a pleb or a created, as you call them."

Clara shoots her daughter a dirty look, then chucks her chin at Cassian. "Forgive Patricia's ignorance. That was not something we were aware of. Maybe you can educate us at a more convenient time if you're so inclined. But, for now, we're extremely grateful that you could at least tell us Olivia is okay." She pats his hand. "Could you tell what time or date she's in? Would you have been alive then?"

"Yes." He glares at Patricia. "In fact, I saw my father and Mr. Windsor. They were still friends and looked just as I recall when I was a young boy."

"Still friends?" Clara lifts her hand. "Never mind. I believe that might explain why you and Olivia are experiencing the world around you differently. You would have been able to touch that tree because you once belonged in that space and time. But, to Olivia, those trees are nothing more than a vision of a time long gone."

Helen waves her hand, producing a glass of red wine in front of Cassian and turns to her mother with a bewildered look. "But why wouldn't he be able to communicate with her? He's been able to before."

Clara runs her fingertips over her lips, then rests her chin on her curled fingers. "If I have to guess, I'd say it's because only Olivia is to be inside the journal entries." She takes a deep breath and leans back in her chair. "We can't forget that timekeeper journals are created with a power of their own. Olivia is the one that has been chosen to interpret the book, and I'm afraid we can't cheat it. So we'll simply have to

wait for her to reemerge.” Her eyes soften as they shift back to Cassian. “Though I see no reason why you couldn’t at least observe along with her. If you wouldn’t mind, that is.”

Cassian’s lips tighten as he gives a firm nod. “Of course.” He closes his eyes, once again reaching out to Olivia’s mind. Thankfully, she’s where he had left her—Lancashire forest.

Julien halts for a brief moment, his focus remaining on the glow emanating through the branches. “Harold, you cannot tell me you don’t feel that.” He pulls free from Harold’s grasp. “There’s no way you can’t sense the immense energy radiating through the air?”

Harold presses his lips together and looks around. “No, I feel nothing out of the ordinary, and I’d like to keep it that way. What the hell is with you, Julien? You haven’t been yourself all day.” His brows draw together as he searches Julien’s face. “Look, I said nothing when you ripped the heads off your latest creations—deeming them all out of control. Sure, taking out your own clan was a little out of character, but that’s what I appreciate most about you. You’ve always been merciless. But now this?” He shakes his head, throwing his hand out toward town. “Of course, I hear the chanting. But you’re acting as if this is something new. They’ve been hanging and burning witches for weeks now. It never bothered you before. In fact, just a few weeks ago, we were cheering this very crowd on. So what changed all of a sudden?” He grabs Julien’s arm and gives him a tug. “I’m not sure what has gotten into you, but you need to stop this foolishness, and let’s go. We have a deer hunt to get back to and our own families to think about.”

Olivia stares at Harold, her face heating with each heartless word. It takes every ounce of her energy to focus on Julien as he continues to gaze off in the direction of the voices. When he’s finally heard enough, he tugs his arm free of Harold’s grasp and glares back at him. “Foolishness is letting our plebs gorge themselves. Prepare for change, my friend, because many more are coming.”

“One old hag has you this bent out of shape that you are willing to change life as we know it?”

Julien shakes his head. “No. The law has already been written and sealed with my blood. There will be no more reckless pleb creation. No more gorging. That’s why I set up this deer hunt tonight. I needed to tell you. I rounded up the last of my rogue plebs this morning. They had the choice to conform, or I had to remove the life I gave them, and you, my friend, must do the same.”

“That’s ridiculous!” Harold stares at him in disbelief. “You destroyed your own clan?”

“To preserve humanity? Yes. Without question.” His head swings back toward the chanting. “This discussion can wait until tomorrow,” Julien says, waving him off as he steps closer to the tree line. “Tonight, precedence has shifted to a powerful witch. There is no way you can’t feel her strength.” Glancing at Harold, he touches his cheek. “My flesh feels alive for the first time in centuries.” His hand continues down his chest. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d swear my blood is pumping warm. Her energy is so intense.”

Harold breaks into laughter. “Okay, Laurent. Stop being so dramatic. This apostle act is not fooling me one bit. I feel absolutely nothing.” He raises his finger in the air, pompously cocking his head to the side. “Oh. No. Wait. I do feel something.” He spins back to face him with wide eyes and an exaggerated grin. “I feel us burning right alongside that damn witch if we don’t get out of here. Now stop this nonsense. We need to go.”

Scowling at Harold, Olivia wants to scream but knows it’ll be useless. They don’t seem to acknowledge her presence at all. Though all is not lost when Julien turns to plead his case. “Look, the townspeople neither desire witches nor vampires. For all we know, we could be next on their weekly roundup—beheaded and tossed into the town’s burning centrepiece. With all the untamed plebs you’ve been creating, they’re bound to draw attention sooner than later. Maybe this is a sign. Who is to say it wouldn’t work in our favour to help out an equally unfavourable foe?” Drawing in an unrequired breath, he slaps Harold’s hand off his arm and directs him toward the bushes. “Go ahead and cower, but this is something I must do.”

Leaving Harold slack jaw, Julien takes off toward the glow of the fire breaking through the trees. He halts at the tree line, taking cover within the foliage. Slowly, Olivia creeps up behind him and stares

out between the leaves. Her hand flies over her mouth as she gasps. The sight before them is something she's only read about. Never did she think she would witness such a thing firsthand.

Erected in the city centre is a large wooden cross. Two women hang by their necks from each end of the crossbar, and clearly, they've already perished, but the third is still alive. She's tied to the primary beam, her hands and feet bound together behind the main post. Olivia can't see her face with the sack over her head, but she can see her moving—she's definitely alive.

Julien takes another step closer. "It's so strange. I know I hold no friendships with any witches. But this one? She feels so—" He rubs his arm. "So familiar to me."

Harold laughs, laying his hand on his shoulder. "You have no friends among the *breathing*, Laurent. Now, come on. Snap out of it. We already have to find another herd, thanks to you letting our deer get away."

Olivia's fear spikes as men toss dead brush at the woman's feet. She can hear the torch-bearing crowd's chant echoing through the forest—the mob's roar becoming increasingly unbearable. "Burn the witches! Burn them all!"

Julien attempts to leap, but Harold grabs his jacket and yanks him back, his voice a loud whisper. "You crazy son-of-a-bitch! Will you forget about the witch! You're going to get us torched for crying out loud!"

"No. The other two are already dead, but they're going to burn that poor woman alive."

"She's not a bloody woman!" Harold yells, rubbing his forehead. He stares at Julien, throwing his arms out in disbelief. "Will you think about this for a minute? If this witch is so powerful, why isn't she saving herself? Huh?"

"I'm not sure." Julien tilts his head toward the city center. "But just listen for a moment. Her heart is unusually calm for someone in her position. I'm telling you, there is something special about this witch. I must save her."