

Ready for some foreshadowing fun?
Let's goooo...!



A CAROLINA FIRST-YEAR sprints through the darkness and launches himself off the cliff into the moonlit night.

His shout sends sleepy birds flying overhead. The sound echoes against the rock face that borders the Eno Quarry. Flashlights track his flailing body, all windmilling arms and kicking legs, until he hits the water with a cracking splash. At the cliff line above, thirty college students cheer and whoop, their joy weaving through the pine trees. Like a constellation in motion, cone-shaped beams of light roam the lake's surface. Collective breath, held. All eyes, searching. Waiting. Then, the boy erupts from the water with a roar, and the crowd explodes.

Cliff jumping is the perfect formula for Southern-white-boy fun: rural recklessness, a pocket flashlight's worth of precaution, and a dare. I can't look away. Each run draws my own feet an inch closer to the edge. Each leap into nothingness, each hovering moment before the fall, calls to a spark of wild yearning inside my chest.

I press that yearning down. Seal it closed. Board it up.

"Lucky he didn't break his damn legs," Alice mutters in her soft twang. She scoffs, peering over the edge to watch the grinning jumper grasp protruding rocks and exposed vines to climb the rock face. Her straight, coal-black hair lies plastered to her temple. The warm, sticky palm of late-August humidity presses

Pro tip:
Always
pay
attention to
a character's
"wild
yearning".
It's a
clue.

While this
is an
'After-Bree'
tease, it
also hints
at Bree's
hidden
magic.

Chapter Two

creature and ground it down into a pile of dust and fractured images, then rearranged that pile into something new: an unremarkable blank space above the campfire with no creature in sight. But that new memory doesn't *feel* real; it is a thin, flimsy layer created from silver smoke with the truth visible and concrete underneath.

He gave us both false memories, but now I remember the truth. That's impossible—

A voice sends me ducking behind a tree. "It's just these four. The rest made it to the parking lot." It's Tor, the blond girl who'd yelled at everyone. "Can we make this quick? I have a date with Sar. Drinks at Tap Rail."

"And Sar will understand if you're late." Selwyn. "This one was nearly corporeal. I had to wipe those last two kids' memories just in case."

I stifle a gasp. They're both still there at the clearing twenty feet away. Whatever they're doing, they're working together. Tor and Selwyn are visible between trees, circling the campfire, looking up. The murky green shape is still there in the sky, flashing in and out. The four drunk football players must be absolutely *plastered*, because they're only now coming up for air. They sit back, chests heaving, faces bloodied, expressions disoriented. One of them moves to stand, but Selwyn is at his side in the blink of an eye. His hand drops like an anvil on the kid's shoulder, forcing the larger boy back down so hard and fast that I hear his knees crack against the earth. The boy screams in pain, falling forward onto his hands, while I muffle my own cry.

"Dude!" another boy shouts.

"Shut up," snaps Selwyn. The wounded boy struggles in Selwyn's grip, but Selwyn holds him down without effort, without even looking. Selwyn's gaze hasn't left the flickering thing moving above their heads. After several pained breaths the boy releases a low moan. "The rest of you, over here with him." The other three boys exchange glances in silent debate. "Now!" he barks, and they scurry together on hands and knees to sit next to their injured friend.

[In that second, I realize I have a choice. I can go find Alice and Charlotte. Alice will be worried sick. I can leave, like Selwyn told me to. I can put my wall up again, this time against whatever is happening here with these kids I don't know from a school I've barely started. I can hide my curiosity, just like]

In writing craft, this is a pretty classic example of the "refusal of the call" to adventure. But here . . .

→ cont'd

... Bree's refusal is more than just story craft,
it is Arthurian. The "true" King in many stories
24 does not ^{TRACY DEONN} want to be King.

After-Bree, just like my grief. Or I can stay. If this isn't just a trick of grief, then what is it? Sweat streams down my forehead, stings my eyes. I bite my lip, weighing my options.

"As soon as I get them out of the way, it's going to bolt," Selwyn cautions.

"You don't say?" Tor says dryly.

"Snark later. Hunt now." *Hunt?* My breaths quicken.

"Pot, kettle, black . . .," Tor huffs, but reaches over her shoulder for something I can't see.

Any choice I had evaporates when silver smoke appears from nowhere. It writhes and coalesces around Selwyn like a living thing, wrapping his arms and chest, blurring his body. His amber eyes gleam—actually *gleam*—like dual suns, and the ends of his dark hair curl upward, topped by bright flames of blue and white. The fingers on his free hand flex and contort at his sides, as if they're pulling and churning the air itself. Impossibly, he is both more terrifying and more beautiful than before.

Silver smoke materializes and surrounds the boys. They don't even blink—because they can't see it. But I can. And so can Selwyn and Tor.

When Tor takes a step back, I finally see what she's holding: a dark metal rod curved in an arc. A downward snap and it extends—into a bow. A goddamn *bow*.

At the sight of her weapon, the taut football players shout and scatter like crabs.

Ignoring them, Tor pulls hard to extract a silver bowstring from one end. Strings the weapon with practiced fingers. Tests the tension. The girl I'd called prissy draws an arrow from a hidden quiver between her shoulder blades and nocks it without looking. Takes a breath—and in one powerful motion, pulls the bow up and the arrow back to her ear.

One of the players points a shaking finger. "What—"

"Where do you want it?" Tor asks, as if the boy had never spoken. Cords of muscle strain at her bicep, in her forearm.

Selwyn tilts his head, assessing the creature. "In the wing."

Tor aims; the string tightens. "On your signal."

A beat.

At the end of this chapter, Bree runs away and doesn't look back. For good reason! But it's too late. She is already on the path to the truth.

Chapter Six

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TRACY DEONN

"Well, which one did you join? So I know which one to avoid."

"A second sidestepped question. Cricket Club."

"Cricket. Club. In basketball and football country?"

He shrugs. "I knew it would piss my dad off."

Something twists in my heart, tight and sharp. "Oh?"

"My dad's an alum. A psychology professor here."

"And he wants you to do something other than cricket?"

"Yep." Nick tips his head backward and watches the tree limbs as we pass under them. "Follow in his footsteps."

"But you're not going to do that something else?"

"Nope."

"Why not?"

He drops his gaze to mine. "Because I don't do things just because my father wants me to."

Suddenly, irrationally, the twist in my chest transforms into something more aggressive. "He just wants a connection."

Nick scoffs. "I'm sure he does, but I don't care."

I stop on the pathway and turn to him. "You *should* care."

Nick stops walking. Uses my earlier response against me. "Oh?"

"Yes," I challenge.

* [We lock eyes, brown to blue, and something unexpected passes between us.] *

A tug of friendship, a dropper full of humor.

"You're pushy," he observes, and smiles.

I don't know what to say to that, so I start walking again.

Old East appears ahead of us, beige-yellow brick and unremarkable identical windows running in rows down its sides. You'd never guess it had been standing for almost two hundred and thirty years—the oldest state university building in the country.

I don't know why it bugs me that Nick doesn't want to connect with his father. We've only just met, we barely know each other, and he doesn't owe me any details about his life. It shouldn't irritate me.

But it does.

I adore this first sequence between Nick and Bree! This ~~*~~ moment foreshadows their "call and response" dynamic. Is it Arthur/Lancelot?

Chapter Seven

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TRACY DEONN

meet you two days in a row, but no Shadowborn would have made herself as vulnerable as you have tonight, which means you must simply be . . . unlucky.” That word again, *Shadowborn*. When Sel says it, his face twists into a sneer.

“You are Unanedig. Onceborn.” The Kingsmage’s eyes—scientific, assessing—track every tremble of my frame. “So your body isn’t accustomed to aether. That’s why you’re dizzy.”

“Screw you.”

“Sit.” Sel’s voice rolls over me like a wave. When I don’t comply, he steps forward and that deep-down, primordial fear of him *presses* against me. I sit.

Nick takes half a step forward. “Minimal intervention directive,” he urges. “Just the last couple hours.”

Sel rolls his eyes. “Orders, Nicholas? As if I am not bound by the same laws you so carelessly neglect?”

My eyes fly to Nick’s. He nods as if to confirm what’s about to happen. *He’s going to erase my memory again.* Sel kneels in front of me, and the same heady, spiced smoke scent swirls around me, filling my nose. “Your name?” he purrs in that same rolling voice.

“Her name is Briana.” Nick gives Sel my legal name, not my preferred one.

My mind races. Last time Sel’s mesmer worked, but only for a little while.

How did I break it? There was the light, then the pain in my palm—

Sel watches the fight on my face with interest. “I must admit, Briana, I’m curious. What twist of the universe has set you in my path again?” he asks, his voice quiet, wistful. “Alas, some mysteries must remain forever unsolved.”

I flinch when he reaches long fingers toward my face. It gives me just enough time to bite down on the inside of my bottom lip. Hard.

The last thing I remember is the hot skin of his palm pressed against my forehead.

Oh, Selwyn! This mystery will be solved!
One of my favorite devices is to have a character ask the right question at the wrong time or to the wrong person. In this case, Sel sort of dismisses his own query. For now...

Chapter Fifteen

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↗ A good lad!

"I usually like to follow up with my patients, but you were taken away before I got a chance to."

Fear washes through me. Rule One means I can't tell him what I remember.

"I . . . I'm not sure . . ."

He smirks. "No need for subterfuge. I'm a healer by inheritance and by nature. I genuinely want to know how your wounds are doing."

At a loss for words, I thrust both forearms out. He takes my wrists and traces one forefinger up the inner skin of one arm, then the other. "Good. You took aether well."

The elevator comes to a jerking stop. When I swallow down bile, William's shrewd eyes narrow minutely. The doors open onto an even lower level and a similar long hallway, but he punches the button to keep them open.

"May I?" He gestures at the sticky, aching spot on my right cheek. I nod. But instead of touching me again, he sticks one hand out into the hallway, then chuckles at the look on my face. "Aether is everywhere, but it's a bit like a cell signal. Hard to find in a metal box." He glances up at the elevator by way of explanation. I watch as mage flame swirls and gathers in his palm. It solidifies into a thick, silver sauce that bleeds out over his hand, coating his fingers and the green leather cuff around his wrist. He steps closer, making eye contact first, and hovers three shining fingers over my cheek. The bright citrus smell of his casting flows between us, filling my nose.

The aether is cold—and it reminds me a bit of the slop of the uchel on my skin. I flinch, and William hums. "Deep breaths." The cold spreads, soothing where it touches. There's an itchy sensation, a quiet hiss, and the ache disappears. "Done." A flick of his wrist, and the aether dissolves. "How do you feel? Dizzy?"

I take stock of my head, tilt it back and forth. "No. Not like last time."

"Acclimating fast for a Onceborn," he says thoughtfully.

"Thank you?"

He inclines his head in response and gestures to the hall. "Shall we?"

I step through, gnawing on my lower lip. He knows I was at the Lodge last night, but what else does he know?

*

William was taught that it is risky to use aether to heal Onceborn bodies.

He was worried about how Bree would take it... but little does he know, she is not Onceborn! Shh....!

} *

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Chapter Fifteen

Some of the old incantations are still in Welsh, like the swyns I use in the infirmary.”

Alice would love this, I think. The history, the Wall, everything. Then I feel a pang of guilt for wishing she was with me. I’d never want her to get hurt, and right now bodily injury seems like the price of admission.

“Potential Scion children are told the lore early and often. First by our parents, then by the Lieges—retired Scions and Squires—then by our parents again when we turn sixteen. That’s the first year our knights may Call on us.” His eyes lose focus as he returns to a story he’s clearly heard many, many times. “At the Round Table’s peak, Arthur had over one hundred and fifty knights at his command. But over time, the Shadowborn Wars, our fight with the Cysgodanedig, cut that number down until only the thirteen strongest knights remained. Merlin and Arthur feared what the world would become should the Table fall, and so Merlin devised the Spell of Eternity: a powerful casting to magnify the remaining knights’ abilities and bind their spirits to their bloodline so that their heirs could forever stand against the darkness. So that the Table would live on, immortal.” William’s voice has dipped low with reverence, or perhaps he’s echoing the reverence of those who told the story before. “When our knights Awaken, their spirit lives again. This is why we call those outside the Lines Unanedig. ‘Onceborn.’ And why we call ourselves Chwedlanedig. ‘Legendborn.’”

To be able to trace one’s family back that far is something I have never fathomed. My family only knows back to the generation after Emancipation. Suddenly, it’s hard to stand here and take in the magnificence of the Wall and not feel an undeniable sense of ignorance and inadequacy. Then, a rush of frustration because someone probably wanted to record it all, but who could have written down my family’s history as far back as this? Who would have been able to, been taught to, been allowed to? Where is *our* Wall? A Wall that doesn’t make me feel lost, but found. A Wall that towers over anyone who lays eyes on it.

Instead of awe, I feel . . . *cheated*.

I take a deep breath and turn to William, my voice harsh. “You said sixth

This is written to hit differently on a first and second read. Bree's frustration is real and she should feel cheated, but then we realize the Wall is a Lie.

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single shining star engraved in the wall at the same height as my hip.

[My fingers reach out to touch it without my permission, and I yank them back. William's mouth quirks in a knowing smile.] ★

"Under normal circumstances the Order operates just fine without an Awakened king. That's what the Regents are for. Shadowborn cross into our world to feed and terrorize, we kill them, and the peace is kept, relatively speaking. Low-ranked Scions like myself are Awakened frequently, and we're generally strong enough to keep the demons at bay. If you age out or expire, the next eligible Scion can be Called in your place, and the cycle continues."

"*Expire?* If you die, you mean?" I ask, horrified.

"The Scion in each bloodline and the nine potentially eligible descendants in the line of succession behind them begin training as soon as they can walk." He turns to me, his eyes assessing my expression. "We know the risks and prepare for them as best we can."

I remember what Fitz said earlier—and the orders Lord Davis had given to send the Awakened to the front lines against the hellhounds. "But if the lower-ranked Scions are Called all the time, then your Lines are—infantry. You're bearing the brunt of the war. The higher-ranked Scions—"

William cuts me off with a raised finger. "No, little Page, don't go down that road." He sighs. "Fitz's way—his entire family's way—is . . . dishonorable. We are Called first because fifteen hundred years ago, our knights were first to the field. It's like Lord Davis says, to serve is to elevate oneself. It is ennobling. Some carry the burden with resentment, but the truth is, none of us have a choice. Immortality has a price. In the end, there is evil in the world, and we are the ones equipped to fight it."

"Under normal circumstances, the Order is fine without an Awakened Arthur . . . but we're not 'under normal circumstances,' are we?"

"No, it seems not." William sighs heavily. "Nick was correct. A Scion ranked higher than sixth hasn't been Called in a very long time. And Sel was right too. Demons—*isels* especially—don't work together like they did tonight. And an *uchel* sighting is beyond rare." He studies me. "But why don't you ask the question that's really on your mind?"

★ A clue! William smiles because he thinks she is drawn to Arthur's Line because of her dynamic with Nick, but is that the only reason? Hmm....



TEN MINUTES LATER, we descend the stairs with a prickly sort of awareness bouncing between us. Yesterday we entered the great room in agreement, but we each had limited information about the nature of our situation. Twenty-four hours later, Nick's world is heading to war, and I'm preparing to unravel my mother's history. As our paths continue, will we still find common ground?

When we reach the foyer, the sounds of dinner reach us from the vast dining room around the corner. Clinking cutlery. Chairs scraping the floor. Voices.

I look back to find Nick watching me, my own uncertainty echoed on his face. "We good, B?"

I nod. "We're good."

His mouth quirks. "I don't know why, but—"

Suddenly, the front doors open and humid, light rain sprays across the tiles. Outside, three women stand deep in conversation, shaking their umbrellas on the patio before entering. They're dressed head to toe in country club-chic: blouses, cardigans, capris, spotless white tennis shoes. Their pale, perfectly contoured faces light up when they see Nick.

"As I live and breathe . . ." The woman on the left wears a neck scarf the deep yellow of the Line of Owain.

"Is that—?"

"Nick Davis." The tallest woman, a brunette, speaks with a low rasp. The


If Nick had not been interrupted, he would have said "—I feel like I can trust you."

Chapter Twenty-Four

LEGENDBORN

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"trust"
again.

The 1st
time this
is used.
We hear
it 5x in
this book.
It is a
key theme
for Bree
and Nick.
A possible
hint about
their true
lineages and
the dynamic
between
Arthur &
Lancelot?
Maaybe!


Despite my guilt, I think of how, in so many moments since I've met him, my own trust had risen inside to meet his, sure and steady.

Call and response.

Maybe Nick's thinking of that too, because he caresses my palm once more and takes a ragged breath.

"How about now?" he whispers, his voice rough.

"Now?" I breathe.

Something heady and dark pools in Nick's eyes. "Does *this* make you nervous?"

The last boy I kissed was Michael Gustin in ninth grade in the corner of the school dance. I remember being terrified and, after the too-wet, too-sloppy ick of it, disappointed. But that was ninth grade and Michael. This is now. And this is Nick.

I don't feel nervous. I feel desire batting against my ribs like a caged bird. I feel hesitation. I feel overwhelmed. Then, I feel mortification when I realize that Nick, with his sharp, perceptive eyes, has seen it all.

He smiles, small and secret, and brings his free hand up to cradle my jaw, sweeping his thumb over it. His eyes follow the movement thoughtfully before they rise to claim my gaze again. He squeezes my wrist, then lets me go.

I lurch backward on my knees, my cheeks heated, the ghosts of his hands on my skin.

I'm grateful that he's busy adjusting his pillows and not looking at me.

I have a feeling he's doing it on purpose, giving me a moment to collect myself.

Once he finishes, he settles back against the headboard and folds his hands in his lap. "Will you sit with me?" he asks pleasantly.

And just like that, the air between us feels lighter, easier. Like nothing unusual had happened at all.

I'm impressed, despite my still-racing heartbeat. How does he do it? How does this boy navigate my emotions like a seasoned sailor, finding the clear skies and bringing them closer, when all I seem able to do is hold fast to the storms?

He waits patiently for me to decide, his eyes soft and open. Finally, I nod and crawl up to the headboard, making myself comfortable in the space beside him.

We sit like that for a long time, until our breaths rise and fall as one.

"Until the uchel took you."

"Oh, sure," I joke, my voice trembling only slightly. His face is so close I can smell the shampoo he used this morning. See the fine lashes against his cheek. I'm scared to want him—but I want him anyway. My next words come out breathy and faint. "Damsel in distress activates your hero mode?"

The passion in his voice, the breathless force of it, is enough to make me shiver. "You're not a damsel to me, Bree. You're a warrior. You're strong and you're beautiful and you're brilliant and brave." He presses his forehead against mine, his eyes squeezed shut, and takes a slow, ragged breath. "And I'd *really* like to kiss you."

"Oh," I squeak, and immediately wish I'd thought of something more to say. *Anything* more.

He chuckles, his clean, minty breath already intimate against my mouth. "Oh, 'no'? Or oh, 'yes'?" He pulls back to meet my eyes, and there is affection and something more flickering in their heated depths. It's the something more that sends an arc of electricity through my body.

"The second o—" He tilts my chin and presses his mouth against mine, warm and soft.

I've read books, watched movies, whispered secret wishes to Alice in the darkness of bunk-bed sleepovers. I expect this kiss to feel an awkward sort of good.

I don't expect each gentle brush of Nick's lips to shift, grow insistent—and set me on fire.

The distant sounds of early morning birds fade away when Nick's fingers smooth up the column of my throat, angling my face so that our mouths connect more fully. My fingers clutch at his T-shirt, pulling closer until I am all feeling and no thought: my heart pounding with his, the heat of his chest against mine, the strength of his thigh pressing into my own. Someone gasps for air; then we find each other again. I make a sound in the back of my throat that should be embarrassing, but Nick consumes it with a low hum against my mouth, drawing me forward until we're flush. In that instant, I feel the two sides of our familiar dance. The call and response of trust and loyalty, intermingling until they

← "call and response" #2!

→ the themes of "trust and loyalty" are very Arthur and Lancelot-coded!

become a melody. A beautiful truth that circles in the wind, swirling against my mind, growing louder until everyone, everyone must hear it too.

I don't know what our kiss is becoming—just as his lips ghost over my jaw, just as his fingers feather over my sternum, we hear someone's feet crunching down the gravel road behind us.

"Nick? That you?" Russ.

I instinctively freeze, but Nick lifts his head, a frustrated groan rising from his chest.

Another voice nearby. "Who's that—?" Oh God. Evan too. "Whoa!"

At some point, we'd rotated so that my back is toward the way we'd come, and Nick is facing Russ and Evan's disembodied voices. Thank the Lord, too, because I can duck my face into Nick's shoulder and catch my breath instead of die of mortification in front of frat boy *Evan Cooper*.

Evan crows. "Oh-kayyy, y'all! Sheeit . . . ! Get it!" He's wheezing with laughter.

"Is this a good morning kiss or a good night kiss?" Russ calls, the sound of a grin all over his voice. "Are we coming or going?"

"Kinda busy right now, guys." I can't help but feel a little thrill at the steel underneath Nick's hoarse voice.

["Oh, we can *see* that." Russ laughs at his own joke while Evan says, "Sorry to interrupt, my liege! Please, proceed with thy gentle tonguing!"] ★

They both laugh a long time at that, and even I crack a grin into the soft fabric of Nick's shirt. They walk around us, whooping and cheering the entire way down the gravel road toward campus.

As soon as they get out of earshot, Nick sighs, pulling me tighter into the circle of his arms. "You okay?"

I nod into his chest and press my ear to it. We stand there in comfortable silence. After a few minutes, both our hearts slow from a rapid gallop to a steady thump. My lips still tingle and the fine hairs on my arms are alert with want, but I sigh into it all rather than act on it.

For the first time in a long while, I let myself enjoy a moment of warmth and safety without wondering if it's real.

★ Not a clue! I just think this line is funny and I still laugh at it even tho I wrote it, hehe.

Chapter Twenty-Six

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TRACY DEONN

Together, the three of us peer into the shadows behind the brick patio at the base of the structure, where a hooded figure stands in a dark patch of grass on the far side of the lawn, nearly hidden from sight. Whoever they are, they have placed themselves strategically, pausing right where the imposing landmark shields them from late-night passersby and blocks the dull orange glow of campus lampposts. The sound of low, harsh chanting reaches my ears. It's not English. Not the Order's Welsh, either.

I sway on my feet while listening, momentarily captivated. I've taken a half step forward before I snap out of the sudden daze. I shudder. Something isn't right, here beneath the Tower's shadow.

Cecilia nudges me. "Go on. Get closer. They can't see you."

"Just like you and Louisa couldn't see me?" I hiss.

"Forces bigger than Patricia are at work with you," Cecilia says, narrowing her eyes. "Her original walk has been pulled into the current of our family's ancestral energy like a leaf in a river. The ancestors won't release you until they're done. Now, go." She shoves me hard until I move around the hedge onto the lawn.

As I approach, the chanting figure turns away so all I can see is their black hooded sweatshirt and jeans. They look over their shoulder, as if a noise has caught their attention—maybe Ruth—and I freeze, but they look right through me like I'm not even there.

Even two feet away, I can't make out their features. The hood is pulled low, but even their nose and mouth are shadowed shapes. Satisfied that they're alone, the figure turns back, fishing out a small item from their pocket. A vial of dark liquid. The figure unscrews the vial and pours it over a gloved hand. It's blood, I realize, and they coat their palms and fingers until the leather is glistening.

They walk slowly across the grass while swiping their bloodied glove in the air, palm out, leaving an arc of green mage flame in their wake. The flame hangs in the air like an emerald rainbow, then turns into liquid. Glowing aether flows down to the ground in thick trails. The figure backs away, chanting, and the aether spreads until it's a shining veil taller than a man and at least twenty feet across. There's a roaring sound, rising like a wave in my ears, and then a thick tear.

Something isn't right, but she's also drawn to this location because Excalibur is beneath the Bell Tower.

Chapter Twenty-Six

LEGENDBORN

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I feel the tug on my spine again, but just before the world disappears for the last time, I see dozens of partially corporeal clawed feet extend through the veil and land on the grass. A low howl begins out of sight, the garbled sound growing clearer, louder . . .

Hellhounds.

I come to with a gasp, sitting just as I was before Patricia's walk. There's a sound I can't quite parse. An "—ee" sound. I hear it again. "—ee?" A question. I blink and see Patricia on her knees, her hands trembling on my shoulders. Her mouth moves, and this time I hear it. "Bree?"

"Patricia."

"Oh, thank God." She pulls me in tight for a hug, then sits back. "You were here, but you weren't here. Breathing but unresponsive. Louisa wouldn't let me call on her again. I had a feeling I should wait, but—"

I shake my head to clear it of the fog, but the memories—my memories now—cling. Images paint the inside of my mind, pulsing through my consciousness like drums. Abby's back. Mary's hands. Bloodcrafters. The determined look on Pearl's face. The crossroads child and his golden-orange gaze. The Shadowborn Gate.

A pack of hellhounds crossing to our world.

My eyes find Patricia's. "You have a sister named Ruth."

She blinks. "I did. She passed a few years ago."

"Oh," I whisper. "I didn't realize."

Patricia smiles like she knows what I'm thinking. "I've walked with her. I miss her, and yet I see her when I need to. Why do you ask?"

"Because I walked with her too. When she went to school here. When was she enrolled?"

"She graduated maybe twenty-five years ago. Why?"

It feels like she's just punched me in the gut. My mother was at Carolina twenty-five years ago, maybe living in a dorm not far from where Ruth was that night.

Bree's mom also would have been drawn to Excalibur beneath the Tower, as she was also the Scion of Arthur.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

LEGENDBORN

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bigger, and fully corporeal. It throws glowing silver aether off in waves. Details I'd missed before are clearer now, even in the dim light: its long snout with nostrils flared and tipped like a bat's. Sel's given it the Shadowborn's heart-blood eyes, dark and impossibly red. I can't look away; I can barely move for terror that when I do, it will strike.

I edge one foot back, and my heel hits something hard, vertical, smooth. Another mausoleum. I know without looking that the door is out of reach. The only escape routes are between the corners of the buildings and the fourth, open side I've just come through—the side that the hound is now closing off with its massive body.

It snarls and snaps its saliva-drenched jaws, in delight or fury, I don't know. It lowers itself into a crouch, ears flicked forward. My heart accelerates into a full gallop, blood pounding in my ears. "Call it off, Sel!"

Sel drops down silently beside his construct, landing in a crouch and rising with a satisfied smile. "Just as I thought. A coward and a liar both."

Sel's hellhound pants at me, its mouth wide and open in a doglike grin. "Call it off!" I press my back into the wall.

Sel crosses his arms over his chest, pleasure painted all over his face. "Once a true hellhound has the scent, it never gives up its prey. The only way to stop it is to kill it. As much as I despise those Shadowborn beasts, I find I'm much the same way. So I decided to give you two final options: reveal your true form, or kill me."

"You set me up!" Adrenaline and rage surge through my veins. "You planned to corner me here."

He groans, as if correcting a dense student. "*Of course*. I must admit, I was inspired by what you said yesterday in William's infirmary. You were right—all of this cat and mouse is getting old."

I risk a step forward, but the hound snaps. I fall backward onto the bricks. "Why are you doing this?"

"Because I'm *tired*, Briana, of your Shadowborn lies and the fun you must be having at our expense. Planting your brethren at our Oath, sending the serpent to take Nicholas under my nose, taking part in our trials." With every

In Bloodmarked, Sel is plagued with guilt over this sequence especially. He admits that he wanted to kill Bree — and worries about what it could have done to the Lines if he'd succeeded.

Chapter Thirty

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TRACY DEONN

I grit my teeth, unnerved that he has brought up his own mother. Can he see that I was thinking about mine? “Is this story going somewhere?”

Sel ignores me. “With that upbringing, I, more than most, understand that our magic, if you will, is at its core and in its very fundamentals, a type of physics.” He extends his arm in the dim light. The tattoo claiming most of his forearm is a bold black circle divided by five lines into five equal segments. “Earth, air, water, fire, and aether, or what medieval alchemists called ‘quintessence.’ Every Merlin is taught that aether cannot be created or destroyed, only infused into a body or manipulated into temporary mass. So”—he looks directly into my eyes—“how is it that you, Briana Matthews, defy every law of aether that thousands of Merlins have followed for the past fifteen centuries?”

I stare back, scared of what he’s saying but refusing to show him that. “Maybe the Order doesn’t know everything about magic in the world.”

He hums and steps back. “There are a lot of things the Order does not know.” He walks ahead again without adding a word to *that* enigmatic comment, and I have no choice but to follow.

The deeper we go, the more the scent of rotting things overwhelms me. I tug my T-shirt up over my nose for relief, then pull it down again because it’s freezing here.

After a while I ask him the question that needs to be asked. “Are you going to turn me over to the Regents?”

He answers without looking back. “I haven’t decided. Why are you really joining our Order?”

He’s a Merlin. I can’t trust him with the real answer, and doing so would go against everything Nick’s specifically warned me about.

“You must be thinking up a lie,” he muses, “because you’re taking too long for the truth.” He stops again and gives me an expectant look.

I pull together the best possible, truest answer I can and look him right in the eyes while I say it. “I asked Nick to help me join because I need to understand the things I’ve seen, and I need to know why I see them.”

“What does Nicholas think of your ability to generate aether?”

“I . . . he doesn’t know about that. It’s only happened once before. Randomly,

Foreshadowing!

"A lot" is an understatement.

Chapter Thirty-Three

LEGENDBORN

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between my hands feels like it might tear if I stretch my fingers too far. I collapse to the floor in a heap and look up at the clock; three hours have passed and it's close to ten.

"How's it going, Gill?" Nick asks.

Gillian looks me over for a moment. "She's about as good as you were . . . when you were eight."

Nick winces. "It's her first night."

The older woman shrugs and plucks the staff from my hand.

Nick helps me to standing, taking my weight when I hop up on sore feet. "At times like these, there are only two words I can offer."

"Yeah, what are they?" I mutter.

"William's waiting."

On the car ride home, I fall into an exhausted, aether-drugged sleep. Nick offers to help me upstairs twice before I wave him away.

The images I dream of melt and bleed into one another like oil over water.

I see my mother, hunched over her desk, writing. When she looks down and smiles, I know I am a child, and this is a memory.

Her face slips into familiar blue-and-white smoke.

I wear shining aether armor. Metal gleams over my arms and chest. Nameless, faceless Regents kneel on the ground before me.

Men in robes playing god.

I level my crystal blade at their throats.

Beside me, Nick gasps. My armor matches his. I am his Squire. But his sword is sheathed. When I reach for his arm, he pulls away like I am a stranger.

I am on my hands and knees in the graveyard, bent over earth and stone with hands smeared in blood.

The graveyard falls into never-ending darkness, black and silent and suffocating.

★ ★
Dream Sequence
★ ★

Is a book really YA Fantasy without a mildly prophetic dream sequence?? J/K J/K! 😊

Chapter Thirty-Five

LEGENDBORN

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The six competing Pages wear fitted pants for maximum mobility, and tunics in the color of our sponsor's Line, adorned with their sigil in the center.

I am the only Page who wears the gold of the Line of Arthur.

Sel said I had too many reasons to be here. Fractured goals.

Tonight I have only one focus, and I fight for only one family: my own.

The matches are set up so that each Page goes in the ring three times, for a total of nine matches. When the first pair goes up, Nick makes eye contact with me and winks. He's never seen me in the arena, and his easy confidence in my abilities triples my nerves.

Sydney easily beats Greer with the quarterstaff but loses to Blake when it comes to the longsword.

Whitty knocks Blake out of the ring with rapid stabs and swipes of his dagger. Then, to everyone's surprise, manages to beat Vaughn into submission with the staff. Vaughn smacks Whitty's staff away and leaves the ring, face as red as his tunic. It's been obvious since warm-ups that he'd planned to get through the night three for three, winning each match with each weapon. He launches his staff against the trees, splitting it down the middle. Fitz walks over to his Page to pat his back encouragingly and murmur in the other boy's ear. Even though Fitz doesn't need a Squire—he's got Evan—it seems he's still invested in his Page's success.

The other Pages, Squires, and Scions cheer or groan, and chat between rounds. Only Nick sits hunched over, silently watching the bouts with a neutral expression.

Each time Pages enter the ring with the hard, black practice swords, all eyes go to him. Everyone wants to know what the Scion of Arthur is thinking.

My first match is against Sydney, with the dagger.

Greer claps me on the back and nods when I go up. "You got this."

Sydney, in an orange tunic, smiles back and struts to the ring. I'd never seen the Line of Bors's sigil up close—three bands across a circle. She doesn't seem to be at all concerned about the outcome of our fight. I shake my shoulders to loosen them up, and force the fingers of my right hand to

Little
tease
here!

Because
you are
not a
Page, Bree!

Chapter Forty-Six

LEGENDBORN

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respond," he whispers, the harsh sound in my ear jarring me back to life.

"I . . ."

I meet Nick's eyes across the room and across hundreds of people, centuries of history, secrets and truths—and I feel the familiar tug between us. *If you can be brave, I can be brave. If I can, you can.* Call and response. In a way, Nick and I are already bonded. We have been since that very first night. In that second I am in two places at once: here with Nick and back in the hidden memory from my mother. I see the same qualities in his eyes that I saw in hers: faith, hope, pride. Camlann is coming and, like my mother, I have a choice: fight or flight.

Take risks. Follow your heart. And move forward.

I am my mother's daughter.

"Yes," I call, loudly and clearly. "I do. I accept Scion Davis's offer."

As soon as the words leave my mouth, the crowd explodes again.

The ballroom becomes a storm of exclamations, gasps, and outraged shouting. Lord Davis calls for order, even tapping the mic. It's no use. No one is listening. An attendant moves Nick offstage. He's protesting, they're pushing.

"You *stole* this from my son!"

I flinch. The woman next to me sneers, disgust turning her face into a hideous mask. It's Vaughn's mother, Rose member Schaefer, who had been kind to me before. Tonight, the slurs in her eyes rain on me like daggers.

"This is his future, you . . . you nappy-headed little—" Someone pushes her back, but another man with a graying beard takes her place, his teeth bared.

A pair of strong arms—Sel's—wraps around my middle, pulling me backward through hands that grab at me. Hands that try to pull me close so that they can inspect me, judge for themselves. I twist in his arms to find Nick, but he's gone.

Insults fly as I pass.

"Gold digger!"

"Onceborn cheat."

"Charity case!"

"Come on! Her blood is dirty. She'll taint the Line!"

That sets me off. I swing around for the culprit. "Who said tha—"

This whole section is about Bree & Nick, but also their knightly counterparts.

↓
"Call and response" again!
#4.

These annotations cover just some of the clues, teases, and foreshadowing in Legendborn. There are plenty more to be found! xoxo, ID