

EXCERPT FROM *HEXBORN*

Witch by birth, warlock by trade.

Adeline Thorne is a witch. The magic inside her is not. The warlock magic coursing through her veins is volatile, incompatible with her witch blood, and growing more unstable by the day. When Luke Churchwell, a powerful runecaster, returns and sees how far her magic has spiraled, he steps in to train her—but every lesson is a gamble, and his desire for her may take them both down.

Far across the country, the hexborn are tracking a killer whose trail leads straight to Adeline.

The hunter is closing in. And the secret that created him is deadlier than the man himself.

ONE

Adeline Thorne stood at the foot of her bed, flipping through her sketchbook. The runes she'd drawn were intriguing—promising even—but they were useless without knowing how to cast magic into them.

At the chime of her doorbell, she glanced up. Half past eleven. Late for a visitor. She closed the sketchbook and set her empty wineglass on the dresser. Thankfully, she hadn't yet changed out of her party dress. She pulled her bedroom door closed and descended the stairs, turning on the porch light when she reached the bottom. Through the door's diamond-shaped panes, in a pool of light, stood Luke Churchwell. Her pulse quickened. She opened the door, and the faint scent of cedar drifted in.

“Your bad penny’s come back,” he said, one hand in his slacks pocket, the other hanging loose at his side. The corner of his mouth quirked into a tentative smile, as if he weren’t sure of his welcome.

Adeline hugged her torso and leaned her shoulder against the doorframe. “It’s been a while.” Three months, and until a moment ago, she hadn’t realized how much she’d missed him—not romantically. She’d missed his company. He’d risked his life for her, and vice versa. And yet she’d never known the real Luke Churchwell, just the edited version his jailer allowed. He looked good in a bespoke jacket with a black dress shirt unbuttoned at the collar, but the shadow of a beard suggested he’d had a very long day.

“It has. Sorry for the late hour. I’ve just returned. Came straight here.” He swept his dark hair back, leaned in, and lowered his voice. “I’ve learned something you should know. May I come in?”

She frowned, searching his tired features, his midnight eyes, and then straightened. “All right. Please, come in.” She led him across her warded threshold and into the living room. “Have a seat. Would you like a drink?”

“No, thanks.” He folded onto one end of the sofa. “You look like you’re dressed for a party.”

“I am. Was. Today was my nephew’s first unbinding ceremony. There was a party afterward.”

“Ah, yes. Summer Solstice. How’d it go?”

She quirked an eyebrow at him. “You don’t have to pretend with me.” Warlocks felt the same way about witches binding magic as witches felt about warlock jewellery that amputated limbs.

“I’m evolving,” he said, smirking.

“I see.” She sat in an armchair opposite him. “In that case, it went well. Better than well. He wielded earth elemental magic like a pro.”

“Happy to hear. How about you? May I assume your magic is behaving?”

She stifled a laugh. “I’ve not seen any sign of incompatibility, but I can’t say it’s behaving.”

“Oh?”

“You know Kai better than most. The eclectic array of magic he pilfered over the years has spawned more than one awkward moment. Some days I feel like a five-year-old with a loaded wand.” Kai Oxen was the warlock who thought he could evade his sentence of magical forfeiture by dumping it into her—a magically barren witch, a vessel from which the arrogant bastard presumed he could retrieve his magic when it suited him.

“I expect that’s quite a challenge. If I can help in any way, call on me. Please.”

She dipped her head in acknowledgement. “What is it you’ve learned that I need to know?”

His attention slipped to his hand as he dipped into thought, absently caressing the arm of the sofa. He wore a heavy ring she’d not seen before. “News of a witch possessing warlock magic has gone viral in the warlock community.”

It wasn’t a shock. Kai’s assault of Adeline had threatened a decades-old peace accord between witches and warlocks. Word of the attack had also rippled through the network of covens.

Luke continued. “But knowing there’s a witch who wields warlock power, and tolerating it, are two very different things. You need to be careful.”

“You sound like Sarah.” Adeline’s sister had said the same thing. “She tells me there are witches who think I’m an abomination, that I’m a threat to them.”

He glanced up. “You *are* a threat to them.”

“That’s not true,” she said, scowling. “I would never siphon their magic. And I wouldn’t siphon their power. Not intentionally. I don’t even know how.”

“Maybe not today. But Kai could siphon magic from the shadow of a witch or warlock half a kilometre away, so you can too, should you choose to do so.”

“And what do the warlocks fear?”

“That your loyalty is to witches and that you’ll expose our rune magic.”

“Which I can’t do, because none of you will teach me.”

“Is that so? Because rumour has it you’ve been behind closed doors with Queen Ophelia on more than one occasion.”

“And you think she’s teaching me your sacred rune magic?” she said, her expression doubtful. “Do warlocks not trust their own queen?”

A dark chuckle escaped his throat. “Unseating royals has been a favourite pastime among warlocks for centuries. King Lochlan and his queen are very good at the power games, but they’re not bulletproof. Queen Ophelia’s secret meetings with you are stirring unease.”

“Secret?” she said, taken aback. “Where are you getting your information?”

“Are you forgetting I led a coup against Lord Tanner? It may have been unsuccessful, but I didn’t go down that path without well-positioned informants.”

“Evidently, you need better informants. My meetings with Ophelia are not secret. Her secretary pens an invite that’s delivered by her courier, and a null escorts me to and from her home. None of that is concealed. Everyone knows.” Just as everyone knew that Adeline had been commissioned to paint her portrait, though that was before she’d known her subject was the warlock queen.

“Ah, but she meets with you in private.”

Adeline frowned in confusion.

“When anyone else meets with the royals, nulls are present. But not when she meets with you.” Nulls were royal guards who served for life and were immune to all but the king’s magic.

“I’m under her protection. She considers me family.”

“That—right there—is the heart of the problem. When you and Warrick married, he brought a witch into the royal family. That’s never been done before. It doesn’t matter that you’re divorced now. The prejudice against witches runs deep. Probably as deep as witches’ prejudice against warlocks.”

Adeline exhaled. “I can’t fix that. None of it. It’s exhausting.” She dragged herself upright. “But I will mention it to Ophelia.” She stood. “I’m having a glass of wine. Can I change your mind on a drink?”

She poured him a Lagavulin and joined him on the sofa. “How did your fence-mending go?” The last time she’d seen him, moments after the king had released him from his imprisonment, he’d kissed her and then rushed away to seek forgiveness from those he’d been forced to harm while trapped by Lord Tanner. She was still uncertain if the kiss was genuine interest or a spontaneous burst of relief that he was finally free. Given his long, quiet absence, she leaned toward the latter.

He shook his head. “As good as could be expected.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Time may heal the wounds.” He filled his lungs, shaking off the disappointment. He met her gaze. “Warrick’s bike is gone.”

She paused. He must have checked the garage for her ex’s Harley before he’d rung her doorbell. Luke and Warrick were not buddies. The only things they had in common were her and believing they were the better man. “He’s on the road again. California, I think.” Warrick was allergic to anything that tethered him to one place for any length of time.

The hint of a smile crossed Luke’s face as he swirled the amber liquid in his glass. Their conversation flowed easily despite the months that had passed. There was a trust between them, forged in battle. She imagined it was the same trust shared by soldiers who’d fought shoulder to shoulder and survived.

He asked about Charlie, her first and last bed-and-breakfast guest. The elderly gentleman had booked a one-night stay in her renovated basement suite and never left. He was a tenant now, though she still brought him breakfast on weekdays.

She asked about Luke’s sister and her family. He’d hidden them from Lord Tanner before his attempted coup.

“Lord Mandal has agreed to find wards to train her sons, my nephews. Lieutenants, no less.” He said it with pride, a sentiment she’d not heard in his voice before.

“Mandal? His territory is in the northeast. Peace River?”

He tilted his head, a question in his expression.

“Ophelia is schooling me in royal politics, which includes knowing the warlock lords, ladies, and their territories. And in exchange, I’m explaining coven governance and witch hierarchy.”

“Ah,” he said, nodding. “Then not runes?”

“Not yet,” Adeline said with a playful smile, then she grew serious. “This wall of prejudice between witches and warlocks is toxic. I like to think, if we knew more about one another, if we invited each other in, that—just maybe—we could loosen the mortar on old misunderstandings. Poke a hole in the wall.”

He nodded, thoughtful. “It’s possible, I suppose. In theory. But how do you peel away generational layers of prejudice? A history lesson and a tea party aren’t going to do it. It’s inbred, in both our kind.”

“I know. Like I said, it’s exhausting.”

“You also said you couldn’t fix it.”

“Doesn’t mean I shouldn’t try. *We* shouldn’t try.” She set down her empty wineglass and stifled a yawn.

Luke upended his glass. “I’d best get home and make sure it’s still standing.”

Adeline grew still in concentration. “Can you hear that?”

He tilted his head to listen. “No. What do you hear?”

“Not in my ears—in my head. Like when you and I mind-talk.” They’d discovered that Kai’s magic had also passed along to Adeline his ability to mind-talk with Luke, and so far, only Luke. “It sounds like a child’s voice. It’s faint. She’s tired and wants to go to her bed.”

“You’ve heard her before?” he said, closing his eyes. A line formed between his brows.

“A few times. I chalked it up to more of Kai’s magic developing.”

“I’m not hearing it. Have you tried talking back?”

“Only once. But my *bello* frightened her away,” she said, rubbing her temples. “Do you know over what kind of distances you and Kai could mind-talk?”

“A few city blocks, not much more.”

“Then whoever this is, is close.”



Mind-talking, Luke knew, was a very rare ability. He and Kai had discovered it when they were children, and though they'd never met anyone else with the ability, they'd heard rumours about others like them. Now he wondered if Kai had been completely honest about only being able to mind-talk with Luke.

But it was also dangerous, an advantage best left hidden. He and Kai had never disclosed their secret, which had saved both their hides many times during the coup—at least up to the point Luke was captured and Tanner installed a magic-dampening chain around his neck that also tied his tongue. He'd still be chained, still doing Tanner's bidding, if Adeline hadn't been dropped into his orbit. He owed her his life.

"The voice may sound childlike, but it could be a trap. A warlock hunting for someone with mind-talking ability to sell off for siphoning."

"Wow. That's where your mind goes? You need a vacation."

He chuckled. "That was rather dark. It appears I've spent too much time with the dregs of warlock society."

"You're also forgetting the snow leopard you drew on my back. Your runeglyph?" Absently, she pulled her impossibly long braid over her shoulder. "If it's all you promised, I don't need to worry about siphoning."

He took in Adeline's teasing smile, the hollow at the base of her throat, the perfection of her collarbones. The grace of her every movement. He'd thought the time he'd spent away would have diminished his feelings for her, but from the moment she'd opened her door, he'd known he was in trouble.

"I'm keeping you up," he said, setting his empty glass aside. He stood and offered her his hand. She let him tug her off the sofa, and he held her there, wanting to pull her close, to know what she felt like in his arms, but instead he kissed the back of her hand.

At the front door, he turned. "I meant what I said earlier. Call me if I can help you sort out your magic. Any time. Name the place, and I'll be there."

She looked up at him, dark lashes framing sapphire-blue eyes. “I’d like that.”

Emboldened, he leaned down, his cheek nearly touching hers as he breathed in the sweet coconut scent of her hair and whispered, “Make it soon.”

The next day, while the coffee brewed, Luke stood barefoot in his rustic kitchen and gazed out at a forest of ancient trees he knew as well as his reflection. They’d been powering his magic since he’d bought the place years ago. It had been dark the night before when he’d returned from Adeline’s, and he hadn’t yet had the chance to lay eyes on them and say a proper hello.

He swung open the leaded-glass double doors, inhaling the sweet scent of the climbing roses that tumbled over arbours at the edge of the dew-dampened patio stones. He stepped outside, the slate cool underfoot. Dew lay thick on the grass beyond the patio—more moss than grass, he noted—relishing the soft touch of the earth that grounded him. He made his way into the forest and to the massive trunk of a Douglas fir. The giant tree wasn’t old growth, but at almost six feet in circumference, she was at least a hundred years old.

He walked in a circle around her trunk, weaving his hands in a familiar pattern, runecasting his magic along the forest floor, letting it encompass the nearby arbutus and red cedars. Then he swirled his hands in upward circles, pulling up the magic until it had fully scanned the precious trees for their enemies: the Douglas-fir beetle, the cedar-tree borer, and others of their ilk. Satisfying zaps signalled the harmful insects’ demise in the web of his magic.

Confident he’d banished any tiny threats, he laid a hand on the Douglas fir’s rough bark, absorbing the pulse of energy she emitted. “Any time, old girl,” he said, patting her bark before heading back to the stone cottage.

In his study, with a coffee in hand, he flipped through the mail left there by his cleaning service. Warlocks were largely traditionalists, eschewing digital correspondence in favour of embossed linen stationery for invitations and announcements of weddings, engagements, births, and mentorships. There were no such crisp linen envelopes in Luke’s stack of mail—just form

letters from local politicians, charities seeking donations, and colourful flyers from neighbourhood businesses.

It would be a long time before he'd be invited into inner warlock circles again, if ever, and he couldn't blame them. After the failed coup, Lord Tanner had ensured they witnessed Luke carrying out the lord's dirty work firsthand. He'd humiliated Luke at every turn, branding him a traitor. Reputation was one of the few things magic couldn't buy.

The apologies had gone better than he'd deserved, the forgiveness more generous than he'd hoped. He'd also helped King Lochlan rout out Tanner's cohorts—those in power who'd abused their positions and enriched themselves in the process. The king was holding them accountable, and the new lord he'd appointed to the territory, Clive Redd, was repairing the damage he'd inherited, reinstating titles and returning money and property Tanner had extorted.

Even if his friends never trusted him again, Luke took solace in seeing them whole and happy again. And he was deeply grateful to King Lochlan for believing him and releasing him from Tanner's chain. He might be ostracized by his peers, but he was also blessed: to be alive, to be in the king's favour, and to have Adeline in his corner.

Adeline. She hovered in the background of his thoughts most days, but with increasing regularity as the vitriol about a witch having warlock powers refused to fade. The simmering anger had spread to outlying territories, where unaffiliated warlocks threatened vigilante retribution. And because she bore his runeglyph on her back, the reckoning wouldn't be as easy as siphoning the magic out of her. They'd have to kill her.

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