

JASPER

“The Reckoning”

[Book 3]

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Chapter 1

Cerie was lazily enjoying the warm caress of the sun on her face as she relaxed on a lounge chair and sipped on a refreshing glass of lemonade when Cora breathlessly rushed up to her. Sliding to her knees next to the woman, she excitedly grabbed the ancient witch's forearm, causing the freshly squeezed beverage to spill out of the glass onto her hand.

"For heaven's sake, Cora," Cerie bellowed. "Whatever has gotten into you?"

"You will never believe what I just learned," Cora managed to eke out between gasps.

Impatiently grabbing a cloth napkin from a small side table, Cerie wiped the sticky liquid from her flesh while still holding the glass and snarled, "I have no doubt that you will tell me."

Ignoring the witch's irritability, Cora eagerly continued with, "I just found out that Jasper and a warlock raided the vampire castle and killed everyone in there!"

"Everyone?" Cerie said with both glee and disbelief as she repositioned herself onto her lounge chair. "All of the vampires are dead?"

“All that were there at the time,” Cora replied. “Samuel and Oscar were off with a small crew doing one of their witchy raids, but everyone else is dead.”

“How could that crazy scientist pull off something like that?” Cerie mused. Then, without waiting for Cora to reply, she added, “Did you say that he had the help of a witch?”

“Not just a witch,” the younger woman continued. “He also had an army of zombies.”

Sitting up so fast that her lemonade splashed on her just cleaned hand once again, Cerie said with a mixture of shock and disapproval, “He has teamed up with zombies? How? Why?”

Cora shrugged, “I have no idea. I am just passing on what I was told. They left the humans alone. Man, oh man, is Samuel pissed off! The humans who are allowed to leave the castle to run errands are all talking about it.”

Wearing a broad, satisfied grin, Cerie leaned back in the lounge and took on the task of wiping at the spilled beverage once again. Since it was she who spilled it this time, it was done with considerably more patience.

“I imagine Samuel is on fire with rage to discover that most of his subjects are dead,” she giggled. “It couldn’t happen to a more deserving son-of-a-bitch. I wish I was there to see it.” Then, with a heavy sigh, she added, “It is a shame they were absent at the time of the raid. I would have enjoyed imagining Oscar’s demise at the hands of those

clumsy zombies.” After a brief moment of silence while she allowed herself to imagine just that, she added, “How they managed to get the upper hand is a mystery.”

“They were not so clumsy from what I understand,” Cora informed her. “Some of them were, but a good number of them moved just like a regular human. If they had not been so grotesque looking and begun eating their kill when the battle was over, the humans would have thought them their fellow man come to join in on the fight.”

“That pesky scientist has found a way to undo the viral curse,” Cerie hissed with angst. “That should not have happened. That curse was meant to be impenetrable.”

With a look of confused concern, Cora said, “You are angry. I thought you would be happy to hear what happened to the vampires. Most of them, anyway.”

“It is a delightful bit of news,” Cerie assured her with a curt grin. “What I am not pleased with is the fact that the zombies will be free of their curse. If he can free this horde, he will eventually free them all.”

Still not understanding where Cerie was coming from with her disapproval, Cora hesitantly said, “I did not realize that you had a position where the zombies are concerned. I knew that the vampires and werewolves hated them, but not the witches.”

“Do you know the history of the zombie?” Cerie asked as she sipped on what was left of her lemonade.

“Not really,” Cora admitted. “I heard that the vampires, witches, and werewolves were cast out of an alternate dimension by a frustrated and angry king. I think his name was Landon. I do not think that’s where the zombies come from.”

“It is not,” Cerie offered. “The zombies are a product of a witch’s curse. A long, long time ago, a witch fell in love with a handsome human, named Drake. Drake dabbled in magic. She thought this endearing and did her best to assist him with his magical education. Of course, humans are not able to perform magic at the level of a true witch, but he managed to become fairly adept at a few things. Telepathy being the strongest.

“It took a considerable bit of time for the lovestruck witch to realize that Drake was in love with a human named Melissa. The snake had kept his affair with the woman secret in order to manipulate the witch into sharing and teaching as much about her craft as possible. When she finally did learn of it, she was outraged, hurt, and embarrassed. As a result, she cast a spell on him and all he held dear. She cursed them to a state of ugliness that even they found grotesque and fated them to the need for human flesh for survival.”

“But, they have poisonous venom,” Cora argued. “If she was seeking revenge for his using her, why would the witch equip him with that?”

Cerie slowly shook her head as she said, “She did not. That crafty man had learned enough to be able to teleport to the dimension that the witch had been cast from. He knelt before King Landon and begged for a reversal of her spell. Now, you must remember that the king is a very powerful warlock and takes his magic seriously. When he discovered how Drake had used the witch for information that should never have gone to him, he chastised the ugly bastard for his deceiving ways and sent him on his way.

“The foolish man was not wise enough to leave right away. He stuck around to plead just a bit more for mercy from the king. Instead of softening the king toward him, his actions angered Landon all the more. Where the witch had simply cursed Drake and his loved ones to a look so offensively nasty that they could barely stand to look at each other, the king enhanced the spell. Drake’s motor skills were impaired and he was imbued with a venom that would be transferred through a bite. This venom had the power turn the humans into abominations like himself. Those who survived being eaten ended up joining him to form a horde. Thus, increasing the number of horrifically ugly, flesh eating creatures to remind him of his actions and burdening him with their care while, little by little, their human bodies slowly deteriorated with rot.

“Realizing that Drake and his horde’s grotesqueness would be abhorred by the supernaturals who would be quick to eliminate them, he made sure that, although the venom

wouldn't turn a supernatural into a zombie, if enough of it was introduced into the system, it was capable of killing the supernatural. So, for his survival against supernaturals who were also on the king's punishment list, Drake was given the protection of a lethal venom and the ability to telepathically communicate, but his motor skills were impaired and his ability to speak vocally so that he could cast a spell was stricken from him. This was the beginning of the zombie."

"So, it was a payback for tricking the witch," Cora said with approval.

"I suppose that it was the king's way of supporting the witch he was punishing by casting her out," Cerie wistfully said. "He must still care for her just a bit."

"Is it not a bit odd that a scientist found a way to undo the spell?" Cora asked.

"More than a little odd," Cerie mused. "This scientist gives me concern. First he adjusts the vampires so that they can procreate and now this. King Landon took the vampire's ability to procreate in the womb away from them because it gave them magical powers. By taking certain privileges away from each species that he cast out of his realm, he had leveled the playing field. I can only imagine his response to it being given back to them."

"Do you think he'll find out?" Cora asked.

"Not by me," Cerie quickly said. "It is not worth the risk of contacting him."

“So, you know him? Or is it that you know of him?”

Cora asked.

Cerie gave a low chuckle, “My dear, not only was I Landon’s lover, but I am the witch that he cast into this pit of hell so long ago.”

“Really?” Cora said with surprise.

“Even more,” Cerie added, “I am the witch who cast the original spell on that bastard, Drake.”

“Surely, if the king enhanced your curse to such a degree, he has forgiven you,” Cora mused.

“I would not bet on it,” Cerie muttered. “King Landon is a complicated beast.”

Chapter 2

Lila quietly approached Jasper as he stood looking out of the window at the world beyond.

Her voice was weak and gravelly as she said, “A penny for your thoughts.”

Turning to face her, he smiled and extended an arm to her shoulders so that he could pull her close.

As she snuggled up close to him, he rested his chin on the top of her head and said, “You shouldn’t be using your voice yet. Your vocal cords need time to knit back together and heal. We’re so very lucky that Oscar did a poor job of ripping them out.”

With a sigh and a light shrug, she snuggled closer while nodding her head in agreement.

“It’s a relief to be able to speak again, I’m sure,” Jasper mused, “but it must also be very frustrating.”

“I am just thankful I wasn’t butchered any more than this,” she telepathically informed him.

“Has Ben had any luck regenerating the limbs of those poor women?” he verbally asked. When she vigorously shook her head, he added, “I don’t know what I can do for them. I’m a geneticist. Orthotics and prosthetics aren’t my field.”

“Perhaps between the two of us we can come up with something,” Ben said as he entered the room. His weary gait was all Jasper needed to see to understand the impact that

his lack of success in attempting to help his coven victims was having.

“How many of them are pregnant?” Jasper asked.

With a scowl of disappointment mixed with anger, Ben replied with, “All of them.”

“Damn!” Jasper said. “I need to study the children as soon as possible to stop them from becoming vampires. I can’t do that and work on a solution for the butchered women as well.”

“Butchered women,” Ben said with disgust. “It sounds so cold, yet that is what they are.”

“I didn’t mean to sound apathetic about their plight,” Jasper quickly interjected with an apologetic tone. “I’m feeling a bit overwhelmed and it’s surfacing in odd ways.”

“We need to make a list of priorities,” Ben offered. “We still need serum for the rest of the zombies. I’m anticipating the wolves will be coming our way soon.”

Looking down at Lila, Jasper compassionately asked, “Are you up to being my assistant again?”

Eagerly nodding, Lila’s eyes showed her enthusiasm as she sent the telepathic message, *“I need something to keep me busy. What do you want me to do?”*

“I have recorded the formula for the zombie’s serum in my journal. Do you think you can make a few batches of it and administer it to the rest of them?” he asked.

Her eyes went wide with surprise as she asked, *“On my own?”*

“You’re fully capable,” Jasper firmly said.

“*You’ve never given me an assignment like this to do on my own,*” she mused. “*It just surprised me.*”

“When do you think she will be able to talk?” Ben asked. “My witches can’t communicate telepathically yet. They won’t until more of their magic returns.”

“Are their babies syphoning it from the womb?” Jasper asked.

Surprised by his question, Ben asked, “How did you know?”

Pursing his lips in thought, Jasper said, “Just a guess.”

“Well, it was a good one,” Ben said. “Is there a way to stop that? With those fetus’ constantly robbing them of what little magic they manage to regenerate, they’re left weak and unable to properly heal. I think that if they had their magic back, they’d be better able to accept the energy I’m sending forth to their limbs in hope of them regrowing.”

“Is that a thing?” Jasper asked. “I mean, have you reproduced lost limbs via magic before?”

Ben shook his head. “Sadly, I never had an occasion to try.” Then, after a brief moment of silence he added, “I want to revisit our neighboring coven. I haven’t given up on them. Once they hear about our victory at the castle, I’m hoping they’ll change their minds and join us. With their added magic, I believe I can help our girls.” Looking directly at Lila, he said, “That’s why I asked when you could speak. I’ll need

you to tend to them. Since they're unable to give or receive telecommunication, you'll need to be able to speak."

"I can speak if I need to," Lila scratched out.

"Give her a few more days," Jasper said with conviction. "I worry about permanent damage if she tries to use them too soon."

Ben nodded, "Understood."

Jasper found Ben sitting beneath the thick gnarled branch of an ancient oak tree. His face was lifted toward the full moon as he bathed in its bright light.

"Am I disturbing anything?" he asked as he squatted on his heels a few feet away.

With a slow shake of his head, Ben slowly opened his eyes and rotated his shoulders.

"I often get ideas when sitting in the moonlight," Ben softly said. "I was hoping..."

"I came up with one," Jasper interrupted. "It's not fool proof, but I think it is worth a try."

"We're talking about the witches, right?" Ben hesitantly asked.

"We are," Jasper said with a nod.

With a thin smile, Ben filled his lungs with air and said, "I'm all ears."

“Even though the babies haven’t shown vampire traits yet, they were sired by vampires,” Jasper began. “I think we should try taking their blood and introducing it to the mothers. It might do the trick.”

Ben knit his brows together in thought. “I’m not sure I’m following you. Do you want to turn the witches into vampires?”

Jasper vigorously shook his head.

“Absolutely not,” he said with an involuntary shudder. “My hope is that the blood of the birthed infants will contain enough magic to speed up the rejuvenation process.”

“So, the witch will have had to have given birth,” Ben mused.

“True, but if this works, she will not have to wait for the magic to slowly return,” Jasper offered. “From what I’ve witnessed and what Lila told me, they’re almost at empty by the time they give birth.” Then, as an afterthought, he added, “Let’s not forget that the vampires were draining them through sex as well as the draw from the fetus. They got double whammed. Now, with the vampires out of the picture, they stand a better chance of rejuvenation once we get their magic levels up a bit more.”

“It might work,” Ben said. “The challenge will be to get them to let us do it. Their fear of it failing and them becoming vampires will be a strong one, I’m sure.”

“I ran it past Lila and she’s willing to be our test subject,” Jasper offered. “I really feel that it will help.”

“Her child is older,” Ben mused.

“He’s also been fed vampire blood,” Jasper said. “I think he’ll be the perfect doner.”

“You feel strongly about this, then?” Ben asked.

Even though Jasper had already made it clear that he believed it was the solution to speeding up the return of the witch’s magic, Ben needed to hear him say it one more time.

“I wish it would work on those who are still carrying,” Jasper said. “It might, but we need to try it on someone who has delivered first.”

“And Lila is willing,” Ben softly said, more to himself than to Jasper. “She’s already on her way to recovery. This is quite a risk if it backfires.”

With a look of pride, Jasper said, “She’s a true scientist.”

“And a brave one,” Ben mused. “You have taught her a good deal, I think.”

“As have you,” Jasper replied.

Ben shook his head and grinned.

“I fear her magical skills pale in comparison to her science,” he said, “but, please don’t tell her I said that.”

Jasper gave a light laugh. “I believe she is aware of that fact.”

“I don’t blame her,” Ben said. “Given time, she could catch up with the others. She joined late in life. Therefore, her training is lacking.”

“Well, I think you will rectify that once her magic is at full capacity and this is all over,” Jasper said with confidence.

After a long moment of silence, Ben said in a voice just above a whisper, “You do know that I love her, don’t you?”

Jasper gave a slight nod. “It’s hard not to love someone like her. She’s a rare gift.”

“She’s in love with you,” Ben said with a tone that radiated sadness.

“Is she?” Jasper asked with raised brow. Then, as if suddenly remembering that this was fact he said, “Yes, yes she is.”

Ben scoffed and shook his head while saying, “Sometimes I wonder what goes on in that head of yours, my man.”

Jasper shrugged his shoulders as he said with mild chagrin, “Sometimes I wonder myself.”

