



OATHBOUND

BOOK THREE IN THE LEGENDBORN CYCLE

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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OATHBOUND

BOOK THREE IN **THE LEGENDBORN CYCLE**

TRACY DEONN

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For the girls who face the unknown... and leap anyway



PROLOGUE

WHAT MUST BE DONE

I

THE SHADOW KING could destroy me.

I can feel it. When the ancient demon's magic swallows us both, I sense my own ruin, but there is nothing I can do to stop it.

His swirling black wisps tighten like a fist around my rib cage, then... *pain*. Squeezing, crushing, breath-stealing pain.

On the grassy hill above the Northern Chapter's Keep, his myrrh-and-sap-scented smoke turns opaque, obscuring my view of Nick running to stop us. The King's magic billows, until all I can see is Nick's aether armor glinting in the sun. His outstretched hand. His blue eyes burning for battle. My final memory of the Keep is Nick, fighting to keep me safe.

There have been so many fights and losses, just to *keep me safe*.

Volition, a haven destroyed because I took shelter on its ancestral grounds. Lu, Hazel, and Mariah's Rootcrafter refuge, compromised because they offered me sanctuary. Alice, in a coma after I struck her down in the throes of possession. Selwyn, succumbed to demonia after consuming my power to bring me back to myself. And Nick, risking his life by returning to the very same Order that sent Merlin assassins to kill him. Too many fights. Too many losses.

The King grasps my hand.

"I'm sorry," I say to Nick, to everyone, to myself.

I avoided Nick before I climbed the hill because if anyone could stop me from leaving, it would be him. Nick's eyes see too much, too clearly, and always have. He would offer understanding when I don't want to be understood.

Not for this.

I whisper, “Please know that I—”

Then, we are traveling through shadows.



Blackness surrounds us in thick, inky streams. My body *knows* we are moving. I feel the leaps across space. Sometimes, when slivers open wide enough in the whirling dark, I glimpse visions of terrifying places—blackened fields burning under a darkened sky, miles and miles of gravestones at night, the deepest parts of the ocean—before the cyclone closes again. My stomach lurches when the world reappears, and twists when it is gone.

This is what it means to travel through shadows, I think—before I begin to suffocate.

In this here-and-there vortex, there is no air. I wonder if I might die before I’ve even begun this new life.

No.

The thought sharpens my oxygen-deprived mind. I clench the hard hilt of Excalibur to my side.

I will not die here.

How much time has passed? Seconds? Minutes? I don’t know.

Then suddenly, without warning, we land.

My knees buckle, hitting cold white marble. My grip loosens; Excalibur clatters to the floor. The sharp scent of cleaning supplies catches in the back of my throat, and I cough. Wheeze out a curse. Gasp for air. Try to get my bearings.

We are in a long, empty, windowless corridor inside a building I don’t recognize. Coughing still, I raise my watery vision to the mass of smoke before me. Where a face might be are obsidian eyes with shining crimson centers. A demon so strong that this close, even his casual scrutiny sears my skin.

The Shadow King, inhuman.

While he observes the messy humanity of me panting and clammy on the floor, I notice a tendril of dusk has wrapped itself around the security camera mounted on the

wall behind him, blocking the lens. Wherever we are, the Shadow King has already ensured that our presence will go undetected.

The black cloud draws my attention again. It churns slowly, then melts, then hardens into the familiar, solid form of Erebus Varelian, Mage Seneschal at Arms of the High Council of the Order of the Round Table.

Erebus watches me with a single brow raised and both hands clasped at his belt. His eyes are now those of a middle-aged Merlin's: heart-blood red with human black pupils. His thick raven hair is perfectly combed back in the Mageguard undercut, and a dark overcoat lies flat on his shoulders, draping down his torso to his knees.

This is the man who fooled the world's most powerful and ancient secret society into believing he was one of them, for who knows how long. Even now the Order believes Erebus to be their highest-ranked, most loyal Merlin soldier. Only he and I know the truth—that he is the Order's greatest enemy. And only *we* know that I, the Order's own Crown Scion and king, have left the Round Table to become his pupil.

My next inhale is a shaky one. *What have I done?*

"Can you walk?" When Erebus speaks, his voice is low and unimpressed. The deferential respect he showed when we first met is absent.

"Why did you," I croak, "take me before I could—"

"And what would you have said to Nicholas Davis," Erebus murmurs, his expression unreadable, "had I not traveled you away?"

My mind flashes to those final images again. Nick's armor. His hand. His eyes. His fingertips straining to meet mine. Our call and response, left unfinished. I grit my teeth. "None of your business."

Erebus's brow lifts. "Then I was right to remove you when I did."

"What does *that* mean?"

"If Nicholas Davis had touched you, he would not have let you go." Erebus's lips purse. "He will be a nuisance enough as it is."

Fear is a quiet, cold trickle inside my chest. The High Council of Regents wants Nick dead because they can't control him; my absence won't change that. I rise to my feet. "Nuisance?"

Something cruel flickers through the Seneschal's gaze. "Once he recovers from the shock of your disappearance, whom do you think Nicholas will pursue first? You... or

Selwyn?”

My stomach dips. I don't have an answer, but I know I don't *want* Nick to look for me.

Erebus chuckles at my silence. “In either case, the boy will be chasing ghosts: I will ensure that no one finds you, and Selwyn is a lost cause.”

That quiet fear doubles. I asked Erebus to take Sel to his mother in the hope that she could reverse his descent into demonia, but even the king of demons could not guarantee that Natasia Kane could save her son. Sel trusted me to control Arthur, and because I trusted *myself* in a moment when I shouldn't have, he sacrificed his humanity to save me.

My breath hitches and my eyes burn. It's done. It's all *done*, and nothing can change it.

I swallow hard and meet Erebus's gaze with a fierce one of my own. “I think Nick will pursue *you*. He saw you, after all. Saw *Erebus* take me away.”

Erebus's facial features fade in his brown skin until they become gray mist. Until he is not Erebus, not the King, not *anyone*, exactly. A shadow in the shape of a man.

“Did he, now?”

My heart stutters at the reminder that Erebus is a face the King *chooses*.

I wasn't looking at the Shadow King in that final moment on the hill; I was looking at Nick. The King can mimic the identity of an endless number of murdered victims. Unlike part-demon, part-human cambions, full demons like him don't *possess* humanity; they steal it. They kill us, then wear us. Like clothing.

Bile rises in my throat. “If Nick saw you like this, then who does he think I left with?”

“No one, I suppose. Or anyone.” The King's body shudders. Now in place of Erebus's figure is a tall, narrow-faced person I don't recognize, with pale, freckled skin and gray-and-brown-streaked hair.

Fear and horror take a back seat to the anger that roils up from my gut. “Do you even remember the name of the human whose face you're wearing?”

“His name was not important,” he replies in this new body's voice. Without another word, the Shadow King turns on his heel to stride down the corridor in long, swift steps. When he is not waving gloomy wisps at cameras ahead of him, his hands are shoved into deep pockets.

I scramble after him, grasping Excalibur to carefully rest it at my hip, pointing the blade down and back. I really should have found a scabbard before leaving. “Where are

we?”

Erebus the Seneschal would have answered his Crown Scion’s question, but this demon is not that Erebus, and I am not his Crown Scion. Those were just the masks we wore—and his always fit better than mine.

I am the Bloodcrafted descendant of King Arthur. I am a Rootcrafter and Legendborn, or I *was* before I deserted both groups. Now I am the Shadow King’s bloodmarked *investment*. I am a power source that I’ve asked him to teach and help grow, even as he plans to use my power to eventually help him triumph over the Order we both despise. With him, I will become a weapon—one he will wield when I am strong enough.

I have a feeling the Shadow King won’t let me forget that in leaving with him, I chose *this* identity—that of a weapon—above all others.

The King’s demon feet make no sound, but my human ones do. The soft brown boots Greer found and left in my room at Northern create a shuffling noise as my strides lengthen to keep up with his. Greer had also left a pair of loose jeans and a band T-shirt; their clothes, I think. I wonder if I’ll be able to find more wherever we end up, or if this will be it. Perhaps I should have packed a bag and not just a sword.

Ahead, the Shadow King turns a sharp left and pushes through a door. I follow, struck mid-thought by the brightly lit room we’ve just entered—and its contents.

On either side of the King’s direct path through the room lie Egyptian sarcophagi behind large glass display cases. With a flick of his wrist, the King obscures the cameras mounted evenly along the high ceiling. I call out to him. “Where—”

The King’s new voice reaches me as he walks. “The British Museum.”

“In *London*?” I squeak.

When I look at the sarcophagus in front of me with fresh eyes, a quiet sense of injustice creeps through the dissipating fog of surprise. According to the white placard at the base of the case, I’m looking at a young woman who lived in Thebes in 800 BCE. The beige, yellow, and red paint illustrate her face across the wooden casket—and I’m reminded sharply of another young woman who would not wake. Alice. I breathe through the clawing memory, the guilt. Shuttle them both away.

This shouldn’t be her resting place, I think. Not stuck here behind glass in collectors’ hands. This isn’t where her people imagined she’d be. My fingertips itch to touch the

sarcophagus to see if the girl's spirit lies awake inside. It's a Medium's instinct. One I'm not even sure I can act on after what I've done to my ancestral stream—

The King clears his throat by a door at the far end of the gallery. I shift the heavy length of Excalibur to my other hip and jog to join him. The door is labeled CURATORS ONLY. When I reach his side, he holds out a hand. For a moment, I am confused.

“The sword, Briana.”

I grasp the hilt in my fist. “It's mine.”

It's the wrong thing to say.

He hisses, lips pulling back. “You have no *authority* here, girl.” His voice turns harsh and otherworldly. “No court of children to kneel for you, no Regents to scramble over your lineage. You are not the *Crown Scion* in *my* presence. And if I choose, I will take the sword Caledfwlch by *force*.”

A raw, primordial terror streaks through me. Every instinct inside me screams that the Shadow King is far, far more powerful than the Merlin he pretends to be. That he is far stronger even than the goruchel mimic demons the Legendborn Order most fears. That his true demonic nature is unknowable and hidden and older than the oldest mountains. He just whisked me across the planet, bending space and light and matter to his will... but I chose this. I can't let him bend me, too.

“I need it—” I begin.

“For what reason?” he snaps.

Strength. Power. Control. They are what I need more than anything. They will make the running worth it. And now that I have reforged Excalibur, it is more my weapon than ever.

“For training.” I lift my chin, set my jaw. “As Erebus, you train Merlins and command the Mageguard. As the Shadow King, you've seen every Camlann, every demon uprising, and every Legendborn victory. As the Hunter, you've watched every woman in my family since Vera. You know what we're capable of.”

“All true.”

“You agreed to teach me,” I say. “And I'm ready to learn. We have a bargain.”

The corners of his lips curl upward. “An *unregulated* bargain.”

I narrow my eyes. An unregulated bargain, made without a third-party broker, is something I am very familiar with. "It may have been unregulated, but I made my terms clear."

"*Your* terms were clear." His face shifts to Erebus's once more. "But mine were not."

My breath catches.

"Did Valechaz never explain the anatomy of a demon bargain to you?" He circles me slowly, expression amused, and tuts softly. "That is unfortunate."

The furnace in my chest opens without my permission. My root, rising to meet a threat. "Valec taught me plenty," I respond. "Unregulated bargains make it easy for demons to claim whatever they wish from a human, but I told you *exactly* what I'd be willing to do and what I needed from you. I agreed to go with you and stay by your side if you took Sel to his mother. Our bargain is negotiated and complete."

He continues as if I'd never spoken.

"For each demand made in a bargain, the opposing party has the right to make a demand in return. As a broker of repute, Valechaz regulates such bargains to ensure that every demand has been addressed and accepted, thus allowing the bargainers to close on equal footing. This regulation *is* critical, because unless and until *every* demand is addressed and accepted, the bargain cannot be closed at all."

My heart freezes in my chest. "Meaning?"

"Meaning the party who has yet to state their requirements at the time of closing walks away with an open, unfulfilled debt." He smiles. "An 'I owe you,' if you will."

"No." Fear kicks my heart into a sprint. "I... we—"

"You said you would go with me and stay by my side if I performed a single favor, and yet you made not one but *two* demands of me, Briana." He holds one finger up. "The first, that I take Selwyn to his mother. You said, 'If you take him to her, I will go with you.'"

I glower at him. "I know what I said—"

"But do you *remember* what you said?" His voice turns derisive. "What you demanded *before* you asked me to transport one Kane to another?"

"What other—"

"You demanded my *knowledge*. You want to learn strength, power, and control. 'Only a king may teach a king.'"

Blood drains from my face. Pools in my stomach in a dizzyingly cold vortex.

“Two demands, and only one fulfilled. You owe me, Briana.” His smile spreads. “We are as good as Oathbound, you and I.”

“No, I... I...” I flounder.

“*Yes.*”

“It was... a bargain—”

“What is a bargain if not an oath? And what is an oath if not a promise with a price? Call these what you will. All are cut from the same cloth—a cloth woven of intention, will, and sacrifice. Your power is bound by my bloodmark. Your death is bound to my triumph. And *you* are bound to me by your very own words.” The Shadow King drops both hands into his pockets. “If I am not able to name my return for educating and training you, then we are out of balance, and the deal can be struck in its entirety.”

“Then don’t teach me! I’ll... I’ll learn on my own,” I say, even as I don’t mean it. Even as I know *he* knows I don’t mean it. That I *can’t* learn on my own. That I’ve already tried—and failed.

Instead of saying what we both know to be true, his voice grows quiet. A whispered threat. “You do not wish to see what happens when you break a fair bargain with a demon, Briana Matthews.”

My chest heaves as I search for the cold disconnect I’d found on the hill at Northern. The confidence. I can’t find it. “This isn’t *fair*—”

“It *will* be fair when your debt is paid. If it is not, you will be in breach, and your breach will earn my vengeance *tenfold*.” He steps closer, fangs glinting in the light. “First, I will see to it that Selwyn Kane dies. Next, a Mageguard will slit Alice Chen’s throat while she sleeps. And *Erebus* will be certain to carry out the Regents’ plan to murder Nicholas Davis.”

Each threat wraps my throat. I can’t breathe. Can’t finish a single thought, ears *ringing*—

He leans in to whisper the next words: “Or perhaps I will simply suggest to Aldrich that if we wish to draw you out from wherever you’ve run away to, perhaps your father, Edwin’s, life is not the too risky leverage I once thought it to be....”

I suck in a breath. My father is innocent in all this. He knows nothing about who I really am. “What. Do. You. *Want.*”

All humor leaves his face. “Something that will cost you dearly to surrender. A price that I will reveal when the time is right, and not before.”

I shut my eyes. Living in unknowable debt to the Shadow King, for as long as he wishes, is worse than destruction.

“In the meantime,” he murmurs, “you *will* give me Excalibur of your own volition.”

There is no other choice.

Abruptly, I think of Nick again. He’d blood walked with me to the sixth-century origins of Legendborn power. Together, we’d watched the original Merlin cast the Spell of Eternity upon the original knights of the Round Table, initiating the cycle that allowed those knights’ descendants—their Scions—to inherit their ancestors’ magical gifts from one generation to the next. The core of the Spell is tied to my life as the Scion of Arthur, and being born the Scion of Arthur is what allowed me to pull Excalibur from its stone. After everything we’ve witnessed together, I wonder what Nick would say about me handing the symbol of the Order to its greatest enemy. Would he understand? Or would he want me to fight to keep it? Fight to make the blade my own?

Finally, I raise Excalibur by its hilt. An offering.

The King tugs the sword from my grip, and a high-pitched, metallic whine zips through my mind when it leaves my fingers. My eyes snap open. I have heard Excalibur’s war cry, but nothing so mournful as this.

As the King hefts the blade beneath his arm, his Erebus identity melts away until he is the freckled nameless man once more. He knocks twice on the door behind him.

After a moment, a muffled voice responds, growing louder as its speaker approaches. “When will you interns *learn*?” The door cracks open to reveal a narrow-shouldered white man in a pale blue button-down. “If you continue to disturb me, I’ll—”

“You’ll what, Agaraz?” the Shadow King challenges in a low, crackling voice.

The man’s eyes widen. “Sire!” He drops to one knee. “I did not recognize—I was not expecting you.”

“Rise,” the King commands. Agaraz moves to his feet in a smooth, single motion, as if his limbs are attached to strings that have been pulled all at once. Goruchel. The third I’ve met after Rhaz and Kizia. At my gasp, Agaraz’s head whips around, his gaze burning my cheeks. He tilts his head curiously before he inhales, slow and intentional, in my direction. The King releases a long-suffering sigh. “I need your assistance with a blade.”

“Yes, of course, sire.” Agaraz’s eyes are drawn to Excalibur as the King walks past him into a dim room lit by a banker’s lamp on a wooden desk. Before Agaraz moves to follow, his gaze finds me again. The open hunger on the goruchel’s face startles me. The door closes shut.

I listen for voices behind the door but hear nothing. Even if Excalibur remains here in the museum, that doesn’t mean I can get to it. Are we staying here or returning to the States? If we return, how would I travel this far on my own?

My hands begin to shake as the threats the King so quickly offered settle deeper beneath my skin. I thought we were on equal footing of a sort, but I have already been outmaneuvered. My eyes are hot with sudden, embarrassed tears. Why did I think I could outsmart an ancient demon older than the Order itself?

Valec would have instantly known that my bargain with the King was incomplete. Alice would have stopped us to ask questions. But Valec isn’t here right now, and Alice isn’t even *conscious*. And Selwyn... Sel would have physically torn me away before negotiations ever began.

What have you done? I flinch at the memory of Sel’s last words to me.

His contempt joins my own. *What have I done?*

My breath speeds. With each exhale, a wisp of red root flows from my mouth, floating toward the ceiling before it dissipates. I have breathed fire before, but this feels like breathing misery instead.

Abruptly, the door opens, and the King returns empty-handed. He pauses, nose raised to the air. The red root is gone, but I’m sure the scent of it remains.

“You already took one of my weapons. Will you take my root now too?” I ask. “Lock me away by keeping me weak?”

The King looks pointedly at the museum exhibits behind me before returning my gaze. “Greedy men collect what they cannot understand, and weak men destroy what they cannot control. A man who is both will attempt to recreate that which is beyond his comprehension, obliterating the original in the process.”

I remember the dead girl in the sarcophagus and eye him warily. “What do demons do?”

“I will build you into a girl whom no one can destroy. You won’t need a weapon. You’ll become one.” The King wraps his fist around my elbow, squeezing tight, cloaking

us in the tendrils of his power.

“Deep breath, Briana.”

I do as I’m told, and we slip through space once more.

II

THIS TIME WHEN we travel, each leap to a new shadowy location is accompanied by a squeezing sensation. As if my very atoms are being forced into new spaces, pressing me into something too tight, too dangerous. I see ruins under a moonlit sky, the thickest underbrush of a towering forest, the arctic under never-ending night.

When we land, I collapse to my knees once more, but this time on a foyer floor laid with red brick. We are surrounded by white plastered walls. To my left, a small entryway table is tucked below a gilded mirror. Ahead is a living room where brown wingback chairs sit on a thick, expensive-looking rug set before a stone fireplace. Wherever we are, afternoon light filters in through the stained-glass window in the heavy oak front door behind me to create a collage of color. The foyer walls are bathed in deep goldens, warm blues, and burnt sienna nearing orange. It was the end of the day in London, so maybe we are back on the East Coast? And Excalibur is thousands of miles away.

The Shadow King moves around to block my view into the rest of the home—the large living space, the hallways to my left and right.

I stand, exasperated. “*Now* where are we?”

As if in answer, his body changes shape again, to Erebus once more. “This is Erebus’s home.”

I hate myself for finding this face, this voice, the barest hint of comfortable. I tell myself it’s because I know Erebus, but that’s not really true, is it? “What I know” feels like sand sifting through open fingers.

“Did you murder him, too?”

“Yes.”

“How long have you been impersonating this Merlin named Erebus? How long have you been living his life?” I ask.

“Long enough,” he replies.

I stare at him, gathering my thoughts. “Erebus” is the nickname that Natasia Kane gave him at the Merlin academy... but was that nickname earned by the *demon* who stands beside me now, or is it yet another story stolen from the Merlin boy whose life had been cut short? “How long did the academy’s instructors unknowingly teach and train humanity’s greatest threat?”

His mouth twitches in a small, appreciative smile. “You are asking good questions, Briana.”

“I don’t want your approval,” I spit back.

“Nor will you easily earn it. Wait here.” After drawing the flickering darkness toward him, Erebus disappears in a gust of smoke.

He could be across the world again for all I know. In another country, several time zones away, or even back with the Regents, pretending to be their Seneschal.

After a moment, the room’s shadows relax and melt back into place, taking the shapes of their parent objects until they are still. The only thing moving in this entire room is my chest, rising up and down with my jagged breaths.

I don’t know how long I stand there waiting for Erebus to return. Long enough that the light changes around me, making new shapes against the plastered walls. Long enough for the faint ticking of a grandfather clock standing tall in a corner to grow loud in my ears. Long enough for regret and uncertainty to make themselves known in my chest. For me to wonder if, in choosing my own fate, I have doomed myself to a worse one.

How long have I been waiting again? I check the clock. Too long.

I take a step forward, half expecting my new mentor to reappear at my elbow at the unauthorized exploratory movement. He does not. I take another step, then another, until I am standing in the center of the living room and able to examine the details of the home more thoroughly.

For the home of a demon king, it is all rather... innocuous: High archways lead from the main space to other halls and rooms. A partially enclosed kitchen sits to the left. Brown built-in shelves on either side of the fireplace hold five rows of leather-bound

books that remind me of the rare book collection at the Lodge library, except these look like they are better cared for. There are no picture frames of people, but the home does not feel abandoned. The mantel is spotless, without a speck of dust, and the lampshades are equally clean.

Is this where Erebus will leave me until he decides I am ready to be trained? For how long, I wonder? Days? Weeks? *Months*? Mild panic sets in, enough that I mistake the tingling sensation at the nape of my neck for nerves instead of what it truly is.

When the sensation doubles, any doubt is erased.

I am being watched by a demon.

I inhale silently. Shove the panic aside and prepare for a fight. Rather than allowing my breath to become shallow, I take in steady, long draws of oxygen to fuel my muscles and brain. Feel the familiar heat of my root deep behind my sternum. Feel Arthur's strength in my body and remember that it's mine, not his.

My eyes dart to the hearth near my left foot. That wrought iron fireplace poker will do.

Slowly, I pivot on my heel to face the room—and come face-to-face with a Black girl my age with long, thick twists down her back. She wears a thin-strapped black tank top, tight black jeans, elbow-length fingerless fishnet gloves, and a Cheshire smile. Her makeup looks fresh. Dark, smoky eye shadow and liner, deep eggplant lipstick, a soft pink blush on high, warm brown cheekbones. She could be equally at home at a coffee shop or a concert. Hers is the dynamic type of beauty that's equally as powerful at rest as it is in motion.

And everything about her posture—her flexed fingers, her eager grin—feels poised for a fight.

Her eyes are a deep human brown, so at first, I question my own senses, my own paranoia. Then that smile widens, and her irises flash red before flickering back to brown. Then I know—she is not a goruchel demon, whose eyes are either deep red or the eye color of the human body they've taken. Not a *mostly* human Merlin with a golden or ochre gaze, but a balanced cambion with human and demon parentage like Valechaz. Which means she could be my age... or she could be hundreds of years old.

Perhaps traveling with the king of demons himself has made me immune to regular fear, because a balanced cambion should *terrify* me. Instead, I feel cold, like when I left

Alice. Like when I stood on the hill at the Keep. Like there is nothing this moment can take from me that I have not already given up.

The cold is what I need right now.

“Who are you?” I ask as I edge closer to the fireplace.

“I’m Zoelle,” she purrs. “Who are *you*?”

The iron poker is at my hip. Blood walking through left-handed Arthur’s memories has made *my* left hand more adept than it used to be, enough that I’ll be able to grab the iron with confidence. Which means my right will be for wielding root. That will have to work, because I don’t plan on letting Zoelle get close. If she gets her hands on me, I won’t beat her by grappling; cambions are too strong.

I try one more maneuver before this gets ugly. “Erebus brought me here. He won’t want me harmed.”

“He did, did he?” Zoelle looks me over once, up and down, eyes landing on my sternum. “Brought you here with all *that* power?” She grins. “I bet it’s delicious.”

“You *really* didn’t have to say that,” I reply with a grimace.

“Why not?” Her eyes sparkle. “Is it true?”

Instead of answering, I fling my palm outward, firing root flame in a short blast.

She flattens to the ground. “Hey!”

I use the distraction to grab the iron—but before I can swing it, a green fireball appears, cracking open in front of my face, startling me back.

That was an aether bomb. I never even saw her forge it.

I need more room.

I dash in front of the fireplace—and Zoelle’s hand shoots out to wrap around my ankle. She yanks me down. When I hit the ground, the pointy end of the fallen iron poker grazes my cheek.

A few inches over, and it’d have punctured my right eye.

I growl, twist, then thrust my flaming palm in her face. She screams.

While she writhes, I pop up. I need to get outside. *Now*.

I sprint across the floor. Aim for the back doors. Abruptly, a body blurs between me and the exit, stopping me short.

“Where you goin’?” a deep voice asks.