

VIOLET IN THE DARK

*My hold on reality blurs as the outside world becomes fuzzy
and distant.*

*A heavy pressure squeezes my body like I'm being forced into a
tiny box.*

Fear prickles through me...

I don't want to go...I push against the darkness.

I don't want to die.

CHAPTER 1



VIVIAN

PUFFY, over-stuffed storm clouds moved across the sun, throwing a shadow over the lake that made gooseflesh rise on my skin. The surface of the water shifted from a calm sapphire blue to a dark midnight black. This battle was far from over. The wind picked up, rustling the hair off my face as Robert's eyes searched for his Violet.

"L.. it's too hard-" Violet's words were barely a whisper in my head as the sensation of her essence faded into the background. She should have died upon waking me, but still she held on. What strength she must have to accomplish such a feat.

"It's really you, Milady?" Robert said, clearing his throat. A sharp pain shuttered through my heart as Violet's emotions warred within me. Robert looked as if someone had let the air out of him as his eyes traced my face. Realization dawning on him that Violet was no longer the woman standing before him.

"Yes. Violet succeeded in her quest to wake me," I supplied.

“I thought... I didn’t realize...” his Adam’s apple bobbed up and down as he let out a shaky breath.

“That I’d take on the body of The Waker,” I supplied. It’s an unfortunate part of the process that always leaves loved ones confused and feeling betrayed. “Your Violet is strong and though I don’t know how she’s survived, she has.” I tried my best to reassure him again.

“How can I be sure you’re telling the truth?” His fingers twitched like he wanted to touch me but thought better of it.

“You’re bonded, are you not?” I asked him as an unfamiliar thrill of Magic unfurled in the pit of my stomach.

His eyes widen for a fraction of a second. Surprise washed across his face that I was aware of their connection.

“We are,” he blurted, composing himself.

“You understand, your *Artognou Magic* can only be accessed if both parties are alive?” I asked.

Understanding flickered across his features as he squared his shoulders. He held my gaze and his fingers curled into a fist as I waited to feel the connection between them.

“I see,” Robert said.

I’d met bonded pairs before and been close to their Magic on numerous occasions, but I’ve never experienced the raw, unbound nature of the bond for myself.

The wind rustled my hair as the tall grass moved against my trousers. Gooseflesh crawled across my skin as every nerve in my body fired at once.

The raw, untamed Magic poured through me, taking my breath away. It was unlike anything I’d ever experienced before, warm, powerful and hungry. It tasted like pure freedom.

Robert took a step toward me and reached for my hand; Violet let him take my fingers as another wave of energy pulsed through me at his touch. The heat began to crawl up my skin from where his hand held mine and Violet’s strength pushed me toward him.

"Violet," he breathed. "Don't give up." His thumb traced a circle on the back of my hand.

"I won't," She replied. Violet's words pierced through my head as if she was standing right next to me.

Tearing my hand from his grasp I tapped into my Magic shutting them out and fortifying my claim on this body.

My stomach turned as Violet faded into the background once more. I hated silencing her, but there was much to be done and I couldn't afford the distraction.

This will be rather interesting, I thought, as another sharp pain flashed across my chest.

"Your bond is young, untested," I said keeping my Magic close to the surface. "But strong."

A heaviness settled over my heart as Violet's spirits fell.

"Forgive me, milady." Robert inclined his head as the last shred of their Magic dissipated within me.

"There's no need to stand on ceremony, Vivian will do."

Robert squeezed his eyes closed and exhaled, "Will Violet make it out of this?"

I studied the sharp edge of his jaw, the tension in his shoulders, uncertain of what I should tell him. Not a single person had survived this long, but the reality of her death, while she was still so close, would be too hard for him to accept. That much I knew from experience.

Robert opened his mouth to speak but was cut off by someone yelling his name.

"Robert! Oh, thank God, I was worried you..." a woman came to a stop next to him, her brow furrowing as she took in the pained look on his face. "What's wrong? Did you guys find The Lady?" She turned to look at me and her eyes widened.

"Violet?" She squared her shoulders as her eyes held mine.

"Brett, meet The Lady of the Lake," Robert motioned between Brett and myself.

Brett's head swiveled to look at Robert and she whispered, "What happened?"

Sparks danced up and down my fingers as my eyes caught three figures jogging across the open field toward us. "Do they belong to you as well?" I asked, taking a step forward.

"Yes," Brett shouted, "There's no need for your defenses." Her eyes fell to my hands and I let the Magic die with one last crackle.

"Whoa, what's with the *X-Men* eyes, Violet?" One of the men joked with a playful smile.

"Ethan." The woman who shared his features nodded her head toward Brett and Robert.

Brett shot him a warning glance and he looked at me and Robert.

"Allow me to introduce myself," I started. "The title you'll know me by is The Lady of the Lake, but you may call me Vivian."

"This is a joke, right?" The bronzed skinned woman looked at Robert for confirmation.

He folded his arms over his chest, and without looking at me, he said, "I'm afraid she speaks the truth, Elodie."

"But Violet? I mean, is she...?" The tall, broad shoulder man asked.

"Jake," Brett scolded the man.

"In my experience," I interjected. "The host is destroyed upon my entry, but Violet has survived within this body."

Everyone looked at each other, fidgeting and trying not to stare as I spoke.

"And Morgana?" Jake asked.

"She's escaped, for now." Anger bloomed in my chest, hot and furious.

"We need to get out of here before they regroup," Brett said.

"Where's Lila and Annabel?" Jake asked.

"Lila didn't make it," Robert said.

Again, Violet's emotions bubbled to the surface and guilt pierced through me.

"I'm sorry, brother, Lila was complicated, but I know you cared for her."

"Jake, there's something you need to know about Annabel." Robert's voice broke and he couldn't meet his brother's eyes.

"Not here," Brett grabbed Robert's arm.

"Putting it off, won't make it any easier." Robert whirled on Brett. "He should know."

Jake's eyes darted between Robert and Brett. "Tell me," he demanded.

"Annabel." Robert closed the gap between him and Jake and placed a hand on his brother's shoulder. "She's gone."

"What're you — no." Jake shook his head and stepped away from Robert.

"She's been gone a long time," Robert continued. "Since the day Ian took her."

"No, no, we got her back, we saved her." Jake's brow furrowed and his hands balled into fists.

"The woman parading as your wife showed us her true form and killed Lila right in front of us," Robert's voice was devoid of emotion.

A flash of a memory skirted through my mind. A blonde woman shifting into a redhead. A blade across another woman's neck and Violet's hands covered in the victim's blood as she held her.

Brett stepped forward like she was approaching a wild animal and said, "Ian told us, our Annabel, the real Annabel," she hesitated. "Was killed by his hand the day he took her."

"No," Jake argued. "Why would they take her, if they were just going to kill her, why? It doesn't make sense," he yelled at no one in particular.

"I don't—"

"You're wrong," Jake growled at Brett.

I stepped forward, wanting to help him see the truth of their words. Reaching out my hand, my fingers brushed Jake's temple. A rush of Magic coursed through my torso and Violet's memory played between us. The woman playing his wife, slit Lila's throat, then shifted from Annabel to her true form.

Jake's eyes met mine for a fraction of a second. I watched the heartbreak work its way from his chest and into his eyes as his knees hit the soft earth.

Looking down at his hands as if he was staring at Annabel, he uttered her name softly and I could feel the tiny cracks in Violet's heart open up. She knew pain and loss all too well, it would seem.

"I'm so sorry," Brett whispered. Kneeling next to Jake she wrapped her arms around his shoulders.

"I too am sorry for your loss," I said. "But we must move to a more convenient location."

"No," Jake barked. His face contorted into a mask of pain and anger. "I held her in my arms, cared for her, loved her."

"You didn't know," Robert argued. "None of us did."

"I should have known," Jake shouted as his eyes filled with tears. "I should have—"

"Stop, you can't do this to yourself. Anna wouldn't want you to blame yourself," Brett said as she gripped Jake's shoulder.

Jake's eyes met hers as a tear trailed down his cheek. "If it was Matty you'd blame yourself, wouldn't you?" He snapped.

Brett's mouth opened and closed.

"It's not my wish to rush your grieving but we must take our leave in the event Morgana returns," I said again.

"I need to... bring Lila home." Robert moved away from the group through the tall, thick grass and Brett pulled Jake to his feet. Following Robert, the others whispered among themselves as I scanned the open field. The chill that hung in the air was more than just the weather turning; I could feel the darkness in

my bones with each step I took. Something was lurking out there, something sinister and not of this world.

Robert came to a stop and the others halted a few feet away, giving him the space he needed. As he knelt down in the grass, I moved toward him, pushing past the others. Lila's body was no more. Only a pile of black ash remained on the blades of grass.

Robert laid his hand on the ash, the glint of something silver catching my eye.

"I'm so sorry," he said under his breath.

I knelt next to Robert, placing my hand on top of his and said, "Whether you brought happiness or pain, may your soul yet win delights on this, your death-day."

"Thank you," Robert said, without looking at me. His fingers pushed the ashes aside and he picked up the silver ring and stuffed it in his pocket.

"It's not safe here," I reminded him. "We need to seek shelter." I scanned the dark clouds holding steadfast to the horizon.

Nodding his head, he stood and turned to face his family. "Let's go home," he said.

I held my hand out for him to grab.

"For those of you who wish to return," I held out my other hand. "Robert, if you'll please picture home in your mind." I nodded to him.

Ethan and Elodie grabbed onto my arm while Brett and Jake held onto Robert.

The Magic inside me unfurled like a rose blooming, slow and easy. "*Auferetur.*"

Within the blink of an eye, we were home, wherever home was for Robert and his comrades.

A dizzy spell washed over me as I took in the furnishings. It felt like someone had taken hold of my intestine with a death grip. I could feel Violet more prominently again as the edges of my vision blurred.

"They're back," a voice shouted and a pair of arms wrapped around me.

"Jake? Jake what's wrong?" A worried female voice called after him.

"It's been a long day, leave him," Robert said.

"We'll go," Ethan said and he and Elodie followed Jake.

"Thank God you're safe." A tiny woman with short dark hair held me at arm's length, then let go of me like a hot coal.

The pain in my abdomen sharpened and I slumped against the wall, letting out a heavy breath. Holding out my hands, they shook as I turned them over.

"Are you okay?" Robert grabbed my elbow to steady me.

"Of course," I cleared my throat. "Just out of practice."

"Is this normal?" Violet's voice rang in my head.

"Nothing about this is normal," I replied.

"Vivian, is that you?" A familiar, gentle voice said from somewhere above me.

"By the stars. It's you." An overwhelming sense of relief washed over me.

"Ahh, my dear Vivian. It's been quite a long time. I was afraid you wouldn't recognize me."

"You two know each other?" Robert asked, his eyes caught mine and his brow furrowed as he tried to work out how I could know anyone in his world.

"You could say that." I shrugged and took a ragged breath.

"Your face may have changed," I said through another spout of dizziness, "But you can't hide the stench of your Magic." I did my best to hide the pain in my voice as Violet grew stronger.

"Good to see, The Lady of The Lake still has a sense of humor." He held his arms out to me.

"You and I both know I was always the humorous one, Merlin." I stepped into the circle of his arms and my legs went out from under me as darkness fell over my eyes.