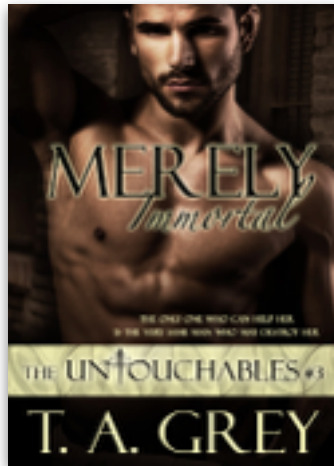


MERELY IMMORTAL

A Lucas Blackmoore story



When the woman who knew not who she was came to, she realized several things. She saw, firstly, that she was no longer in the woods. Or, at least, not in the last location she remembered—that of lying in pain on the forest floor. She also recognized that she was in a cabin which had a strong sense of isolation around it, as if nothing surrounded the cabin for a great distance. The other, most important, note she made was that the woman in the white robe was in the room with her, stirring a large wooden spoon into a black cauldron over a crackling fire in the hearth.

Sitting up with a grunt, she took stock of her sore body. At least the furriness had abated. She had only normal human skin now... Or wait...she couldn't have human skin because she was a Were now, right? That's what most people called werewolves today, Weres. But why did she have a gut feeling that told her she used to be human? And how did she recall some details of the world but not others?

“Good! You’re awake.” The woman in the robe had a soft but gentle voice, the kind mother’s used in a nursery to keep babies calm. She scooped whatever vile substance was in the cauldron onto the spoon and treaded over to where she lie on the ground. “Here, taste this.” She thrust the spoon towards her mouth.

The unknown woman’s answer came instantly. “No way.” Her nose scrunched in disgust.

The woman smiled. “Then, smell it. It’s not poison, I assure you.”

With a grimace, she stuck her nose toward the spoon and sniffed, and instantly her shoulders relaxed. “Chicken soup?” she asked with surprise.

The robed witch laughed. “Exactly! I hope you’re hungry, I’ve made a lot of food.”

At the mention of food, her stomach rumbled. Food, especially not anything cooked, yet alone delicious, seemed like such a faraway possibility. Memories surged in her brain. Memories of nearly eating a live deer, of killing it, but it’d gotten away before she’d transformed at the full moon. Food was something that had been in rare form for her. Ever since she woke up...different.

“Yes, please. Can I have some?”

“Have a seat at the table,” the witch said. “I suppose we have to introduce ourselves. I brought you here after your ordeal. I hope you don’t mind, but I didn’t deem it safe to leave you passed out on the forest floor all alone.”

Sitting up, the woman grimaced at her tight muscles, her body ached in places it never had before. Moreso than after bootcamp. Her eyes lit up.

“I went to bootcamp!” That meant she must have been in the military. Yet, she still couldn’t remember the most simplest of details—such as her name. And the more she struggled to force her brain to recall the details of that bootcamp only came up with nothing. Not a single specific memory of her doing anything, only a lasting impression like a stamp in her brain that told her she’d done it.

The witch smiled gently and ladled a large steaming bowl of chicken soup for her. “Dig in, please. It seems we have much to talk about. I don’t get many... visitors out here.” A faraway expression hit her eyes, and she looked sad for a

moment, before she shook her head and smiled. The witch poured a bowl for herself and then they both sat down at the table to eat.

It tasted delicious. There was fresh broth combined with juicy meat and tender vegetables with thin, stringy noodles intermixed. She couldn't remember ever tasting anything as good as this.

"You mentioned bootcamp. So you were in the military I take it?" the witch inquired pleasantly, eyes on her bowl.

"Yes! I mean...I think so. I remember it, but I don't." She shook her head in frustration. "I can't say I remember vividly doing anything in particular. I just woke up like this, in the forest with bite marks on my neck. I think I've been turned into a werewolf."

The witch giggled, a soft motherly sound. "Oh, yes, dear, that is quite obvious." She sipped delicately before speaking. "Unfortunately for you, most Weres have their pack's support with they turn their first time during the full moon. It seems as if you were turned not of your own volition. That's very unpleasant. So, pray tell, what do you recall?"

What did she recall?

She closed her eyes and thought hard. Perhaps if she forced her brain to work then it would remember everything. But it was like trying to slog through black, fuzzy memories with no coherent thread whatsoever. She swallowed hard. "I don't really remember anything. Not even my own name."

"Well then, we shall have to name you!" the witch said excitedly. "Most of us never have the opportunity to pick our own names, we are merely born with what our parents gave us. Now is your opportunity. What would you like to be called until we figure out who you really are?"

"What do I want to be called?" she repeated dumbly. She hadn't thought of it. She felt put on the spot. Yet, one name came instantly to mind and she wasn't sure why. "I guess if I have to be called something, I'd like to be called—Evie."

The witch's flaxen eyebrows rose sweetly. "Short for Evelyn?"

She nodded. "Yes, I like the sound of it. I don't know why," she added, a bit confused.

The witch patted her hand encouragingly. “No worries, my dear. You don’t need to know why to understand that it’s perfect. It’s a lovely name and it suits you. You can call me O.”

Her eyebrows rose in surprise. “O and nothing else?”

For the first time, she felt as if the witch either couldn’t or wouldn’t share this information with her. She merely gave a close-lipped smile. “Just O and nothing else.”

Evie, as she now thought of herself, sat back from her empty bowl and sighed. Her belly wasn’t anywhere near full, but the witch winked at her before she could ask, and refilled the bowl. The witch appeared so young in age, probably around Evie’s own age (whatever that may be), and yet she exuded motherly calm and reserve. Yet, there were no children visible. In fact, aside from shelves adorning the walls holding various pots and bottles and flasks that looked like potions, the cabin was eerily devoid of life. No television or computer which seemed like such common necessities to people nowadays. Obviously the witch lived a different kind of life.

In fact, the only thing odd in the whole cabin—aside from the cauldron which actually fit the rather witchery-style decor—was the large, round clock on the wall next to the front door. It felt so out-of-place in this cabin that had no air conditioning or refrigerator. It was more than two feet wide and two feet in height; the numbers counted one to twelve in Roman numeral and had large, black hands surrounded by a black, round face. Something about that clock made her feel uneasy.

“If you don’t mind, Evie, after you finish eating, I could do a reading for you. My intuition skills are not superb by any means, but they may help you to garner some knowledge as to how you were turned into a Were. Maybe it could give you a clue into figuring out who you are.”

“I do need to figure out who I am, but a ‘reading?’” Evie hedged, unsure what that meant. “W-what’s that?” She envisioned a crystal ball and lots of smoke and spookiness. She didn’t care for mysticism. Her brain perked up at the

recall, gradually it seemed like she was learning bits and pieces about who she was.

O laughed jovially. “I have these cards. Similar to what you might call tarot cards, but different. They are of an ancient arcana, and sometimes I can divine certain...information during a session. It might help you, but I’ll leave it up to you to decide whether you’d like the reading. I can sense, my dear, that you are a lost soul struggling in difficult times right now. I believe that’s why I felt your energy in the forest. It was almost as if you summoned me.”

Both eyebrows rose high as Evie sat back, stunned at O’s proclamation. That was quite a statement to make from someone she’d never met before.

“Yes, thank you. I would like your help. You’ve been so nice. I suppose, what do I have to lose?”

O sent her a gentle smile, then her eyes darted to the big, black round clock by the front door. One blonde eyebrow quirked straight up to her hairline. “We will begin shortly,” she said curtly.

Something in the way the witch said it, so unlike the kind voice she usually spoke with, alarmed Evie. She noticed the time; the hands pointed at six o’clock and judging by the dying sun it was evening time. Night was coming soon.

Dishes were cleaned and the table was cleared. Evie was instructed to sit on the floor near the fire where O sat down a small table like that of a breakfast tray. She pulled a key out from her long creamy white robes then went to a small wooden cabinet hanging on the wall. She inserted the key into the golden lock. Inside, she pulled out something wrapped in cloth. She held it delicately, carefully, as if afraid to jar the object.

O took a seat across the small table and sat cross-legged on the floor before setting the cloth on it. She smiled at Evie. “Ready?”

Evie’s face twitched and she scratched the back of her neck, feeling nervous but unsure why. They were just cards, right? They couldn’t hurt her, right?

“Yes, I’m ready.” What a lie that was.

The witch nodded then proceeded to part the cloth, first revealing one side, then flipping open the next side and the next. Evie realized, she was doing it in directions: north, south, east, and west. Once the cloth was completely open, the cards were revealed. They looked old and worn. The color something of a muddy cream color. The tops had only some inarticulate design that looks like vignettes or a floral pattern but they were so faded it was hard to tell.

“I am going to make a spread.”

Evie’s eyes widened. “A spread?”

“Yes, watch,” O instructed.

She shuffled the deck. There were many cards, far more than in a normal playing card deck, but, then again, these were magical cards and not playing cards. The cards were long and looked made of thick paper, closely resembling what that of tarot cards. Once O finished shuffling, she neatly stacked the deck and pushed them close to Evie.

Evie sat back a notch, fearing the unknown—something she knew nothing about!

“They won’t hurt you, I promise. Touch them, shuffle them, but don’t look at them, and when you’re done place them back down on the table. It’s that easy.”

That easy. Yeah, right.

Evie wanted to scoff, but she was made of sterner stuff than to be afraid of magical arcana cards. So, she made certain her hands weren’t trembling when she picked up the deck. They were heavier than she had imagined, not very smooth but almost coarse in spots and quite worn and soft in others. Swallowing past the nervous lump in her throat, she shuffled, cutting the deck sideways, then flipping them all together. She did not know how much time had passed, in fact, she seemed to grow enamored with the act of shuffling; until, quite suddenly, she set the deck down with a solid whack.

“Sorry,” Evie mumbled, blushing at her rather brash behavior.

The witch merely smiled. “Everything’s fine. You did perfectly. Now, I’ll do the spread.” O reached across the table but didn’t touch the cards. She patted

Evie's hand and looked her straight in the eye. That's when Evie noticed O had two different colored eyes—one dark brown and one bright blue. How had she not noticed before? It was so unusual.

She was surprised when O didn't shuffle the cards again. Instead she carefully handled the deck and began to flip one card over after the other. She made a pattern with the cards that formed an odd version of a cross.

Evie studied the strange pictures on the cards. What looked like a queen holding up two goblets sat on one card flipped over, on another, an imposing kingly figure holding a sword who wore a crown of gold. At no point did O gasp or cry out—Evie began to sit back and relax. Maybe this could be an enjoyable experience after all.

“That cards are all laid out. Ready for me to read them?” O asked. Her eyes scoured the cards, not in any particular order but gliding from left to right, then from first to last, and last to first. “Hmm...” Was all she said.

Evie leaned forward, eyes wide. “What is it? What do you see?” She stared at the cards as if she too could inquire their true meanings, when in fact, they held no meaning to her. They looked like non-sensical images like trying to read a foreign language and in no way could she interpret their meaning.

“I see that you have lost your memory.” She pointed to a card with a woman who looked to be sinking in open water with nothing else nearby. Her back was to the picture so you couldn't see her face giving the card an ominous feel. “You feel disheveled and alone, but not for long.” She pointed to the following card. “You are about to embark on a perilous journey full of excitement...and danger.” O briefly glanced at her. The card was that of a large ship headed toward an exotic island full of bright colors and murky dark shadows in the caves. “You have undergone a recent, rather dramatic transformation.”

“Yeah, I'd say that,” Evie growled, feeling lost. She was a Were now. Not a human. But she still had no clue who she really was or how it all happened. And didn't that put a hamper on her life?

O's finger flowed to the next card and her eyebrow pierced in consternation. "And along this journey you will meet an imposing man. He has hearts around him. You will feel enamored of him, and perhaps he of you. But notice also that he carries a sword—a weapon—meaning danger. A danger to you, I do not know. He could be a protector for your journey, or he could be a hinderance."

Evie said not a word, but merely listened and watched with wide-eyed fascination.

"The great wall." The card following was a of solid brick wall that appeared to reach as high as the sun, unclimbable and unsurpassable by man. O looked hard at Evie. "I see that he will in fact be a great hindrance on your journey to discovering who you are. And possibly dangerous, though toward you, I cannot say."

"Why?" And more importantly, who?

O shrugged. "The cards do not tell how or why. They only tell what will come to pass and what has been. Here," she pointed to the next card, "The Dueling Lovers. You will quarrel with this man and perhaps love him. Your heart will be susceptible to him, but his to yours as well. Love is never one-sided."

Evie felt a headache coming along. "I don't even know my real name. The last thing I want is to be falling in love."

O's mouth held a small smile, but it froze. "Oh, dear."

Evie gulped and once again leaned forward to study the card she was stuck on. It showed a black murky swamp and the figure of a person slipping inside it like quicksand, half their body stuck in the brown gunk as if it was sucking them down. The person's arms reached for the sky but there was no help in sight, only a heavy sky that blocked out the sunlight.

"You will struggle through danger that is quite dire," O said, her voice turning to a whisper, as if she didn't want to speak the information aloud. "Something dangerous follows you, chases you. Perhaps the one who turned you? I cannot say. But it, or they, whatever it is, is incredibly dangerous." The next

card had three dog-like creatures who had nasty snarling fangs dripping with drool like blood from their snouts. They were chasing down a winding road of dirt, in which, in the distance a figure appeared to be running from them.

Evie broke out in a cold sweat. She didn't know who turned her into this beastly creature, she knew nothing about how to control herself or what to do with her new abilities, but the idea of a Were following her put the fear of God right into her.

The next card was of a female figure sitting at a desk by candlelight. Books were stacked next to her and many, many rolled up scrolls. In her hand, she held a quill. She was hooded like a monk and she was hastily scribbling something on a scroll of parchment. "The creatures are dangerous, but this figure is...inquisitive...searching for answers or asking lots of questions. I do not yet know if she is good or bad. She may be neither but she will appear in your future."

"Is that...is that possibly you?" Evie prodded. "Or me?"

"No, no," O chided softly. "I am never revealed in this readings. I am merely a medium, if you will. And I assure you this is not you, but another figure, an inquisitive one. Now, we're almost done. Let's see what's left." For once, O's eyes lit up with happiness. "The treasure chest!"

"What does that mean?" The card looked like a pirate's treasure chest, a large wooden crate with a broken lock. The lid was partially open and an abundance of gold coins glimmered from inside.

"It means you will happen upon some great rewards. It could be financial or mental or physical, but you will find some great success on this journey. If you make it past the dangers..."

"That doesn't sound hopeful."

O gave her a playful wink. "One last card, and then you're done." Her finger fell to the final card.

Suddenly, the clock chimed. The sound was so loud, Evie startled and nearly jumped out of her skin. But that reaction was nothing compared to O's. The clock chimed seven times for seven o'clock.

O surged to her feet, knocking the card table over in the process and sending dozens of cards scattering across the floor. Her eyes were huge in her pale face as she looked at the clock, then back at Evie. “You have to leave! NOW!”

“What? But why?” Evie sputtered, coming to her feet.

But she never got an answer.

O chanted magical words, waving her left hand in the process, and just like that Evie felt a swirling of energy surround her body. Like a blanket enclosing her inside, and then her vision went blank. She could see nothing for what felt like seconds of endless time. She was floating through empty space, and then she landed hard and her vision came to instantly.

Sitting up, Evie brushed dirt off her hands as she looked around at her surroundings. Strange, but she was back in the same exact position on the forest floor before the witch had found her.

What was on that last card?

Shaking her head, she stood and looked out at the forest, alone once again. She had a lot of questions and no way to get answers. But, for now, she knew she had a journey to go on—to learn who she was and about what happened to her. So she started to walk toward the very distant skyscrapers she could see in the great distance.

It was, at least, a beginning.

Coming in August 2015!

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