

Twisted Fate, Band 1: Wenn Magie erwacht

Twisted Fate, volume 1: *When Magic Awakens*

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Prologue

Callanish, Isle of Lewis, Scotland, in the year 1721

Quick footsteps. Panting breaths. Muffled voices.

“Hurry, everyone!” Isabelle cried, clutching the fabric of her skirt and earasaid tighter. Her legs ached from exertion, but she ran on, undeterred. The horses had fallen victim to the demon’s last attack. “We’re almost there!”

Her companions’ torches threw a flickering light on their surroundings, illuminating the damp grass, and were reflected in the stormy sea of the bay. Bathed in the light of a full moon, the first stones of Callanish loomed ahead like beacons in the night.

At the sight of them Isabelle felt the faintest relief. They had almost made it. They needed to lure the demon into the circle of monoliths, then the witch would be able to complete her ritual and they would vanquish him, this time for good.

Shrill screams sounded behind her. Isabelle’s heart seized up in fright, but she did not turn around and she did not stop. The Brollachan, one of the most powerful magical creatures that had ever existed, was hunting down the members of the order across the wide plains of the Isle of Lewis, which were so flat and desolate that they offered little to no protection. Still, the holy Standing Stones of Callanish were the proper place to put an end to this. The only place. This monster had already killed too many people.

It was solely thanks to Rob MacKenzie that they had made it here to the Isle of Lewis in spite of the bloody fighting in the Highlands. While the other members of his family were at this very moment fighting against enemy clans, he had come with them to confront another, much greater threat.

In these times there was no place that was safe, no matter which side you were on. People fought against each other and weren’t even aware that the true danger lurked elsewhere. They had no idea about the demons and the clandestine battles fought by the Order of the Golden Flame.

Another scream pierced the night. Isabelle gritted her teeth. She could not turn around, could not worry about the others. Her duty came above all else. They had begun this mission as a group of thirty men and women, but only half of them had made it to the island. If they did not manage to annihilate the Brollachan this very night, they would all die – and countless more victims would follow.

Just before they reached the stones, James appeared by her side and reached for her arm. “Isabelle...”

The warmth of his hand penetrated the cloth of her earasaid, which protected her from wind and the cold, as well as her shirtsleeve. His chest rose and fell so fast that the brooch on his shoulder that held together his plaid in the familiar tartan pattern, reflected the light of the torches.

“For the order,” he murmured hoarsely. His breath brushed her face as he rested his forehead on hers. “For our family.” With rough fingers he stroked her cheek. “No matter what happens, I love you, Isabelle. Know that, always.”

In spite of the horrors that lay behind them and the uncertain future ahead, her heart overflowed with joy. They were together. They would always remain together. A smile spread across her face and she grabbed his linen shirt.

“And I love you, James Beauvil,” she replied breathlessly, looking him directly in the eyes. “No matter what happens.”

He nodded with a smile. One last stolen moment, then they would have to take their leave of each other. The other warriors of the order had already caught up with them.

They reached the rock formations that jutted forbiddingly into the night, and in unison stepped into the circle. Isabelle was about to turn around and survey their remaining warriors when a movement in the shadows made her scream. The Brollachan stepped forward, wrapped in darkness and a feeling of power that each of them sensed with every fiber of their being, even though none of them possessed magical powers. An ear-splitting roar made everything around them tremble. Before anyone could take action, out of nowhere a powerful blow struck Isabelle and the other members of the order in the chest and knocked them off their feet. They landed on the grass several meters away and stood up, panting. Instinctively she looked for James and exhaled when she spotted him. He seemed unharmed and was jumping to his feet again, but not far from him Margaret Shieldblade lay on the ground near a boulder, motionless. The light of the torches revealed her pale face and the blood that had spread around her slight figure.

No... Isabelle pressed her lips together to a hard line.

A desperate cry tore through the night. Margaret’s husband Thomas lunged at the demon with his sword. The blade struck the Brollachan and left a deep cut across its entire chest. The beast took a step backwards and looked down at the black blood that dripped to the ground. Then it raised its head with a wicked smile. Within an instant the wound closed, as if it had never been there at all. Thomas staggered backwards but he wasn’t fast enough. Flames ignited in the demon’s claw-like hand, shot through the air – and the next brother fell.

Blades glinted in the brightness of the moonlight. Silver chains jangled. Arrows were readied. One after the other they drew their weapons and threw themselves at the Brollachen.

Isabelle looked around frantically and spotted the witch. She was observing the battle from the outer edge of the rocks. This night would also determine her fate and that of her family, but as they had agreed, she was waiting for the right moment. The moment that they, the brothers and sisters of the order, had to bring about.

“MacKenzie!” James bellowed abruptly. For a brief moment, shock and fear covered his countenance, but then his best friend stood up again.

“I’m okay,” Rob MacKenzie gave a quick smile, although his face was distorted with pain. “You won’t be rid of me that quickly.” He grabbed James’s outstretched hand and let his friend help him to his feet again.

But that was just the beginning. Isabelle sent her silver chain whirling through the air. More blades rushed toward the demon. The Brollachan’s wounds healed just as soon as they were inflicted. Isabelle’s forehead broke out in sweat. Exhaustion cramped her arm muscles. But she would never give up. Never.

Knives and burning arrows rained down on their opponent, pressing the creature backwards. Further, ever further, until all of them had reached the center of the stone monument.

“Prepare yourselves!” The cry of the witch could be heard over the sounds of battle and the roaring of the ocean below them. They had discussed this plan many times, but when Isabelle looked around her, she was shocked to see that only thirteen of them were still standing. Thirteen members of the order. That was the minimum the family of witches had insisted was necessary in order to complete the ritual successfully. If just one more of them fell, it would be too late. Then everything would have been in vain.

The howling wind came out of nowhere, whirling around the demon until it stretched out its arm and...

“James!”

“No!” Katherine Evander grabbed her from behind and held her back. “We have to hold this position.”

Everything in Isabelle urged her to run to her beloved, the man to whom she had given her heart, her soul and her life. The father of her children. But she held her ground, even as it tore her heart apart to see him wounded.

With difficulty James heaved himself to a stand. Blood covered one side of his face, and a dark red spot at shoulder height on his linen shirt began to spread, while his arm hung at an unnatural angle. But his gaze was unbroken and determined.

“Now!” he cried.

It was their last chance to bring the horror to an end. If the Brollachan wasn’t conquered here and tonight, there would be no further opportunity to protect the people they loved as well as those who knew nothing about this, and to spare future generations from a cruel and gruesome fate.

The witch stepped forward and called out words in a language that sounded familiar and yet completely foreign. Isabelle didn’t understand what they meant, but that wasn’t necessary. They had encircled the Brollachan, and it froze in place when the witch began her incantation. A monstrous growl issued from its throat and caused the entire plain to quake again. Even the gigantic stone monoliths of Callanish vibrated from its power. But with each additional word the witch hurled into the night, it seemed to become weaker. The ground directly underneath the beast shone with a gold light, and a shudder moved through its shadowy body that in a bizarre way resembled that of a human.

Isabelle’s and James’s eyes met and held each other tight with all their might.

With a deafening roar, the demon sank to its knees in the midst of them. The light underneath it grew brighter and brighter. All of a sudden, golden threads flowed through the ground and made tracks directly for the warriors of the order, until each of them was connected with the beast. Then the golden light spread to form a circle that connected them all.

The witch screamed the final words of her incantation. Glowing energy shot out of the Brollachan, through the golden threads, and into the members of the order. Isabelle stumbled but managed to stay on her feet.

Bewildered, she looked down at herself. Within seconds her wounds closed and the scratches grew paler. Healing, she thought in astonishment. She was healing just like the demon had done earlier. She saw the same puzzled amazement on the faces of the others, as well.

Had they actually pulled it off? Had their plan succeeded? The demon's arm was outstretched, but no attack followed. No fire. No wind. None of its other many and varied powers.

Tears of relief filled her eyes. They had done the impossible: They had robbed the beast of its magic and banished the danger.

Isabelle wanted to take a step towards James – and could not do it. An odd feeling of numbness began to spread through her limbs. In panic, she looked down at her body. Her legs were becoming one with the ground below her feet. Bones and muscles solidified piece by piece. Her skin took on the gray color of stone.

And she wasn't the only one. Every one of the thirteen people in their circle was fighting this sudden petrification.

Enraged, she looked to the witch. "What is happening here? This was not part of the agreement! You tricked us!"

The face of the witch showed no reaction. "That is the price of magic."

Isabelle tried desperately to move and reclaim control of her limbs. In vain.

Panic closed her throat when she met the gaze of her beloved. He was already rigid to his neck and couldn't move at all anymore.

I love you, she thought fervently, now and for all of time.

"For the order," she whispered. Tears ran down her cheeks as first her arms and then her entire upper body turned to stone. "For our family..."

Chapter One

Dundee, Scotland, present day

Almost my entire life I'd been on the run – but now that belonged to the past. Even if the route from my student apartment to campus that morning felt a little like an escape route; and no wonder, with an older brother breathing down my neck.

"Do you have everything you need, Faith?" he asked for the hundredth time. "Cell phone, money, all your paperwork?"

I made an effort not to roll my eyes as I hurried down the street. I really tried.

The seagulls screeched, the sun was shining, and it could turn out to be a truly beautiful day. My first day at the University of Dundee. The first day of my new life. In case Levi would finally let me out of his sight for a few seconds.

At first I had been a little sad that we wouldn't be living together. But by now, I was truly excited that I had a room in an apartment with Maisie and he had a small apartment on the other side of campus.

"Yes, I have everything. Still." I shot him a quick grin over my shoulder. "Do *you* have everything you need, brother dear?"

His eyes narrowed, but I could see the corners of his mouth twitching. Levi might be the poster child for protective brothers, but at least he had a sense of humor.

"If something happens, you call me, got it?"

This time I couldn't resist the impulse and rolled my eyes. I loved my brother. Since we were only three years apart, we used to do almost everything together. But sometimes I still wanted to wring his neck.

"I'll be fine," I insisted. We were not having this conversation for the first time. "I did manage to survive the last two years of high school without you constantly looking over my shoulder, you know."

Typically, we wouldn't be starting at the university on the same day, but the circumstances were unusual. I had studied around the clock for my diploma and earned my scholarship with a lot of hard work. Levi had needed a little more time to get excited about the idea of going to the university, but then his athletic abilities helped him get a scholarship to study Sports Science. No wonder, considering he had worked as a fitness and martial arts trainer for two years, and his boss had written him a glowing recommendation. That's why it was the first day at the university for both of us. Even if Levi gave me the feeling with his Anthony Bridgerton airs that I was the only new student, while he already knew everything there was to know.

"This is where we go our separate ways." I stood still in front of the science department, which was housed in a handsome new building. "How sad."

Levi shook his head at my sarcasm. "I promised Mum to look after you. You get in touch with me immediately if something comes up. No matter what."

That wasn't a question, but rather an order. I had learned early on to judiciously ignore statements like that.

"I mean it, Faith. Don't do anything stupid, you hear me?"

His words reminded me too much of the parting from Mum ... and the little lecture she had given me.

"Promise me just one thing, Faith: no tattoos, no dares, no drunken orgies – no orgies at all, actually! No intimate piercings, no ritual sacrifices, no..."

"Mum!" I had interrupted her, laughing. "You are aware that I'm going to university, not joining a cult, right?"

"Yes, but..." She had sighed and gotten a worried look in her eyes. "At least promise me that you'll stay away from boys with motorcycles. And boys with tattoos. And especially tattooed boys who ride motorcycles."

Had she warned Levi about all these things, too? Or had his list been much shorter? If he had one at all, honestly. It was probably more important for Mum to warn the entire campus that Levi could be a real heartbreaker.

I made a face and walked backwards, increasing the distance between me and my brother.

"Oh, I will definitely do stupid things. And you can't do a thing about it." The last words were a sing-song, something I used to do before, when I had secretly slipped out to a party even though Levi had forbidden it.

I could literally see how annoyed he was with me. Two deep folds had formed between his eyebrows, which were the same dark-blond shade as his short hair. There was a warning flash in his gray eyes. "Faith..."

I just grinned and waved in parting. "Bye, Levi."

He turned away with a huff. Finally. I had done my duty as a little sister.

Content, I entered the building and a few minutes later took a seat in the middle of the lecture hall for the official first day of the semester.

My fingers tingled with anticipation and I could hardly sit still, but I didn't seem to be the only one. The entire room was filled with the murmur of excited voices and nervous rustling. Restless, I rummaged around in my backpack and pulled out the books to place them in front of me on the small desk. Technically we didn't need to get them until this week, but I had gathered as much information about my classes as I could in advance and had everything prepared. So I reached for my notebook as well and...

"Ouch!" I flinched as I felt the hot pain in my thumb and jerked back my hand. A paper cut about a centimeter long now crowned the tip of my thumb and the first thick drops of blood swelled from it. No one was watching me. No one saw how the cut sealed itself within a fraction of a second. I wiped off the blood on a tissue. There the red drop shone like a glaring warning sign, but my skin was intact.

My heart still hammered much too fast as I looked around again to see if anyone had seen any of that. Because that would lead to questions, to curiosity and suspicion ... and that always, sooner or later, led to us having to leave town.

This time, however, I seemed to have gotten lucky. Everyone was so focused on themselves and their excitement that no one took any notice of me. I glanced quickly at the clock that hung above the door. We should be getting started, actually, but...

The conversations gradually quieted down until it was so still I could hear my own heartbeat, and the nervous whispering of a few of the other students.

At the front of the room stood a woman I hadn't seen come into the room. She wore elegant dark gray pleated trousers with a belt, a jacket in the same color, and a white blouse. She also wore shoes with heels so high that I would have broken my neck if someone asked me to walk in them. Her hair, chestnut brown with a few strands of gray running through it, was combed straight back and pinned up in a bun. She wore rimless glasses low on her nose. A few folds grace her forehead, as well as her eyes and around her mouth, but I had a hard time guessing her age.

By now everyone in the lecture hall was staring at her, although she had yet to make a single sound. Her calm presence was enough to bring everyone to silence. Only when it was so quiet that you could have heard a pin drop did the corners of her mouth lift upwards in a smile and she started to speak. "Welcome to Dundee. You've made a good choice – especially those of you who aspire to a career in genetics, molecular biology or biochemistry, because as you are surely all aware, this department has an outstanding reputation. Of course, you are in the right place in all the other departments at this university, too – just not here in this room. So in case you have lost your way, this is your chance to leave."

The announcement brought a couple of laughs. And in fact, a girl and a guy in the last row stood up and hurried out of the lecture hall with their faces bright red.

As soon as they had closed the door behind them, the instructor nodded, satisfied. "Now that that's been cleared up, I'd like to introduce myself. My name is Dr. Sylvia Kingsley. Like you, I studied genetics and molecular biology here at Dundee, worked for various universities and institutions in Great Britain and Europe, and earned my doctorate in London. That was my last station before I returned to sunny Dundee." She looked out over the rows and for a brief moment, I had the feeling she was looking straight at me before her gaze continued to wander and she told us more about her background, the coming semester, and the exam period in December. And that was just the beginning.

The hours of my first day flew by like the wind. I met loads of new people, wandered from one academic building to another, and managed to get lost only once. The brief time between classes I filled by taking notes in my journal, and I was glad that I had stuck it in my bag that morning. Throughout the day I was so jittery that I even forgot to eat – which my stomach let me know with loud rumbling as I left one of the buildings in the late afternoon. I put a hand on my belly and blinked into the warm rays of sunshine. It was a mild day for late September, even if the cool breeze from the sea ruffled my shoulder-length hair.

I had already forgotten the name of the building I was just leaving, but along with two others it surrounded a lovely, well-tended grassy area. Little by little I would learn to find my way around here. But even if I was rather exhausted and half starved, I had to smile. I had made it. I was here. I had actually made it.

Slowly I got moving and followed the path between university buildings, without giving any thought to where it was taking me. Fortunately, at Dundee everything was within walking distance. In fifteen minutes I could be at my apartment, or in the center of town to get something to eat – or to continue looking for a part-time job. I suppressed a sigh. *That was* unfortunately not so easy in this town.

After a while I came to a stop and looked around, puzzled. I had been so lost in my thoughts that I had no idea what building I was standing in front of... or even whether it still belonged to the university. Still, there was something about the several story high beige sandstone building that drew me to it.

Curious, I approached the entrance. A few meters from the door something was scratched into the wall. At first glance you might not even notice anything, but on closer examination I could make out six almost nondescript lines that were arranged in an interesting pattern, something like a star. The center featured something that reminded me of a drop of water or a candle flame, and under that were two thorny flowers. Roses? Thistle?

The symbol was probably associated with a fraternity or sorority. At least, it looked familiar to me. I was sure I'd seen it somewhere around campus, in the city, or on a flyer without consciously noting it.

I hadn't even noticed that I was reaching my hand out towards it until a voice made me flinch. "Hey, Faith!"

I spotted my roommate Maisie, who was just coming out of the building and looking at me with a quizzical expression that was also amused.

Maisie was what one might call a classic Scottish beauty. She had fiery red, curly hair that she wore loosely piled up in a messy bun. I could see the countless freckles on her cheeks and nose even from a distance, and they only became more noticeable as I walked towards her. She also had an attractively curvy figure that I was a bit envious of. Unlike her, I was rather thin, and underneath the platinum blonde I'd been dying my hair for years was just a boring light brown that I never could do anything with.

"Did you lose your way?" Maisie asked, gesturing around her.

I furrowed my brow. "No, why?"

"Because this is where the history, language and philosophy departments are. Biology and the other sciences are at the opposite end of campus."

Oh. Oops.

“I wasn’t paying any attention to where I was walking,” I admitted, and gave the imposing sandstone building with the mysterious symbol a last glance. “Is this where your classes are? Not bad.”

Grinning, she hooked her arm in mine. “Yeah, all the super modern new buildings belong to you scientists, but it isn’t too shabby here, either. You should see the library!”

Maisie pulled me along, and even if I had no idea what she was up to, I willingly went with her.

I was relieved that Maisie and I had instantly gotten along well, even if that was still an unusual experience for me. It had been a long time since I had had a friend. Most of the time we hadn’t stayed in one place long enough to get to know people well, and there were far too many situations that made it difficult to hide the fact that every scratch or bruise I ever got healed within seconds. At some point I had just stopped trying to make friends, because the relationships would just come to an end anyway – or in the worst case, they led to a whole series of uncomfortable questions. But Maisie wasn’t just someone I had met in a new city. She was my roommate, and if everything went well, we would live together for the next three years. And I was already determined that I would do anything it took to make sure things went well.

“Have you seen the posters for the Winter Ball?” she asked abruptly, pointing to one of the announcement boards that were mounted in various places around campus. “They put them up today.”

I followed her index finger to the bulletin board, which was covered with dozens of colorful flyers. From yoga and pottery classes to apartment searches to information about various clubs and groups at the university, everything was posted randomly, but one large poster drew your full attention right away: the university’s traditional Winter Ball was taking place, as it did every year, on November 30th, St. Andrew’s Day.

“We absolutely have to go!” Maisie squeezed my arm. “No excuses, you hear me?”

“Hey, I didn’t say a word!”

“Good, then that’s settled.” She grinned happily. “Are you coming home with me?”

I shook my head and let go of her arm at the intersection of two streets. “Unfortunately, no. I have to finally find a job.”

“Good luck.” Maisie made a sympathetic face, which wrinkled the freckles on her nose. “It’s really hard after the semester starts, everyone says so.”

“Well, I have to at least try. We’ll see each other tonight!” I waved at my roommate one last time, then turned on my heels and set off towards downtown.

I might still be without a job and therefore filled with guilt, but this was my life now. My wonderful, new, *normal* life – and I would do anything necessary to keep it that way.