



YSOBELLA BLACK

BIJOU'S  
CURE

— ZEKE —

VAMPIRES & STRYGOI WITCHES:  
BOOK 4

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THURSDAY,  
DECEMBER 5

# CHAPTER ONE



Zeke linked his hands over his head and stretched as he pondered whether *not* having a Dragă might be a blessing. If he hadn't been worried about Bolt too, it would have been amusing to see Thunder, his black warhorse, who faced down armies and monsters without hesitation, so freaked out and helpless.

He watched Thunder and Bolt in the grassy paddock behind the stables at the Ildum's compound. The golden mare was pregnant, and while she hadn't seemed to be in pain, she'd paced in endless circles, head hung low, all day long. She was having twins, and those were always tricky with horses, especially with the heritage of their parents.

Thunder's dam, Gullfaxi, a horse equally as fast on water or in the air as she was on land, and his sire, Longma, a scaled horse that was part dragon, would provide interesting genetics. Nevermind his granddam, a man-eating mare of Diomedes, and his grandsire, Bucephalus, born of a pegasus and the nuckelavee, who Zeke was sure was at least part demon.

Bolt was a mixture, too. Born of Balius, whose parents were a harpy and the Zephyrus wind, and Xanthus, whose parentage was a bit murky, but seemed to include two centaurs and the god Poseidon, in a triangle Zeke didn't really want to think about too much. There was no way to tell what kind of babies Bolt and Thunder had cooked up, or how long this pregnancy would last.

Thunder tried to appease his mate by bringing her gifts — he pulled up flowers and presented them to her, dragged her favorite blanket out of the stable, dumped the bucket of grooming tools at Zeke's feet, in a not-so-subtle hint to spoil Bolt, then pushed Zeke around until he gave in and cut up some apples, adding raisins, pumpkin, and some strawberries for a fruit salad.

*It would be nice if Bolt had inherited her father's penchant for talking, so she could tell us what to do.* Zeke had determined long ago that the safest route with females of any species was to always do what they said. He debated calling the veterinarian, but couldn't see how that would help. She knew about Other World creatures, but would likely make a wasted trip.

Nothing settled the mare, and she continued trudging in endless circles throughout the day as Thunder alternatively paced and stopped to glare at Zeke.

"Sorry, my friend." Zeke patted the warhorse's shoulder. "I had nothing to do with this situation. I feel confident in saying this is pretty much all on you."

Thunder snorted, gave Zeke another shove, and returned to pacing next to Bolt.

Finally, as the sun set, Bolt lifted her head, nickered, and nuzzled Thunder. The warhorse let out a tremendous sigh and relaxed.

As the horses leaned against one another in the waning light of day, Zeke realized he'd been wrong. Having a Dragă would never be less than the best thing that happened to him. He touched his chest over his still heart. What would it feel like to have a heartbeat again? See colors while the sun was up? Feel human emotions? Share an eternal bond. For a thousand years, the vampires of the Ildum hadn't thought it possible. The Dragă massacre had annihilated those chances.

Until yesterday, when Stryx, the Esag of their Ildum, found his Dragă. After an explosive battle with the traffickers who had kidnapped Ember, Stryx brought her home safe this afternoon. Ember was the first, and now Stryx and a few of the others were on a mission to rescue her twin, and likely the second Dragă, in two days.

Zeke's cell trilled. He slid a hand into his pocket to retrieve his phone. "Hello, Hybrid."

"Hello, Knight." Ciaran chewed and swallowed. A sandwich, no doubt. "I have a quest for you."

Uh oh. Ciaran used *quest* because he knew Zeke couldn't refuse one of those. "What do you want?"

"Hey, you don't have to sound so suspicious."

"I wouldn't be suspicious if you hadn't said quest. You want me to do something that I will probably not want to do."

"The thing is... Ember is leaving."

"What?" She'd only been with Stryx for a few hours. How had that gone so wrong already? "Why?"

Ciaran cleared his throat. "Let's just say those two don't see eye to eye on a few things. Or most things. Or, well, anything, really. Selene told me to help Ember, so I showed her the garage. But you should follow her to make sure she's okay. Whatever you do, do not approach her."

That sounded ominous. "But... aren't they bringing her sister back here?"

"Ember thinks she can find her twin on her own."

After she'd already been kidnapped by mages once. They'd be after her again, and if she went somewhere they were watching for her...

"And you can't do this because..."

"I've got some more assignments from Selene. Karov is online with the rescue party. Ember took one of Drake's bikes, so I don't think sending him to follow her is a good idea, and he doesn't really do blending in all that well. Norrix is doing research. That leaves you."

Zeke sighed, and after a final look at the horses, began the hike across the lawn in front of the compound. "Fine. I'll follow her, but only until Stryx can take over. I don't want to get my head ripped off." Figuratively *or* literally.

"Good. I gave her a Plan D. You know. Just in case."

That meant explosions.

Why did Dragă make nothing simple?

# CHAPTER TWO



BIJOU

Done at the hospital for the day, Bijou slid into her Fiat 500, held the door open long enough for Seeri, the foot-tall, crimson-haired, red-winged fairy, to fly in, and tapped her fingers on the steering wheel. Catching sight of the scars on her hands and arms, light against her black skin, she pulled the sleeves of her sweater down to her fingers.

Where to go? There were four women, and her friend Poppy, she had to figure out how to help at home. But the gang who'd kidnapped her friend, and put the others into their catatonic conditions, was still on the loose, and that didn't sit well with her.

Yesterday, Poppy had escaped barefoot, wearing another woman's clothes, and driving a stolen car full of unresponsive witches. She knew Bijou as a doctor in the emergency room, and that she tended to unusual medical cases, which is why she brought the witches to Bijou.

Bijou hadn't realized Poppy was missing. The Man, an administrator at the hospital, had put a note in the computer that Poppy was on leave. Things never ran quite the same when Poppy, Bijou's favorite nurse, wasn't around, so she'd checked. Poppy hadn't mentioned taking time off, and a kidnapping didn't allow people to prepare in advance, so how had The Man known to put that note about her in the system?

It wasn't there now, but Bijou had taken a photo of the screen. She had proof she wasn't crazy. The Man gave her an uneasy feeling. Had since the first day she'd started at the hospital. Always skulking around and watching everyone. She couldn't figure out what he actually did, other than complain about Bijou wasting resources.

She should head home, but Uwa and Uba were there, and her parents were capable of dealing with the witches as they recovered from their ordeals. Uba would call if he needed help. Poppy had pointed out on a map where she'd been held in the warehouse district. The area needed checking out — and possibly burning to the ground. There could be hints as to how the gang chose victims or something that could lead her to where the women were supposed to be sent.

Normally, Bijou contented herself with leaving humans to humans. The police could deal with them. But this group had made it personal. Staying out of human crime went out the window when these men kidnapped her friend. Now, Bijou was making it her business to shut them down.

So, while Uwa and Uba took care of the guests at home, Bijou would track the traffickers. And this coincided with her side job of hunting monsters. Although, after ten years, Bijou was at a dead end tracking the Obayifo. These kidnapers and traffickers could stand in until she unearthed a new lead. The only one

she had at the moment was *underground grave*, which didn't narrow anything down since practically all graves were underground.

She also couldn't be sure how dependable her source was. Crow had suffered at the hands of a mage, and while he'd survived the physical torture, there were some mental deficits he lived with.

When she'd found him on her search for the Obayifo, he'd introduced her to a network of Other Worlders who tried to prevent kidnappings and abuse. Their group was an unlikely coalition, to be sure. Crow, a boy infected with the blood of hungry things, a dream walker no one had ever actually seen, an incubus, some other assorted demons and male witches, a banshee, herself, and Allister — the son of a mage.

Working with them was logical, since the Obayifo took and fed on children. The collaboration would let her know if children went missing. While abductions of witches had gone up, kidnappings of children had gone down. Still, the group did worthwhile work, even though she was no closer to the Obayifo.

“What do you think, Seeri? Do you want to go home, or see what trouble we can find?”

Seeri had accompanied Bijou's father from their home in Africa when Bijou began hunting for the Obayifo. One of the red Mmoatia fairies, she loved causing mischief, and it was a toss up whether or not she'd actually help on any given hunt. Cherry gum, her favorite reward, and the flavor she'd been named for, usually bought her cooperation.

The fairy flew to the glove compartment, opened it, and extracted the all black outfit and weapons she liked to wear on their hunts for monsters.

Bijou laughed, hitting the button to pop the trunk and retrieve her hunting clothes. “Trouble, it is.”

Pulled to the side of the road, Bijou watched several trucks pass through the open, black metal gates. Poppy was right. Beyond the fence, it was like a city of warehouses, all lined up in neat rows and columns for as far as Bijou could see. Poppy had said the place was dead — but today the area bustled.

No one inspected the vehicles or talked to the drivers. A car drove out, the driver and passenger both women who appeared to be in no danger. They left unimpeded. Seemed like business as usual.

Seeri stood, backwards-facing feet braced on the armrest, and peered out of the passenger window. She glanced over her shoulder, pointed at the gate, and nodded.

The fairy could sense magic. If she thought it was okay to enter, it probably was.

Bijou put the car in gear and drove in, taking turns at random. Three miles long, a mile deep. Where to start? While Poppy had pinpointed the warehouses, she wasn't sure which one she'd been held in.

When they neared the center of the warehouse city, Seeri offered directions until they arrived near one warehouse with a group of people gathered

outside. The windows lacked glass, and several charred holes gaped in the roof. Bullet holes riddled the walls and metal roll-up door. What happened here? Poppy hadn't mentioned a war in the streets.

Attracting attention wasn't the idea. Bijou kept her speed slow but constant and passed by, turning at the next corner. She drove a few rows away, parked, and walked back, Seeri flying overhead.

She chose a building with upper level windows that offered a view of the damaged structure. The padlock and chain on the door were hardly a challenge. Inside, she handed the lock and chain to Seeri, who flew out the window Bijou opened to rehang them so they looked undisturbed.

This place hadn't been used in months. Maybe years. A layer of dust covered the floor and abandoned machinery. Windows filtered sunlight through thick grime. Seeri returned and flew next to Bijou as she climbed to the second floor and entered the office. A file cabinet, desk, and single chair. Windows overlooking the floor below and the damaged building. Curiosity drew her to the outside windows. What had happened? Had Ember and Musette done that after Poppy drove the stolen get-away car?

The crowd milled around, not in any hurry to disperse. Some were curious, talking and gesticulating animatedly at the warehouse, but a few of the men had the empty eyes she'd seen far too often on her hunts. If they were interested, maybe they were some of the gang who'd kidnapped Poppy and the others. Bijou wouldn't mind introducing herself to them, but this was about information gathering at the moment, and she wouldn't be able to nose around until they left.

Turning away, she opened the top drawer of the file cabinet and extracted a handful of folders. Not that she expected the gang to leave a handy spreadsheet outlining the entire network and their contacts in neat lines and graphs laying out. She took photos of company names and addresses. Even though the information wasn't exactly current, maybe something could be learned from possible connections.

# CHAPTER THREE

↑  
ZEKE

The truck he loved to drive, a six-wheeled, armor-plated behemoth, didn't exactly blend, so Zeke resigned himself to one of the ubiquitous black SUVs the Ildum owned. Ember never looked behind herself, but she could be watching in her side mirrors. He varied the distance between them, turning off and back onto the road. He didn't have to keep her in visual range. All their cars and bikes were equipped with tracking. He just needed to be close in case she got into trouble.

At least the sun had gone down fully, so it was less likely he would accidentally get murdered.

Which seemed likely, based on the fact that she was driving straight to the warehouses where she'd been held prisoner yesterday. Why did she think her twin was here? After Stryx and Idris left to track Ember last night, Zeke had stayed behind and driven the length and width of the warehouses in case there were others in need of rescue. There hadn't been any other heartbeats. Everyone they'd left behind was dead.

Once through the gates, he dropped back farther, relying on the device to track Ember. The motorcycle headed in seemingly random directions, then headed toward the exit and stopped. Zeke turned around to follow, but a figure in black and wearing a motorcycle helmet sprinted past him.

What was she doing? Rather than be obvious, Zeke drove by Ember and parked, then left the vehicle to follow her on foot.

Ember approached a black SUV and opened the back door. Was she going to get in and hope they took her to her sister? The faint sound of a second heartbeat carried to him, and a glimpse of a face exactly like hers. Her twin. Stryx and the others were on a wild goose chase. Ember closed the door and crept into the warehouse.

Zeke walked forward, memorizing the license plate out of habit.

"You! Wait! I'm not —" a man pleaded.

A crack echoed through the air. Ember ran out, lacking her helmet. She locked the door with a chain, tossed something under the SUV, dove into the driver's seat. Tires screeching, she backed up, crushing whatever she'd tossed under the car, and sped away.

What the hell?

He dashed toward the driveway. Maybe Karov could get data off the crushed phone. Another SUV pulled into the driveway, diverting Zeke. He kept his rapid pace, but adjusted his trajectory so he went around the side of the warehouse.

A big, white-haired man got out of the car. His swollen face and blackening eyes said he'd likely been on the losing end of a fight.

Dmitri. It had to be him. The man who'd kidnapped Musette and Ember. He'd found himself on the wrong side of her temper and fists.

Zeke called Karov. "Ninja, Ember abandoned Drake's bike and is driving a stolen SUV. I just saw Dmitri. Here's the information for his car." He listed the license plate numbers, makes and models. "Ember's got her sister, and is heading north out of the warehouses."

Karov whistled. "Ciaran said she'd left. Stryx is going to lose his mind. I'm on it."

Dmitri hurried out of the building, got behind the wheel of his car, and drove in the opposite direction Ember had taken.

With her twin in the car, Ember would head for safety as quickly as possible, and she had a head-start. Dmitri was a known threat, headed in the wrong direction, and Karov was on him. There were still three heartbeats inside that warehouse. Who had Dmitri been meeting with? Better to stay and find out.

# CHAPTER FOUR



Her phone vibrated in her pocket. Bijou pulled it out. The number wasn't familiar, but that didn't mean anything. Her work with an underground movement to protect and hide those who needed help often meant unpredictable calls from unknown numbers. "Hello?"

"Doc." Allister was a boy far too young to be playing games with dangerous men. "I need your help."

"What's wrong?" *Please don't let him be hurt.*

"I have a witch with me. She's one of the witches we... took yesterday. Something isn't right. I think the Spider Mage did something to her. I'm supposed to take her to the Wolf Mage, but can you take a look at her?"

"Where are you?"

"At the warehouses."

"Me too. I'm in 5-4865."

"You — Bijou! It's dangerous here!"

She was more prepared than Allister for danger, but he didn't want to hear that. "Well, that's where I am. Can you get to me?"

Allister blew out a breath. "Yes. I'll be there in a minute."

An engine rumbled outside. Bijou paused her rifling of the papers in the file cabinet and went to the stairs.

The door opened, and Allister entered. He raised a hand to Bijou, but turned as the door opened behind him.

"You! Wait! I'm not —"

A sickening crack echoed through the warehouse, and Allister dropped.

Had someone figured out he wasn't who he was pretending to be? Bijou raced down the stairs as the door slammed, the chain rattled, and the lock clicked. Outside, the engine revved and faded as Allister's car drove away.

She knelt next to Allister and carefully palpated his head. Pieces of his skull shifted under her fingers.

Seeri landed on Allister's chest, wings fluttering in agitation.

"Oh, Allister." There wasn't time to take him anywhere or wait for an ambulance. She couldn't let him die like this. "Seeri, can you do anything for him?"

The fairy nodded and unzipped a pocket. She extracted a tiny bag and placed a bit of root into Allister's mouth.

Bijou knew enough about what the fairy did to recognize that would help with the pain. She closed her eyes and reached deep inside herself for the tiny bit of magic she'd inherited from her father. It was unreliable, and she'd never been able to channel the energy nearly as well as Uba, no matter how he'd tried to teach her.

*Please, please, please.*

An image of a beautiful black-skinned woman with wild hair and a huge green snake draped over her shoulders appeared in Bijou's mind. Her hands glowed a faint green. She pressed them to Allister's head. Beneath her fingers, the bones moved as they reset themselves. The woman in Bijou's mind gave her a haughty look.

*Thank you,* Bijou murmured.

A key snicked in the lock.

"Help..." Allister groaned.

"Allister?" a gruff voice called.

"Don't move," Bijou whispered. No way to tell how many of them there were. Better to take them by surprise. She and Seeri dashed for the stairs and made it into the office, watching through the windows.

Allister let out a pained sound.

"Get away from the door." The door slammed open.

A white-haired man entered and knelt. "Allister, where is the gold witch?" When he didn't get a response, he pressed a hand to Allister's head. White mage magic tinged with the faintest of green glowed for a few seconds.

Was he trying to heal Allister? That didn't seem like something he would do.

Allister turned on his side and vomited. "Thank you." He wiped his mouth. "I thought I was going to die."

"What happened?" the man demanded.

"The red witch..."

The mage's man sat straight up. "How long ago?"

"Not sure." Allister's words slurred. "Few minutes?"

A white glow suffused the man's arm. "I'll be back." He rushed out.

Bijou darted down the stairs. Allister's head lolled. He looked like death. "Allister, open your eyes."

"Bijou?" He blinked. "There are so many of you."

"It's me. Blurred vision is normal after an injury like yours."

It was a pretty spectacular injury. Bijou wanted to be angry, but how could she? If someone kidnapped her, she'd smash skulls in, too. This red witch had only treated Allister as the kind of man he was pretending to be.

Allister lifted his hand to touch his head and winced.

"I couldn't repair all the damage. Doesn't look like that white magic helped much. You're going to have a headache for a while, and some bruising."

“The gold witch?” He sat up like someone had yanked a puppet string too hard, and moaned, closing his eyes.

“Don’t move so suddenly.” Bijou supported his back. “The woman who hit you took your car.”

“The gold witch isn’t well. She needs help. I have to find them. The car can be tracked.”

“I can drop you off somewhere.”

Allister started to shake his head, but thought better of it. “The gang mustn’t see you. I have another car parked outside the property. In case I had to make a getaway.”

“You shouldn’t be driving after that blow to your head. Your vision is blurry. You might pass out.”

“I can stay awake. I have to help them. I helped kidnap them, Bijou.” His voice broke. “What am I turning into?”

She wrapped his arms around him. Allister was not cut out for this. “They were already marked to be taken. By the time you found out, you couldn’t have prevented it.”

“I tried to stop Dmitri. Keep him away from them.” He pushed to his knees and rose shakily to his feet. “I’ve got to get out of here and find him.”

“Let me drive you to your car.” Bijou stood. “We can wait until you feel up to driving.”

“No time. Dmitri will go after them. He has a thing for the red witch. Ever since she beat him, he’s obsessed with her, and if he catches her again...”

Bijou wouldn’t wish that fate on anyone. “Do you have some way to contact the others?”

He nodded slowly. “She took my phone, but I have a radio.”

Bijou blew out a breath. “All right. Radio them and say you’ve seen an intruder and were assaulted or something to make them suspicious. Direct them to me. You take my car. You’re in no condition to fight. If you take another blow to the head right now, you could die. Do you understand me? This is not a time to be macho. Get out of here. I’ll leave on foot and retrieve my car later.”

“I’ll leave it outside the north gate. You’ll be okay? You promise?”

She offered him a cocky grin. “They’re no match for me and Seeri.”

The fairy blew a red bubble and popped it with thorns she drew from her thigh holsters.

Allister smiled, just a little. He accepted the car key and stumbled away, talking into his radio. Bijou waited for a few seconds and slipped out the window with Seeri. It wouldn’t do to make things too easy for the guys coming after her. She chanced a quick peek around the corner to see if they were coming.

A big blond man approached the warehouse. His t-shirt stretched over a broad chest and thick biceps. He stopped, cocked his head to the side, and stared into

the warehouse like he had x-ray vision. His eyes skipped to where she stood and caught her in a golden-brown gaze.

Something in Bijou opened — a door she'd shut and bolted years ago, behind which she'd locked her happily ever after. A future she'd refused to let herself imagine or dream of played out in her mind. A partner. A family. The grandkids her mother always wanted.

No. This was no good. She did not have time for this. Her father's side of the family had magic. They always knew when they met the person meant for them. No way could she let Uwa know about this development. Her demands for grandkids would skyrocket.

“Seeri!” Bijou hissed. “Get back here!”

The fairy ignored her and shot across the street to buzz around the big man. What was wrong with the crazy creature? Fortunately, humans didn't see fairies. When Seeri tired of her game, she'd come back.

But he saw her. He held out his hand, and the flighty fairy landed on his upturned palm.

Not human, then.

As long as he maintained his human guise, there were too many options for what he could be. Uwa would know if she was here. Her mother could tell at a glance what kind of monsters hid beneath their camouflage.

When Seeri returned a few moments later, she clasped tiny hands next to her cheek, tilted her head to one side, and heaved a huge sigh as she batted her eyes.

Bijou scowled. “Not one word, do you hear me? Not to Uba, and especially not to Uwa, or there will be no more gum of any flavor for you ever again. Got it?”

The fairy froze, mouth open, eyes wide in disbelief, horror, and hurt feelings. She whistled in an angry tirade.

Guilt stabbed at Bijou. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. I know you can keep a secret.” It was a matter of *if* Seeri would keep quiet. Annoying the fairy would only invite retribution. Bijou offered a piece of cherry gum as a peace offering.

Seeri accepted it, and perched on Bijou’s shoulder, hurt feelings forgotten. Thank goodness the fairy was easy to placate.

Without thinking about it, Bijou directed her gaze back toward the big blond. He’d closed half the distance between them without making a sound.

Then there was no time to think about him, as the results of Allister’s radio call rushed toward her.