

The Source

Diana Bastine

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REVIEWS

"Diana Bastine has crafted a superb modern-day fantasy adventure. The Irish characters ring true, as does the fully-realized subterranean world the author has created. A fresh read from a promising new author!"

Debra Killeen, author of *The Myrridian Cycle*

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to Melanie G., who came up with the original idea for this story and the original names for two of the main characters, which led to my first brief draft two decades ago. Mel, you probably wouldn't recognize much else at this point, after twenty years of twists and turns.

I also dedicate this book to the memory of my beloved cat, Scott, who had to make his final trip to the vet the day after I learned the manuscript was going to be published.

And finally, I want to dedicate this book to my Big Sis, Debra, who – as ever and always – forged the path and led the way. What would I do and where would I be without your help and encouragement every step of the way? Words cannot express. This humble dedication will have to do.

Prologue

Fortescue slowly looked around the room for the last time, trying to absorb every detail since he might never see any of it again. Exiled! He didn't feel any resentment or bitterness, just a pervasive sadness spreading all the way to his toes. Why hadn't the Council been willing to hear him out? This was Hamelyn's future! If Fortescue was right about the Source, the Goddess Star and everything else, Hamelyn wouldn't have a future. Why did they have to be so obstinate? He thought he had detected a sympathetic glance from Abercrombie, and Felicity definitely supported him, but two out of thirteen wasn't enough. And everyone knew Fortescue was a favorite of theirs, so the other Council members wouldn't pay much heed to either of them.

The Council's shortsightedness deeply disappointed him. Even if they thought his ideas were based on nothing more than myths, there was still the growing problem of a polluted Source. If there were a remote chance that his

theory might be correct, wasn't it incumbent upon Hamelyn's leaders to at least try? Their intransigence made no sense to him. Fortescue was trained to understand and interpret the old stories. This was what he had studied for years! It wasn't as though he were making this up out of his imagination.

They had given him enough time to pack his things. As if he could carry everything he owned on his back. Fortunately, Fortescue didn't care about most of it. He only needed a change of clothes, his relevant papers and a flask of the Source. A slight smile appeared on his countenance. He didn't intend to be gone that long. He was going to go Above, prove he was right and return with the key to his people's future. Fortescue may be leaving as an exile, but with any luck, he'd come back a savior. He picked up his pack and headed for the door.

* * *

Abercrombie paced his office, very unhappy about Fortescue's banishment. He sincerely liked the young man and had always respected Fortescue's mother, but his one vote on the Council did not make much of a difference. He may have been the head of the Council of Hamelyn, but the only time his vote carried any extra weight was in the event of a tie. Abercrombie so wanted to give Fortescue an

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opportunity to prove, or disprove, his theory with the Council's blessing. Alas, it was not to be. Out of thirteen votes, only his and Felicity's had gone Fortescue's way. Felicity was also fond of the boy's dreamer personality, and sometimes she encouraged Hamelyn's eccentric citizens simply out of perversity, enjoying a devil's advocate role. She loved to buck any trend, just to encourage the free thinkers among their population. Abercrombie admired that quality in her. He often voted with her, partly because he too sympathized with Hamelyn's heretics, but also because he knew that any community needed to heed its outsiders in order to stay strong. It was often only those who could look at a situation from an unusual angle who could solve an intractable problem. Conventional wisdom too often failed.

Abercrombie sighed, wondering if that wisdom was going to fail Hamelyn and its denizens this time. Not one member of the Council had been able to come up with a viable answer to the problem of the Source's contamination. Fortescue's solution was something untested. Admittedly, no one had tried it because they didn't have the necessary talisman, but Fortescue had a plan to find it as well. If, of course, it even existed, which was the crux of the matter, really.

One Ivory Tower dreamer versus eleven members of the ruling elite. It wasn't a fair division, was it? And yet Abercrombie still couldn't help but hope for Fortescue's success. Both in finding this charm, and by being correct about its importance. Most people only gave lip service to a belief in the Goddess these days, but if Fortescue were right, Abercrombie hoped She would aid him in his quest. There had been a time when the citizens of Hamelyn had been willing to give up all in Her service. Now, it seemed She only had one young man with enough spirit to fight the good fight. Abercrombie prayed that young man could win.

* * *

Gabriel sat in his tall chair at the heavy wooden Council table. He looked slowly around the chamber, taking in details. There were, of course, no windows, given Hamelyn's depth underground and so no window coverings to admire. But the needlework of the tapestries decorating the walls was exquisitely done, he noticed, with its delicate silk stitches, but the fabrics were worn and beginning to fray. The woven tapestries were easily repaired by the community's skilled weavers, but those which had been hand-embroidered were too delicate for excessive handling. The table and chairs were also several centuries old and, though sturdy, showed signs of age too. The table's dark

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wood was shiny from polishing, but covered with myriad scratches. Even Abercrombie's chair, the only wooden one, was starting to look quite worn, with its gilt paint long since flaked off, although it was still finer than the stone ones surrounding it, as befit the head of the Council. Gabriel resented this sign of Abercrombie's higher stature among Hamelyn's citizens.

But then Gabriel resented a great deal about his position. He was not simply miffed that Abercrombie had been elected by the Council to lead, despite Gabriel having expended a small fortune he could ill afford on bribes. He also bitterly resented having been saddled with his nephew Mortimer all those years ago following the death of his sister and brother-in-law. Not that Gabriel ever shirked his duty or spared any expense raising the boy. Still, it wasn't as if Mortimer were his own child. Gabriel had no children of his own. Only two years into their marriage, his first wife had died in childbirth along with their stillborn babe. His second wife was barren and their divorce so acrimonious he soured on the female sex for decades after. By that time, Gabriel found that he was no longer as attractive to the ladies as he had been in his youth. Oh, he was still quite handsome, with his flowing silver hair and piercing eyes, but there was something in his personality that put off prospective brides.

The fact that he was no longer in a position to produce an heir other than his nephew was a bitter pill to swallow.

Gabriel rose and began to pace the Council chamber. He ran his fingers along the gilt frames of the portraits of past Council members, some of them his own ancestors. He sighed. Somehow Gabriel couldn't see Mortimer's portrait ever hanging on this wall. Where had he gone wrong with that boy?

* * *

Mortimer was also pacing, around his own room. Part of him felt Fortescue was making a fool of himself, but another part, the greedy part, wondered if there might be something to it. Something like power...power that would impress even his uncle. What if the old fables were true? Might he not be missing an opportunity? If Mortimer could gain that sort of control over the Source, he could control all of Hamelyn and prove to Gabriel that he would indeed amount to something.

* * *

Frowning, Fortescue glanced at his pocket watch. He'd been walking for quite some time and the tunnel walls still looked the same. They continued to drip with moisture, though not as much, and there was no change in color beyond the usual subtle variations. The torches lighting the

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way seemed to be farther apart, but Fortescue couldn't be certain whether that was simply due to the fact that he was walking slower as he grew increasingly tired. He expected everything to look different somehow, unrecognizable. He wrinkled his brow. Why was it all still the same?

Weary with fatigue, Fortescue finally saw wooden double doors, the gates to the unknown Aboveground world, just ahead. He pushed against them but they were very heavy. It took every bit of his strength to get them to begin moving. With one final thrust, he shoved through and looked eagerly ahead, but disappointment etched his face. Stretching ahead of him as far as he could see were more of the same dank, dripping walls. Fortescue nearly wept in frustration. How could this be? He'd built it up in his mind for so long, and now.... Maybe there was no Above. Maybe it was all simply a legend crafted by his forefathers. But if there was no Above, then his entire mission was in vain. Fortescue refused to accept that he could be wrong. He had studied the source material for years; he'd been so certain that there was a forgotten world Above. He was determined to see this through. He couldn't afford to be wrong about this. More importantly, whether they chose to believe him or not, Hamelyn's people couldn't afford for him to be wrong about it.

He forged ahead. His legs were tired and sore, and his feet hurt from the unaccustomed walking, but he refused to quit. He would prove the old stories, and himself, right!

Hours later Fortescue raised his head as he noticed a change around him. Yes, the walls *did* seem drier here! How long had this been so? No matter; he must be getting closer now. Maybe he was almost Above.

Propelled by a burst of fresh energy, Fortescue began to walk faster, almost to run. Just as he expected, he quickly reached another set of doors, exactly like the ones he'd encountered earlier. As he pushed through them, Fortescue found himself in a cave. There was a dim glow at the far end. Light! Fortescue rushed eagerly toward the steadily increasing brightness, so close now, so close. He held out his arms, as though to embrace it. Could this be the sun? He ran headlong into it, arms still open wide, wishing to grasp it in his hands and hold it to him. He looked up into the painfully bright sky, but before he could process the effect of all this upon him, he collapsed at the cave's opening, blinded and dazzled by the light. "I have seen the sun," Fortescue marveled moments before he lost consciousness.

CHAPTER 1

Caitlin Flynn shifted her backpack from her left shoulder to her right. Although she enjoyed hiking through Ireland’s hilly countryside, sometimes her supplies moved around and she needed to readjust. It wasn’t as if she spent days on end camping out and needed tons of stuff; Caitlin just liked to throw together whatever she needed for an afternoon close to nature. There was plenty of country to explore without straying too far from home. So usually all she carried was water, a snack or lunch, a book to read and writing or drawing supplies, depending on her mood and the weather. It was definitely easier to protect a paperback from the gentle showers the Irish referred to as “soft weather” than it was to protect a sketchpad, pencils and eraser. Sometimes, when it was too wet to stop, Caitlin simply enjoyed the walk for its own sake. She certainly didn’t mind walking in the rain.

Caitlin had gotten used to the vagaries of the Irish weather over the past few years. Following the death of her mother from breast cancer when she was twelve, her father had decided to return to the country of his birth. Niall Flynn had thought it would be easier to raise his adolescent daughter alone if he were closer to his own family, his roots. It had been a big adjustment for Caitlin at first, but she adored her grandparents and enjoyed meeting her Irish cousins. Several were a great deal older than she was – which was helpful when she needed advice – and some of them were much younger. Being an only child, Caitlin had missed growing up with a house full of siblings, but this was nicer. She had all the benefits of brothers and sisters without actually having to share her space. She still sometimes missed her American friends, but in these days of email and social networking websites, it was easy to keep up with people. It wasn't the same as being able to chat on the phone or at school, but Caitlin had always been somewhat introverted and enjoyed solitary pursuits, so she wasn't as lonely as a more outgoing girl might have been in the same situation.

Caitlin and her father had lived in a small college town in the States anyway, so she was used to not having all of the big city amenities. And Ireland was a small enough

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country that everywhere was close enough to Dublin to get there in less than a day. Some of the roads weren't quite what she was used to – much narrower, for one thing – but there were still plenty of motorways, as the locals called their roads, to get you from one major town to another. Things had changed over the past few decades, making Ireland much more modern than many Americans realized, and it wasn't difficult to get around.

School was different, but not greatly. Caitlin still needed to learn most of the same basic subjects, although she also needed to study the Irish language. Fortunately for her, she was pretty good with languages, and her father had done well in Irish and was able to help. As a folklorist, Niall Flynn found many less common languages useful to learn, and he had passed his gift for learning and his love for myth and ancient stories on to his daughter. Caitlin wouldn't have to take the SAT's, but she would have to sit for her Leaving Certificate, which for all practical purposes was the same thing: a comprehensive test at the end of high school which determined where you could go to university and what course of study you were qualified to take. And you needed to pass the Irish language part too. Caitlin wasn't concerned about taking the test the next spring since she was doing well enough in all of her classes and enjoyed learning. She

was even thinking of studying myth and folklore like her dad. She loved reading all of the old stories and fairy tales, and even trying her hand at sketching some of the creatures about which she read.

Caitlin stopped walking to check for a good spot to take a break. She was beginning to feel hunger pangs, and was hoping to finish *Dracula* this afternoon. As she was taking in the countryside, she noticed something dark by some nearby rocks. Caitlin would never have seen it if the sun hadn't just come out from behind clouds and shone on the black heap, casting enough of a shadow to make it seem larger and more noticeable. If the sun hadn't lighted on it just at the moment she'd been looking in the right direction, she would have glanced past it.

As she moved closer and the object began to take on a separate shape from its surroundings, Caitlin began to frown. From where she stood, it looked like a body. She shivered, wondering if someone had been killed or hurt, but curiosity and concern overcame her fear and she continued to approach.

When she reached the rocks she saw a body – definitely a person – and knelt beside it. She had to roll it over to see the face and when she did, she gasped and nearly lost her grip on his shoulders. He looked dead, yet he

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appeared to be breathing; there was a shallow rise and fall to his chest. But his skin was so white. Not pale, like her skin after a long, cold winter, but white, like paper or fine linen.

Caitlin looked around frantically, trying to see if anyone else was nearby, someone who may have attacked this strange-looking man. She thought for a moment that she glimpsed movement out of the corner of her left eye, but when she turned in that direction, there was nothing. Still, she felt a chill creep down her spine, and again shivered.

She glanced back down at the man in front of her. It seemed from the way he lay that he had perhaps been trying to crawl or drag himself somewhere. Caitlin looked around and noticed a cave-like opening among the rocks. Could he have been trying to reach this when whatever struck him down occurred?

In any event, she decided, she couldn't just leave him exposed to the elements. Given the Irish climate, even in summer, rain could sweep down at any moment, no matter how strongly the sun was shining at any particular time. She had never had much desire for a cell phone, or mobile as they called them here, preferring the quieter, more peaceful sounds of nature, but one certainly would have come in handy right about now. Caitlin didn't feel comfortable leaving

this fellow out in the open for the amount of time it would take her to return home and back, and she didn't know of any homes or farms close by. She couldn't take him back to her house either. He obviously couldn't walk on his own at the moment and she couldn't carry him that far. And even if she could, she'd never be able to sneak him past Mrs. Doherty, the housekeeper, without explaining why she was dragging home a total stranger. Her father was sometimes absent-minded, but Mrs. Doherty had sharper senses than the family cat. So that was out of the question. Caitlin would just have to drag him into the cave and hope he'd be all right. It was summer, so the weather shouldn't be too cold, and she'd be able to check on him several times a day over the holidays.

After checking carefully for any sign of a head injury or broken bones and finding none, Caitlin half carried, half dragged the man into the cave. She wasn't sure why she felt so protective of a total stranger, but for some reason she did. She shook her head. He looked so frail and helpless. He was so thin that Caitlin could almost lift his weight by herself. His bones seemed as hollow as a bird's. Her cat felt heavier and more solid.

After making the man as comfortable as she could, Caitlin rose and attempted to gauge their surroundings. It

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didn't take long. The stone walls were reasonably dry and the cave dimly lit. She wished she had some blankets or something else with which to cover him but, although his clothes appeared old-fashioned and oddly made, he seemed warmly enough dressed, even for the changeable Irish climate. Caitlin frowned. Why was he wearing so much black? Even in Ireland, the sun came out in the summertime. Maybe not every day, but still. She shrugged, figuring he could explain later when he woke up. For all she knew, he was simply a Goth and spent his time listening to depressing music and applying eyeliner. That would certainly explain some of his paleness, although it didn't look like makeup to her admittedly untrained eye.

Caitlin stepped out of the cave, blinking in the brighter light. She looked around, brow furrowed. Something felt wrong. She sensed she was being watched, but there was no sign of anyone about. Still, for no reason she could explain, she felt uneasy. Shaking herself in an attempt to dispel the nervous feeling, Caitlin headed toward home. She was pretty sure she'd be able to return before supper and if she could slip past Mrs. Doherty, she'd bring some food and blankets. Adjusting her backpack, she set herself a quick pace.

* * *

It was late afternoon before Caitlin returned to the cave, her pack much fuller this time. She had hoped to get away a little earlier, but along with summer and school holidays came more household chores. No matter how fidgety she might be, there were certain duties she simply could not avoid, and Mrs. Doherty kept an eagle eye on her until she finished them. Then, and only then, was she able to escape.

While Mrs. Doherty had her back turned, Caitlin had managed to grab a few pieces of brown bread and cheese and several freshly baked oatmeal cookies, one of which she munched as she walked. She didn't know if the man would be hungry but as thin as he was, Caitlin wouldn't be surprised if he hadn't eaten for days.

Caitlin jogged the last few yards, her backpack bouncing against her shoulders, and instinctively ducked her head as she entered the cave only to stop dead in her tracks with a choked-off scream.

The thin stranger was drinking blood!

As he turned toward her, wide-eyed in reaction to her gasp, Caitlin could see the blood running down his chin and dripping onto the cavern floor. She had already turned and started to run back out of the cave when his voice stopped her.

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“Please, lady! Wait.”

Caitlin never could explain what prevented her from dashing away from this peculiar man forever, whether it was her instincts or something gentle she heard in his voice, but she paused, then turned back to face him.

The man was standing up, very slowly. Caitlin could see the smooth-looking clay container he held.

“You are frightened, miss. What startled you? Surely I am not the cause of your fear.”

Caitlin was confused. Did he really not understand the picture he presented? She tried not to shudder. “You’re a vampire,” she said uncertainly, proud that her voice barely shook.

A puzzled expression crossed his face. “A what? I do not understand. What is a vampire? Do you have experience of my people?”

Caitlin removed her backpack and slowly sat down in the mouth of the cave. “Okay. Your people? Let me think about this for a second.” She busied herself removing the blanket and the food she’d brought from her pack. Then she took a deep breath. “Okay, well, um, if you’re not a vampire, then why were you drinking blood?”

The pale, tall man stared at her as if he had no idea what she was talking about. She could swear he looked

offended, as though she had mortally insulted him. But Caitlin was sure of what she'd seen.

"What are you talking about? Blood? What blood?" He definitely seemed confused.

But she had *seen* him. Hadn't she? She couldn't disbelieve her own eyes. "I saw you. Just now. When I came in, I saw you drinking blood. From that, I guess." Caitlin pointed to the flask in his hand.

"This? This is not blood." He held up the flask, shaking his head. "This is the Source."

"The Source?" Caitlin could hear the capital S. "What's that?" She rose and stepped forward a little, still unsure of the stranger.

He smiled. "I shall tell you," he said simply. He motioned for her to sit down again but she hesitated. He smiled. "You *are* frightened of me. Why?"

"I – I'm not sure. I thought –" She looked at the cave floor, ashamed at her reaction. Her father had always taught her not to judge people by their appearances, but rather by their words and their deeds. Caitlin should at least let the man speak and not make up her mind until she heard what he had to say, shouldn't she? Just because he looked peculiar didn't make him bad, did it?

Caitlin met his eyes, "Tell me about your Source."