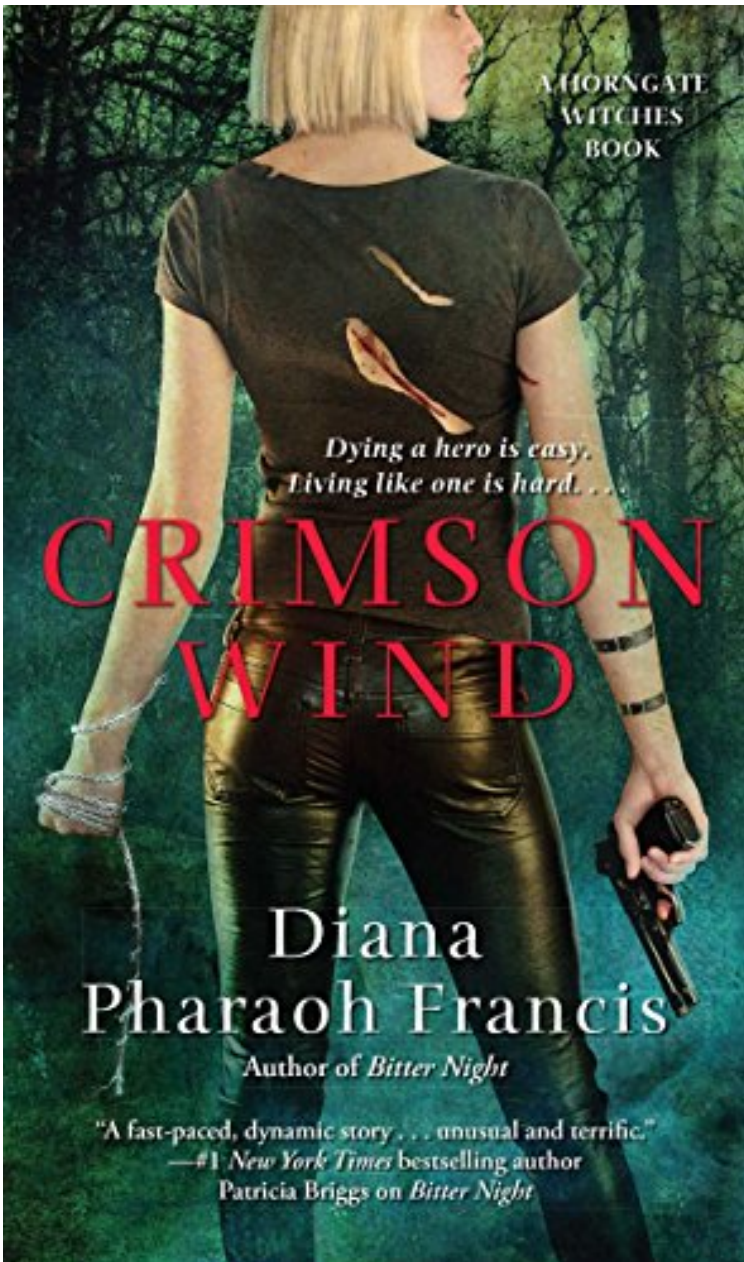


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Crimson Wind



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Dtails sur le produit Rang parmi les ventes : #437209 dans eBooksPubli le: 2010-12-28Sorti le: 2010-12-28Format: Ebook Kindle

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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurTHERE ARE GOOD GUYS. THERE ARE BAD GUYS. AND THEN THERES MAX. Max knows what trusting the wrong person can cost you. Her former friend Giselle, a powerful witch, enslaved Max years ago, turning her into a Shadowbladea deadly warrior compelled to fight for Giselle. But theres more at stake now than Maxs thirst for revenge. The Guardians, overseers of the magical world, have declared war on humanity and on any witches not standing with them. Max and Giselle have come to an

uneasy truce in order to protect what's left of Horngate, their covens home. Max would do anything for Horngate even give herself over to a mysterious otherworldly creature in the nearby mountains in exchange for his help. But first, she intends to save the mortal family she left behind. And Alexander, the Shadowblade warrior who could be her closest ally or her deadliest enemy, is going with her. On a road trip into the unknown, Max and Alexander face wild magic, desperate enemies, and battles that bruise both body and soul. But the greatest challenge will come from unexpected revelations that test everything Max believes about who she is and where her loyalties lie. . . .

THE DREAM WAS NOT A DREAM. IT WAS A KIDNAP.

Max struggled. She hung pendant and weightless in the abyss between worlds. Tatters of magic swirled like bright jewels in the black. They shimmered and billowed like silk rags, and they sliced like razors wherever they touched. She twisted to avoid a swooping cluster that bunched and spiraled like a deadly flock of birds. A gauzy wisp of purple slid along Max's hip, and she wrenched away from the liquid curl of acid that reached intimately down inside her, causing a fierce ache in a place beyond flesh and bone. Max did not scream. She had done it just once, the first time Scooter had dragged her here. She wasn't going to give him the satisfaction ever again. A force shoved her insistently toward the right. Scooter. The fucker. She yanked away from the pressure, tumbling in the darkness and into a cloud of gray magic. It clung to her with tenacious eagerness. It melted into her. Her heart pounded frantically as her healing spells kicked into high gear, drawing on her shallow reserve of calories from the food she'd eaten before bed. It wouldn't be long until they began feeding on her flesh. If she couldn't wake herself up, she was going to die. She hesitated, tempted to let herself stop fighting. He wanted her bad, and she was worthless to him dead. She'd love to see his face if he killed her. But he wasn't the only one who needed her. The thought spurred her. She resumed her struggle. Again the demanding push. She snarled and hauled back against it. She couldn't keep Scooter out; she couldn't keep him from attacking her every time she fell asleep but she didn't have to let him push her around while he had her trapped here. She didn't care if he probably was a half-breed god. Something like fear quivered deep inside her. She ignored it. She could panic later. And there would be a later. She'd make sure of it. She felt his frustration like an explosion of quills drilling through her insides. They curved like hooks and ripped through her. Pain burned like nothing she had ever felt. She opened herself to it out of habit, letting herself relax into the boiling cauldron of agony. It filled her, drawing her down into its depths. Far away, her body twitched and went as still as death as Max embraced the pain. Her breathing slowed, her heart beat evenly. She felt her spectral self smiling with vicious triumph as she drew perverse strength from the hurt. It was a skill she'd mastered the hard way. She refused to ever let anyone use her body against her, not if she could help it. And today she could. Scooter hovered out of sight, waiting for her to capitulate. He prodded her again. It felt like she'd been Tasered. Max snarled, wishing she could pummel him to bits. But there was no fighting him here. She didn't know how. But that didn't make her helpless. With slow deliberation, she reached out to her body. She told herself to kick and thrash. On her bed far away, her physical self responded, sluggishly at first, then began to jerk and convulse. She redoubled her efforts, evading Scooter as he sought to shatter the connection. It was a race. If she could wake herself first, she'd win. Pain streaked from her hand to her arm, and Max woke. She lunged to her feet. Her ribs bellowed as she panted. Blood ran from a ragged three-inch gash that seamed across her palm. She closed her fist around it with a grim smile of triumph. For the last two weeks, every time she went to sleep, Scooter came for her, and every time, it was harder and harder to wake up and escape. This time, she had planned for it. Max glanced down at the tack strips on the floor surrounding her mattress. Four-inch twenty-penny nails spiked from the wood in a six-inch-wide moat. She'd known that sooner or later as she struggled to wake, she'd impale herself and the pain would give her the means to wake up. Above on the wall was a dream catcher. Or it had been. The center of it was shriveled and twisted, and the smell of burned leather and feathers filled the room. She grimaced. It had been a long shot. The shaman who made it was powerful but nothing like Scooter. She opened her hand. The wound had mostly closed, thanks to her healing spells. Her stomach cramped sharply, and she wobbled dizzily. The spells were sucking more out of her than she had to give. For days, she'd been eating enough to feed the entire Pittsburgh Steelers defensive line, and it still wasn't enough. She stepped over the tack strip and grabbed a power bar from the stack on her nightstand, left there for just this purpose. Her hand shook, and she steadied it with an effort. She gulped the bar in two bites and then ate another dozen in quick succession. She grabbed the lukewarm bottle of flat Mountain Dew and chugged the entire thing, making a face at the foul taste. The bars and drink would give the spells some fuel to work with until she could calorie-load in the dining commons. Which, if she had any sense, she would do right now. She ran her hands through her short blond hair, annoyed at the way they still shook. She clenched

them as anger seared through her. She was getting really fucking tired of this. What she ought to do was go deal with Scooter once and for all. The only trouble was that seeing him might be the last thing she ever did in this world. Max drew a sharp breath and blew it out as her compulsion spells jerked tight. Tears burned in her eyes, and she staggered, sagging onto the box spring of her bed. Her legs felt like syrup. She drew deep, ragged breaths, bracing her elbows on her knees and pressing her hands against her face. Her compulsion spells didn't like the idea of her dying in a Scooter confrontation. She doubted Giselle had even thought what would happen when the witch-bitch promised to give Max to the bastard. If just thinking about going to him set off her compulsion spells she was supposed to protect Horn-gate and Giselle, not abandon them actually going to him might kill her. But then, so would he if she kept putting him off. Max snarled. Trust Giselle to make her the center of a game of magical tug-of-war and never think what it might do to Max. Giselle held the anneau of Horn-gate the knot of magic at the heart of a covensteads territorial power. She was a powerful and smart witch, as she must be to hold an anneau, as well as ruthless and cruel. Max's mouth twisted. She knew better than anyone just how ruthless and cruel Giselle could be. The witch had taught Max everything she knew about pain. Max had spent uncountable hours being tortured on her altar as she was bound to Giselle's service, then thousands more as those bonds were strengthened and increased. The memories were as fresh as when they were brand-new, and familiar fury swirled up inside Max as hot as on the first day she'd woken up to find herself no longer human. Giselle had turned her into a Shadowblade, one of two castes of warriors that every territory witch created as her own personal army. Shadowblades were creatures of the night the magic that made them was fueled by the elemental force of darkness. They could not go into the sunlight without burning or melting it was a swift and nasty death. They were preternaturally fast and strong, and many had other talents, depending on what spells the witch layered into them. Max was Giselle's Prime, the strongest of the Shadowblades and thus their leader. They answered to her, and she answered to Giselle. She ground her teeth together and swallowed, forcing down the foul taste that rose on her tongue as the memories of those first years of enslavement played vividly through her mind. Quickly she thrust them away. No. That was history now. Four weeks ago, she and Giselle had called a truce, and as bitter as it was, Max was going to stick to it. She had agreed to put aside her hate and thirst for revenge and work with Giselle to protect Horn-gate. It was a sacrifice she was willing to make, as was giving herself to Scooter. Horn-gate meant more to her than almost anything else. Almost. She still had something important to do, and come hell or high water, she was going to get it done before she tied a red bow around herself and hopped under Scooter's Christmas tree. Now she just had to tell him so. She thrust to her feet. No time like the present. It was only about noon, so her Blades would still be asleep, and the Sunspears would be on patrol. No one would be around to try to talk her out of it. As she crossed to her dresser, her compulsion spells coiled around her like razor wire. She panted shallowly. Usually she could think around them, twist her logic so that they loosened up and let her do whatever stupid thing she wanted to do. Not today. Compulsion spells didn't care if Giselle had traded Max away to Scooter. All they cared about was making sure Max protected the witch-bitch and Horn-gate. Committing suicide by visiting Scooter didn't cut the mustard. She laughed softly and let the pain feed her resolve. One good thing about it was that it helped keep the predator Prime inside her from rising. If it did, all her Blades would come running, and she really didn't need to explain herself. They should just obey her orders and quit harassing her to be more careful. She rolled her eyes. Like there was any safety to be had anymore. Like there ever had been. She stripped off her clothes and tossed them in the direction of her hamper, then dressed in heavy black cargo pants and a long-sleeved black T-shirt. Next, she went to the spacious closet. Two walls were devoted entirely to weapons. The third was stacked with ammunition, grenades, flash bombs, whetstones, reloading supplies, cleaning paraphernalia, and boxes of power bars, jars of peanut butter, cases of Gatorade, and several jugs of Mountain Dew. Several one-pound bags of M&M's rounded out the cache. A scattering of boots and running shoes was strewn across the floor, and in the corner near the door hung a collection of jackets and two Kevlar vests. Max examined the racks of weapons with narrowed eyes. What would she take with her? She wasn't going to see Scooter unarmed, though nothing she had would hurt him much. Scooter was a powerful creature of Divine magic, which meant that, like witches, he could perform magic and create spells. Uncanny creatures like Max were made of magic but had no abilities to manipulate magic. Although she knew he was Divine, Max had no idea what Scooter actually was. She didn't even know his real name. All she knew was that he was the child of Onniont, the horned serpent, and Nihansan, the spinner of webs both legendary creatures of immense magic and Scooter seemed to have inherited a hefty dose of it. Giselle had convinced him to guard a secret entrance to Horn-gate, one that only Max could open with her magical talent for opening locks. Giselle had foreseen the need for such an

entrance in a vision. Scooter had agreed for a price. That price was Max. He called her his gift, and even Giselle didn't know what that meant, but she'd still promised to give Max to him. Anything to get what she wanted. The knowledge stirred up the forge of old fury in Max's chest. The witch-bitch hadn't even asked any questions. She caught herself before the flames of her anger turned white-hot. The promise was made, and Max had agreed to it. It had to be done. Just not yet. Setting her jaw, she reached for her favorite weapons. First went on two flat-bladed knives. The sheaths strapped to the insides of her forearms with Velcro. She pulled her sleeves down over them. Next, she donned her shoulder holster. On the left side was her .45, and on the right was a pouch containing eight extra clips, half with hollow-point bullets, half with shot shells. Hollow points worked well on humans and even fairy creatures, if you hit them dead in the brain. The latter always healed, however. Shot shells debilitated them longer. The steel shot was mostly iron and stayed in the bodies, poisoning them. She strapped a combat knife to her thigh and her new Glock .9mm to her ankle before lacing up her boots. She ate another power bar as she went through her living room to her apartment door. She glanced around. There wasn't much to it. She had a long wall of books and scrolls in information about magic that she'd collected over the last thirty years. There was a brilliantly colored woven rug, several lamps, and a U-shaped black leather couch. On the far wall was a painting of a brilliant sunset over jagged mountains. It was the only sunset she'd ever see again. She scanned the room. I might not be coming back. She quenched the thought as soon as it flittered through her mind, but not fast enough. Her compulsion spells flailed her and she braced herself against the back of the couch. Her legs shook as her body spasmed and her muscles knotted into stone. She stayed there a moment, getting used to the pain, then turned stiffly and clomped to the door with ungainly steps that grew steadier with each forced movement. She opened the wards and slipped out as quietly as she could. The corridor was smooth, unpolished stone. There were no lights. Blades saw in the cave darkness with no trouble, and Giselle didn't have the strength to waste on restoring the witchlights that had been destroyed during the attacks four weeks ago. There were more important things to do, like rebuilding the shattered shield wards and the rest of the covenstead. Max's room was at the end of the passage. She went quietly to the stairway that rose from the center of the corridor, her teeth clamping together as she passed empty rooms. She'd lost six Blades in the attacks four weeks before. A ball of molten grief bubbled in her chest. It was a pain she didn't know how to cope with. She had thought she'd figured out how not to care, how to keep everyone at arms length. But it turned out she sucked at emotional armor and had let them get too close to her. Her hands clenched, and her fingernails cut half-moons into her palms as she drew a harsh breath deep into her constricted lungs. It didn't matter that they'd known the danger or that they were heroes. All that mattered was that Max hadn't been good enough to protect them. She was their Prime and she should have kept them safe. Logic told her that they were Shadowblades and their entire existence was to fight and protect Horngate. Of course they would die. No one got to live forever. But logic was cold comfort when she remembered their charred and mangled bodies. She bit her cheek, tasting blood. Enough. They were dead. It was her fault. The end. She didn't get to feel sorry because she fucked up. She had to do better next time. Train harder. She turned up the steps, bounding up them five at a time, her stomach still churning. She skimmed through the mountain fortress corridors like a shadow. Gravel still littered the floor, and dust hazed the air, despite the cleaning effort of the last four weeks. She heard footsteps ahead and ducked into a side passage. Her nose told her it was Magpie before the witch appeared. Her long blue-black hair was streaked white on each side of her face, giving her her nickname. She was a witch of minor power and a great cook, unless you pissed her off, and then you'd be eating inedible food for as long as she had her panties in a wad. She passed Max without turning her head, her body stiff. Her eyes were fixed and staring, and they had gone entirely white. Max eased back out into the corridor, a chill running down her back all the way to her heels. She'd seen Magpie look like that only once, just before she'd made a true prophecy meant only for Max. Now she was headed back in the direction of the Shadowblade apartments. Who was she looking for? Not Max. Magpie would have found her if so. So who? Max twitched as if to follow, then caught herself. She drew a breath. No. Following might keep Magpie from speaking the prophecy, and that could be disastrous. She swung around. She'd worry about it later. For now, she had an appointment with a homicidal godlet. She kept to the more unused corridors, many of which remained partially blocked from the attack four weeks ago. She turned down one and was caught by the shine of white light coming from ahead. It grew brighter as she drew closer, but didn't bother her eyes. Witchlight, then. Sunlight and even some artificial light blinded her, but not witchlight. She turned a corner and stopped at the bottom of a heap of stone. The light flared like a lighthouse beacon through an opening at the top. Max leaped up and through, quick and silent as a panther. She dropped to a crouch on the other side,

gravel crunching beneath her feet. In front of her was an angel, his back to her, his legs braced wide. He wore black leather jeans and a leather vest cut to allow his silver wings to emerge. They swept upward over his head, each metallic feather shining with razor edges. Black hair cascaded down to his shoulders in sharp contrast to his marble-white skin. He was beautiful, every muscle looking like it was chiseled from stone. The point of a massive sword rose four feet above his head. Its unearthly metal was sheathed in incandescent witchlight. Suddenly the light winked out, and Tutresiel's wings snapped shut with a musical chiming sound.

He turned. The sword was gone, vanished into thin air. His red eyes gleamed, and his mouth twisted in irritation. Shouldn't you be asleep this time of day? Max rose to her feet. The angel was one of the most beautiful and deadly creatures she'd ever seen. He stood nearly six and a half feet tall, with an aura that screamed danger. If he wanted, he could shred her with one swipe of his wings. Not that she'd make it that easy for him. Yep, she said. Then what are you doing here? Passing through, she said unhelpfully. His gaze ran over her from head to toe. His lip curled. You look like shit. She couldn't help her grin. She liked Tutresiel. He was an ass and a jerk, but he was honest, and you always knew where you stood with him. Everybody else didn't trust him at all, but he was as true to his nature as the scorpion in the fable, and if he stung you, then you deserved it for being stupid. Aren't you a bright ray of sunshine. Did some bully on the playground push you into the mud and steal your candy? The corner of his mouth twitched unwillingly. Sounds like you got up on the wrong side of the bed. Or maybe you just need to get laid. Her brows rose. You offering? He looked her over again. I don't fuck corpses. I'm not dead yet, Max said, her grin widening. But check back in an hour. Things change. His eyes narrowed as his mood shifted into hunt mode. What does that mean? Max sighed and shook her head. Talk about loose lips. She needed to pull her head out of her ass and get her shit together before someone—namely herself—got killed. Nothing for you to worry about, kitten. Go back to doing your yoga. Kitten? He snorted, then folded his arms as she started around him, his wings still blocking most of the passage. She stopped, tipping her head thoughtfully as an idea struck her. You don't like me much, do you? He smiled, and it was as cold as arctic ice. Don't take it personally. I don't like anyone, though you're better than most around here. Good. Then I need to tell you something. He looked surprised. Secrets? Are we going to braid each other's hair and have a slumber party, too? His gaze ran over her again. No offense, but even if I was a necrophiliac, I'd break you in half. His smile turned wolfish, and Max shivered with something close to desire. Holy mother of fuck. She did need to get laid if he was turning her on. Max rolled her eyes at him. Get over yourself, chicken boy. I'm going to go down into the vault to see Scooter. He's the creature that's been trying to kill me for the last couple of weeks, and there's a decent chance he's going to finish the job. If I don't come back, mention it to Giselle, would you? She didn't give him a chance to answer, but swung into a quick walk. Her compulsion spells stitched fire through every cell of her body. She shook with the effort of walking, but forced herself to keep going. She turned her head in surprise as Tutresiel fell into step beside her. He was scowling. You aren't telling Giselle what you're up to? She shook her head. No one but you, kitten. Why tell me? Because you don't care enough about me to try to stop me, and I should tell someone, if only so they don't waste time and magic looking for me. Very noble. She snorted. It's the job. Nothing noble about it. He said no more, but continued to pace along beside her. His razor-sharp feathers clanked lightly together. Max frowned at him. Going somewhere? With you. What for? He glanced down at her. I was wrong. What about? Turns out I like you more than I thought. Sort of the way a crocodile likes a wildebeest. Feeling hungry? He stopped and grabbed her arm, pulling her around to face him. His brow was furrowed with genuine confusion. Why don't you send me or Xaphan in to face this creature? Xaphan was a fire angel and as powerful and deadly as Tutresiel. She shrugged. Not your problem. Besides, Scooter would probably swat you both like flies. I'm a hundred times more powerful than you. If this creature will swat me, then what will he do to you? Like I said, that's my problem, not yours. Scooter wants me. If I send you in there, he'll kill you, and I'll still be on the hook. It's stupid and a waste. It could be Xaphan and I could weaken him so that you stand a better chance. His crimson gaze was fixed on her, pinning her in place. Max felt the predator inside her rising in response to the challenge she read there. Dammit. Not now. She wrestled with it, trying to keep it chained, but it broke free, flattening her humanity and filling her senses. Her body tensed and volcanic power filled the air. She stopped struggling, reveling in the primal strength of her Blade. She felt her body becoming more fluid, her senses sharpening, her instincts turning hard and deadly. The pain of her compulsion spells faded into the background of her mind. They weren't important. Hunting was important, and fighting. She glared at Tutresiel. What's your point? My point is that you protect your people and risk yourself, even when it's stupid. It's not stupid, kitten. It's common sense. Horngate can get along without me. If I don't happen to come back, you'll still be here to defend the covenstead. Like you said, you're

a hundred times more powerful than I am. You and Xaphan are too valuable to waste when Scooter only wants me. Besides, Ive seen the kind of fighting you do. Horngate wouldnt survive another one of your brawls.Its common sense for someone who isnt selfish, who will sacrifice herself for the good of her coven.

In my experience, that makes you rather unique in the magical world.Why doesnt that sound like a compliment?Because its stupid. You ought to concentrate on saving your own skin.Theres only one flaw in your thinking, she said.Oh? Whats that, princess?I made a promise, which means that any way you slice it, hes got me on his leash. Her mouth twisted. Hes been yanking my chain for weeks, and Im damned tired of it. Its time for me to get in his face.She swung around and began to jog away, hoping shed corked his mouth. Her Shadowblade Prime was fully roused now, power rolling away from her in uncontrollable waves. Her Blades wouldnt be able to ignore it. She had to get to the vault before they came running to stop her like a horde of hysterical nannies.Tutresiel fell in beside her again, his wings soundless as he held them stiff behind him.Promises are stupid, he said. You put yourself fully into his power. I thought you were smarter than that.If you keep calling me stupid, Im going to find a big pointy stick and jam it up your ass, she said.He chuckled. Any time you want to try, princess, Ill be ready. He sobered. Do not misunderstand. I have no intention of going in your place or trying to stop you. But I will bear witness. You should have that. He grinned. Besides, this could be fun. This place is as boring as a crypt.She blew out an annoyed breath, wanting nothing more than to rip off his wings and tell him to go rent himself a hooker or stick his head in a vat of acid if he wanted entertainment. Can I stop you?You could try. He flicked a wing out, the edge of a feather slicing lightly across the back of her exposed neck. But you wouldnt win.Cocky bastard. Max wiped away the trickle of blood, even as the wound healed over. Fine. Then do whatever blows your dress up, kitten. Just stay the hell out of my way. 2011 Diana Pharaoh FrancisPrsentation de l'diteurTHERE ARE GOOD GUYS. THERE ARE BAD GUYS. AND THEN THERES MAX. Max knows what trusting the wrong person can cost you. Her former friend Giselle, a powerful witch, enslaved Max years ago, turning her into a Shadowbladea deadly warrior compelled to fight for Giselle. But theres more at stake now than Maxs thirst for revenge. The Guardians, overseers of the magical world, have declared war on humanity and on any witches not standing with them. Max and Giselle have come to an uneasy truce in order to protect whats left of Horngate, their covens home. Max would do anything for Horngateeven give herself over to a mysterious otherworldly creature in the nearby mountains in exchange for his help. But first, she intends to save the mortal family she left behind. And Alexander, the Shadowblade warrior who could be her closest ally or her deadliest enemy, is going with her. On a road trip into the unknown, Max and Alexander face wild magic, desperate enemies, and battles that bruise both body and soul. But the greatest challenge will come from unexpected revelations that test everything Max believes about who she isand where her loyalties lie. . . .