

SEANAN MCGUIRE



ONE SALT SEA

An
October Daye
Novel

"Changelings, like all faerie folk, live long; may McGuire and these novels do the same."
—*The Onion A.V. Club*



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SEA**



AN OCTOBER DAVE NOVEL

DAW BOOKS, INC.

DONALD A. WOLLHEIM, FOUNDER

375 Hudson Street, New York, NY 10014

ELIZABETH R. WOLLHEIM

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[*DAW Books Presents Seanan McGuire's October Daye Novels:*](#)

Praise for the *October Daye* Novels

“*Rosemary and Rue* will surely appeal to readers who enjoy my books, or those of Patricia Briggs.”

—Charlaine Harris

“The brisk pacing, the effective mix of human and magical characters, and the PI ambience all make this an excellent choice for fans of Butcher’s Harry Dresden series. . . . Toby’s unusual heritage and her uneasy relationships with her mother’s family will remind readers of Brigg’s Mercy Thompson series, and Thompson fans will appreciate Toby’s tough and self-reliant character. This outstanding first novel is a must for fans of genre-bending blends of crime and fantasy.”

—*Booklist* starred review

“McGuire successfully blends Robert B. Parker-like detective fiction with love and loss, faith and betrayal—and plenty of violence. . . . *Rosemary and Rue* will have readers clamoring for the next genre-bending installment.”

—www.bookpage.com

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—sacramentobookreview.com

“The world building is vivid and realistic, whether it’s the human world or one of the fae realms. . . . if you’re a fan of urban fantasy, this whole series should be in your library!”

—freshfiction.com

DAW Books Presents Seanan McGuire's October Daye Novels:

ROSEMARY AND RUE
A LOCAL HABITATION
AN ARTIFICIAL NIGHT
LATE ECLIPSES
ONE SALT SEA
ASHES OF HONOR
(Available September 2012)

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*For Chris.
Thanks, bunny.*

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One Salt Sea is the fifth Toby Daye book, and like those that came before it, it has been guided along the way by many hands. My thanks go out to my faithful Machete Squad, whose tireless efforts to make these books better is a joy and a delight. These people pull my books apart and staple them back together, and I couldn't be more grateful. Special thanks go out to Jeanne Goldfein, who put up with my using our trip to Australia as an excuse to field-test Undersea biology, and to Chris Mangum, who supplemented his heroic webmaster duties with a tolerant willingness to listen to me go on and on and on (and on and on) about the way my version of Faerie functions. I have the best Machete Squad in the world.

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My soundtrack while writing *One Salt Sea* consisted mostly of *House Rules*, by Christian Kane, *Lungs*, by Florence and the Machine, endless live concert recordings of the Counting Crows, and all of the soundtracks to *Glee*. Any errors in this book are entirely my own. The errors that aren't here are the ones that all these people helped me fix.

Thank you for reading. I'm glad that you're here.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

LAND FAE:

- Bannick: *ban-nick*. Plural is Bannicks.
- Banshee: *ban-shee*. Plural is Banshees.
- Barghest: *bar-guy-st*. Plural is Barghests.
- Barrow Wight: *bar-row white*. Plural is Barrow Wights.
- Blodynbryd: *blow-din-brid*. Plural is Blodynbryds.
- Cait Sidhe: *kay-th shee*. Plural is Cait Sidhe.
- Candela: *can-dee-la*. Plural is Candela.
- Coblynau: *cob-lee-now*. Plural is Coblynau.
- Cornish Pixie: *Corn-ish pix-ee*. Plural is Cornish Pixies.
- Daoine Sidhe: *doon-ya shee*. Plural is Daoine Sidhe, diminutive is Daoine.
- Djinn: *jin*. Plural is Djinn.
- Dóchas Sidhe: *doe-sh-as shee*. Plural is Dóchas Sidhe.
- Ellyllon: *el-lee-lawn*. Plural is Ellyllons.
- Gean-Cannah: *gee-ann can-na*. Plural is Gean-Cannah.
- Glastig: *glass-tig*. Plural is Glastigs.
- Gwragen: *guh-war-a-gen*. Plural is Gwragen.
- Hamadryad: *ha-ma-dry-add*. Plural is Hamadryads.
- Hob: *hob*. Plural is Hobs.
- Kitsune: *kit-soo-nay*. Plural is Kitsune.
- Lamia: *lay-me-a*. Plural is Lamia.
- Manticore: *man-tee-core*. Plural is Manticores.
- Peri: *pear-ee*. Plural is Peri.
- Piskie: *piss-key*. Plural is Piskies.
- Pixie: *pix-ee*. Plural is Pixies.
- Puca: *puh-ca*. Plural is Pucas.
- Satyr: *say-tur*. Plural is Satyrs.
- Silene: *sigh-lean*. Plural is Silene.
- Swanmay: *swan-may*. Plural is Swanmays.
- Tuatha de Dannan: *tootha day danan*. Plural is Tuatha de Dannan, diminutive is Tuatha.
- Tylwyth Teg: *till-with teeg*. Plural is Tylwyth Teg, diminutive is Tylwyth.

Urisk: *you-risk*. Plural is Urisk.

Will o' Wisps: *will-oh wisps*. Plural is Will o' Wisps.

SEA FAE:

Asrai: *as-rye*. Plural is Asrai.

Cephali: *she-fall-li*. Plural is Cephali.

Cetace: *sea-tay-see*. Plural is Cetacea.

Hippocampus: *hip-po-cam-pus*. Plural is Hippocampi.

Kelpie: *kel-pee*. Plural is Kelpies.

The Luidaeg: *the lou-sha-k*. No plural exists.

Merrow: *meh-row*. Plural is Merrow.

Naiad: *nigh-add*. Plural is Naiads.

Nixie: *nix-ee*. Plural is Nixen.

Roane: *rone*. Plural is Roane.

Selkie: *sell-key*. Plural is Selkies.

Undine: *un-deen*. Plural is Undine.



ONE

June 30th, 2011

*As many arrows,
loosed several ways,
come to one mark;
As many ways meet in
one town;
As many streams meet
in one salt sea;
So may a thousand
actions, once afoot,
end in one purpose.*

—William Shakespeare, *King Henry V*

THE SWORD SWUNG FAST AND HARD toward my face, leaving me with barely enough time to raise my own sword into position to parry. The force of the blades colliding knocked me back a step and made my wrists ache even more than they already did.

“Oberon’s balls, Sylvester!” I snapped. “What are you trying to do, kill me?”

“That’s generally the point of hitting someone with a sword,” he said, almost cheerfully, and swung at me again.

Having Sylvester Torquill—Duke of Shadowed Hills, pureblooded Daoine Sidhe, and most importantly, my chosen liege—swinging a sword at my head

wasn't getting less unnerving, or more fun. Not even the knowledge that our blades were magically blunted could stop my atavistic "oh, *hell no*" response. I blocked this stroke marginally faster than the last, shoving his sword aside and sliding my own blade under his arm. Theoretically, this should have let me hit him.

Reality wasn't that forgiving. Sylvester twisted his sword underneath mine and slammed the flat of his blade against my fingers, causing them to open involuntarily. My sword dropped to the ballroom floor, clattering on the polished marble.

The sudden disarmament startled me enough that I forgot to dodge. Sylvester grabbed my arm, spun me around, and slammed my back into his chest, pressing his sword against my throat. "Dead again," he said conversationally. "Can you tell me what you did wrong?"

I swallowed, trying to ignore the blade pressing against my skin. It wasn't easy. "I didn't run away the second you suggested I learn to use a sword?"

"You left an opening." He let me go, stepping back. "You need to watch that."

"I'm sticking with my first answer." I took a moment to wipe the sweat from my forehead before bending to retrieve my weapon. Cold moonlight flowed in through the windows above us, filling the ballroom with shadows. "Are we done yet?"

"I'll tell you when we're done. Now, on my word . . . begin." Sylvester fell into a defensive position. I mimicked it as well as I could. At least he'd managed to teach me that when someone's about to swing a sword at you, you should be prepared to stop them. Not that I ever seemed to succeed, but hell, I was trying. That was something, right?

We started circling. Sylvester was annoyingly cheerful, as always, making supposedly helpful comments about my form as he watched for the chance to hit me again. I didn't really care about hitting him. I just wanted to take his damn sword away, since that would make *him* stop hitting *me*. It didn't look like I was going to be getting what I wanted any time soon.

It had been a month since King Sollys—the highest fae authority in North America—pardoned me for my role in the death of Blind Michael. With my so-called crimes forgiven, the Queen of the Mists was forced to let me go, rather than setting me on fire like she really wanted to. Her life is so hard. A month was sufficient time for me to do a lot of laundry, take a few freelance jobs, pay some bills, assume control of the knowe I semi-inherited from

Evening Winterrose, and learn more than I ever wanted to know about the proper use of a sword. Sylvester Torquill's an excellent teacher, blessed with a degree of patience I'll probably never have. Patience isn't one of my strong suits.

I was starting to think swordsmanship wasn't a strong suit either. He'd swing at my head and I'd duck instead of blocking; he'd move in quick and I'd fall over my own feet getting away. I was, in short, hopeless.

Sylvester aimed for my torso. I already had three bruises on my ribs, and I didn't want another one. Bruises hurt, no matter *how* fast I heal. Maybe that was the motivation I needed, because I managed to bring my sword around in time to block him. Sylvester beamed. "Good!"

"Right." I feinted, trying to hit his left leg. He parried and turned the blow aside. "I still don't see why I need to learn this."

"You have a talent for getting into trouble." Sylvester pushed his advantage, keeping me off-balance with a series of quick thrusts. The bastard wasn't even breathing hard. "I'd like you to continue getting out of it again."

"And you think giving me a sword is the answer? I could hurt somebody with this thing. Probably myself." I scrambled to keep my guard up, watching to see where he'd go next. I needed to keep him from pushing me back to the wall. If that happened, it was all over. Goldengreen may be my home ground, but that doesn't actually give me any advantage I've been able to find.

Sylvester just laughed.

The thing was, he was right: I *do* have a talent for getting into trouble. I'm just not sure giving me a weapon I can barely use is the solution. I guess it's better than nothing, but I'd still feel safer with something more my speed, like my knife. Or maybe a brick in a burlap sack.

Sylvester feinted for my ankle. I parried, bringing my blade down on the wrist of his off hand before a sharp hit from his pommel forced my hand to open. My sword hit the floor. Again.

I stepped back, breathing heavily. "Jerk," I said, between gasps.

"You're getting faster. I would have lost that hand if your blade weren't blunted." He picked up my sword and offered it to me, hilt first. "Shall we take a break?"

I glared and snatched the sword from his hand, sheathing it as gracefully as I could before I bowed. He bowed back a heartbeat later, doing his best to conceal a smirk. The session wasn't over until we exchanged bows, and walking away without observing that little formality would leave me open to

an ambush. He'd managed to hit me upside the head three times before I caught on, but now I wouldn't turn my back on Sylvester without seeing him bow. He was sneaky. He also hadn't taken a student in a long time, and he was positively glorying in the chance to beat me around the block.

"Fifteen minutes, and then it's back to work," said Sylvester, straightening. "Let's get something to drink. You look terrible."

I groaned. "Fifteen minutes? You're killing me."

"You're only complaining because you're used to being lazy." Sylvester sheathed his sword as he walked. If I tried that, I'd probably stab myself. "This will be easier when you're in better shape."

"Says you."

What Sylvester was carefully not saying is that I'm in better shape now than I've been in for years, if ever. I was born a changeling, half-human, half-fae. My heritage made me slightly faster and sturdier than the human norm, but it was still nothing to write home about. I got tired. I got broken. I nearly died—several times. A little fae blood doesn't make you immortal. All it does is make you slightly harder to kill.

All that changed when a paid assassin hit me with elf-shot, a type of enchanted arrow that puts purebloods to sleep for centuries and kills changelings. It should have killed me. Instead, my mother emerged from her private madness and saved my life by changing the balance of my blood, burning out part of my mortality in the process. What Amandine did was impossible . . . for everyone but her.

I grew up knowing my mother was the best blood-worker in Faerie. I also grew up believing she was Daoine Sidhe, which meant that I was, too. That's just one of the lies my mother told me. It turns out that Mom is Oberon's daughter, making her just as much Firstborn as the Luidaeg or Blind Michael. The normal rules don't apply where she's concerned, and her descendants—namely me—aren't Daoine Sidhe at all.

Some things started making sense after Amandine's little parlor trick. My crappy illusions, for one; Daoine Sidhe are supposed to be great illusionists, and mine, frankly, suck. Titania is the Lady of Illusions, and I'm not hers. Everything else just got more confusing.

According to the Luidaeg—Firstborn daughter of Maeve and Oberon, which technically makes her my aunt—I should have always been this way. Amandine didn't want a changeling daughter, so she tried to turn me human when I was too young to understand. She didn't succeed, but she did weaken

me enough that for years I believed her when she said that I was just a low-powered Daoine Sidhe. All she really did when she changed the balance of my blood was restore me to my original state. Too bad it was entirely new to me.

Some of the changes were immediate, like the blonde streaks in my stick-straight brown hair. Others came with time. I've been speeding up and getting stronger as my body adjusts, coming closer to what the purebloods consider "normal."

It's scaring the crap out of me.

Sylvester knows me well enough to know that the changes were scaring me, and I suspect that's why he finally decided to make good on his threat to teach me to use a sword. By his logic, if I learned to work with my body again, it might start feeling less alien. It was worth a try.

At the moment, my instructor was looking at me with amused affection. "Days like this remind me that you were never a proper squire. If you had been, your knight would have worked you the way I'm working you now."

"Etienne tried." I was knighted for solving a murder and finding a new knowe for the Queen. I was never trained as a squire, although Sir Etienne did his best to train me after the fact . . . until I got on his last nerve and he begged to be released from his teaching duties, that is. What can I say? I'm gifted in the art of making people crazy.

Sylvester started walking toward the door. "I'm working you like this because I care about you. A knight's goal is seeing his squires survive."

"I know." I followed him, fighting the urge to sigh. "Sorry. I'm just tired."

"You'll recover, and you'll tire more slowly next time." He smiled. "You're a Countess now, remember? No more weakness for you."

I did sigh this time. "How could I forget?"

When the Queen of the Mists made me Countess of Goldengreen to clear a perceived debt—long story—the knowe of the same name came with the title: a big, slightly insane hollow hill full of pixies, bogeys, and dry-rot. It's nowhere near the size of Shadowed Hills, thank Oberon, but it's bigger than your average shopping mall. That's been sort of a blessing in disguise, since when Lily, the Lady of the Japanese Tea Gardens, died, she asked me to take care of her subjects. All of them.

Most changelings don't have the resources to house a fiefdom's-worth of Faerie's cast-off odds and ends. Most changelings don't have access to entire knowes. I put two and two together, and things became almost functional, by

certain generous definitions.

The ballroom Sylvester and I used for our lessons was one of the first rooms to be cleaned out and restored. The kitchen across the narrow servants' hall was another. It was a square room almost the size of my apartment, probably designed to prepare banquets for kings and queens. One side of the room was dominated by a scarred oak table, used both for meals and for food preparation; a tray of sliced bread, cheese, and apples was laid out for us there, next to a clay pitcher of water. I smiled, recognizing Marcia's handiwork.

Sylvester unbuckled his sword, hanging it from a hook on the wall before sitting. I mirrored the gesture, taking a seat at the other side of the table. Sometimes it amazes me how well I've internalized the often erratic etiquette of the purebloods, which mixes the sensible and the insane with surprising ease. Never say "thank you" if you can help it; keep your promises even if it means your death; never bring a weapon too big to double as a dining utensil to the table when dining with friends.

I took the cup of water Sylvester handed me and emptied it in a single gulp, holding it out to be filled again. This time, I forced myself to sip, feeling my heartbeat return to normal. Whether or not I appreciated the archaic nature of swordsmanship, I was grateful for the training. I needed to relearn my limits before I got myself hurt.

We were quiet for a few minutes, most of my attention going to the food. I've always been a fast healer, and thanks to Amandine's tinkering, I'm beginning to approach superhero status. It takes a lot out of me; I'm starting to get "hunger" hard-wired into my pain responses. Sylvester ate more slowly, studying me. I quirked an eyebrow upward, watching him watch me.

Sylvester Torquill is classic Daoine Sidhe, with the pointed ears and striking coloration common among their purebloods. His hair is russet red, and his eyes are a shade of gold that's shared by every Torquill-by-birth I've ever met. He'd been looking tired recently, new lines appearing on his eternally youthful face. I wasn't all that surprised. It had been one hell of a summer, and it wasn't over yet.

The silence lasted until half the bread and all the cheese was gone. Then he said, "I wanted to discuss something not related to our lessons, if you don't mind."

"Sure," I said. "You're my liege."

"Only because you still swear to me—you're a Countess now, and could

ask to be released at any time.” He smiled a little. “I am here on your sufferance.”

“My sufferance has nothing to do with it,” I said, grimacing. “You’re here to remind the Queen that you have a standing invitation to visit my lands and she doesn’t, even if she has a clear line of fealty on me. And it was your idea.”

“Even so, I’m asking you as your friend, not your liege, and I’d like you to consider my request the same way. It’s a request, not an order.”

I sat a little straighter. “Sylvester, what’s going on?”

“Nothing bad. Don’t be so paranoid.”

“I can’t believe you just said that,” I said, eyeing him. In the past two years, I’ve been shot, stabbed, poisoned, betrayed, and nearly clawed to death, frequently while in Sylvester’s service. This endless excitement has left me with too many scars for polite company, nightmares I try not to think about, and a resident Fetch who teases me about my tendency to spend Sundays in my bathrobe watching TV and spending quality time with the cats. I’ve *earned* my paranoia.

“I’m sorry! ” He held up his hands in surrender, not quite swallowing his laughter. “I promise not to question your right to be irrationally worried by everything I say. Now will you listen?”

“As long as you don’t say the words ‘simple,’ ‘little,’ or ‘favor,’ we’re fine.”

“I need to ask you for a favor.”

I closed my eyes, counting to ten. It seems like every time I do Sylvester a favor, somebody winds up dead. It’s not his fault, but it’s still enough to make me superstitious. “What is it this time?”

“You were never a squire, but you were knighted.”

That was surprising enough to make me open my eyes. I squinted at him. “Are you yanking my title?”

“Oh, no; far from it. I’m simply requesting you do your duty as a knight and take a squire.” His expression was open and guileless. Never a good sign. “Your methods are unorthodox, but in today’s world, being able to drive a car and survive among the mortals are probably more useful arts for a young knight than riding horses and looking noble. Any holes in your educational methods can be worked around.”

“Even assuming I agree, that’s going to be a hard sell,” I said slowly. Take a squire? Me? I have trouble keeping *myself* alive. “Where are you going to

find somebody who's willing to have their kid squired to a changeling from an unknown bloodline? Especially one with my track record?"

Sylvester smiled. "I'm responsible for the training of those fostered in my care. That includes selecting their knights when necessary."

"You . . ." I stared. "Please tell me you're not about to say what I think you're about to say."

"I'd like you to stand as Quentin's knight."

I groaned. "That's what I was afraid of. Sylvester, I *can't*. I'm not a good influence on him. I keep getting him shot. I swear too much, I don't brush my teeth every time I go to bed, and I never remember to eat a balanced breakfast. You want someone with culture. Poise. A lack of gunfire."

"You're his friend. You've already been responsible for much of his training. You're the one who convinced Etienne to start giving him fighting lessons—no one else had seen the need to start them until he was older. And —"

I saw my chance, and I seized upon it. "Yes! Etienne! Etienne would be a *much* better knight for him. Etienne even lives at Shadowed Hills—he's convenient, he's a great guy, he'd be *perfect* for Quentin. He knows how to do proper knightly things, like using a sword and not getting shot."

"And being hidebound, formal, and unwilling to deal with the modern world when he doesn't have to," Sylvester said. "Are these qualities you'd like to inspire in Quentin?"

"I . . ." I stopped, closing my mouth, and glared at him. "That's low."

"That's as may be. Did it work?"

"I still say Etienne would be better for him."

"Quentin is my foster, not yours, which makes this my decision. I've spoken to his parents. They know all about you, and they think you're the best possible knight for him. He'll eventually inherit his father's lands, and they'd like him to be more flexible than most of his generation. He listens to you, considers you a friend, and looks to you as a mentor. Can you really say I'm going to find someone better?"

I wanted to say, "Of course you will, don't be silly." I wanted to say, "Absolutely, and I'll be happy to help." When I opened my mouth, what came out was, "What would I have to do?"

Sylvester had the grace not to look smug. "You'll be responsible for his training in blood magic and dealing with the mortal world. We don't expect you to teach him the courtly arts—we're handling that at Shadowed Hills—"

but the practical side of things needs equal attention. Are you still in the apartment?”

“Yeah. Why do you—”

“It would be good if he could live with you at least part-time, but it’s not essential. If it’s a matter of finances, we own a great deal of property all around the Bay Area. We could help you find something.”

“Uh, right.” Sylvester and Luna have been in Shadowed Hills since the eighteen hundreds, and they’ve had a lot of time to shop for land. Fae, especially purebloods, tend to take a long-term view of investments, and land always goes up in value. There are worse ways to build a fortune, if you have the time.

“So you’ll do it?”

I hesitated. Taking a squire isn’t something to be done lightly. Quentin was a good kid, and he deserved to be taught whatever he needed to know in order to stay alive. Was I really the best choice to educate a pureblood? Especially one who’d already been shot thanks to me, and who’d helped to orchestrate the jailbreak to get me out of the Queen’s clutches?

There was only one way to find out.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll do it.”

Sylvester grinned. “I knew you would. Now come on. It’s been fifteen minutes.”

“Oh, Maeve’s teeth.” I groaned, dropping a half-eaten apple slice and pushing myself back to my feet. “I was too busy thinking to rest. That’s not fair.”

“Neither is combat. Stop whining. You have a squire now, and that means you have to be the mature one.”

“I should have read the fine print.”

Sylvester just laughed.

We buckled on our swords and walked back to the ballroom. I groaned again as we crossed the threshold: we had company. May and Quentin were sitting on a bench against one wall, and they looked like they were planning to stay a while.

Sylvester smiled brightly when he saw them. “Good day, you two!”

“Good day, Your Grace,” Quentin said.

“Hey, Syl,” May said, waving back. Quentin flinched. He’s loosened up a lot, but he still can’t seem to wrap his head around the idea that nobles have personal names, much less diminutives.

“What are you doing in here?” I asked. Sylvester turned and bowed to me. I responded automatically. It’s no good arguing once Sylvester decides practice has started. Refusing to get my sword out would just result in some painful new bruises.

“We came to watch you work,” said May. My former Fetch was dressed like an acid flashback to the mid-80s, combining virulently pink jeans with a silver foil concert T-shirt for a band I didn’t recognize. Rainbow barrettes were clipped in her short magenta-and-green-streaked hair.

May and I used to be functionally identical, before the elf-shot “killed” me. She was supposed to fade out of the world completely that day. That’s what Fetches *do*. Amandine somehow stopped that from happening, and that broke the connection between us. May gets to live. And since we weren’t connected when Amandine changed the balance of my blood, May still looks like the changeling I used to be, while I barely recognize myself in the mirror some days. I’m still not sure how I feel about that.

“It was May’s idea,” Quentin added.

“I’m sure it was,” I said. Sylvester started circling. I dropped into a defensive position. “I’m not really comfortable with this, May.”

“Cope,” she said.

“Maybe an audience will make you shape up,” Sylvester said, and lunged.

I parried. “Maybe an audience will distract me and get me gutted.”

“Let’s see some *carnage!*” hollered May, pumping her fist in the air.

“This isn’t professional wrestling!” I snapped, trying to hit Sylvester’s ankle. He blocked, turning my thrust aside and nearly disarming me. “And I swear if you shout ‘take it off,’ I am coming over there.”

“Take what off?” asked Sylvester.

“Nothing, Your Grace,” Quentin and I said in unison.

“Wimps,” May said.

“Shut up.” I parried again. Sylvester pressed his advantage, and I fell back, trying to keep him from hitting me. The distractions faded away as I focused on the rhythm of his attacks. There was a slight pause after each swing. It wasn’t long, but it was there. I knocked his sword aside and lunged for his stomach, slamming the blade of my own sword into his middle just above the navel.

Sylvester stopped immediately. “I believe that was a killing blow,” he said, sounding both slightly winded and ridiculously pleased for someone who’d just had the wind knocked out of him.

I lowered my sword and stepped back. “Does that mean we’re done?”

“My dear, you just killed me for the first time. This calls for celebration.” He bowed, signaling the end of our bout. I bowed back. “How did you catch me?”

“There was a pause between your attacks while you brought your sword back.”

“I wondered how long it would take you to notice. It won’t be there next time.” He winked as he sheathed his sword and handed it to me. “We’re ready to make things hard.”

“Oh, lucky me,” I muttered, walking over and hanging our swords on the wall before heading toward May and Quentin. “Happy now?”

“Don’t touch me.” May wrinkled her nose. “You’re all icky, and I have a date.”

“Jazz meeting you here?” She nodded. “Will you be home tonight?” May and Jazz—her Raven-maid girlfriend—had been getting serious, despite the little issue of May being essentially nocturnal, like most fae, and Jazz being diurnal, like most birds. We’d already had the discussion about whether or not Jazz was allowed to move in.

I said yes, of course. At least when Jazz is around, May occasionally lets me have the remote control.

“We should be,” May said.

Sylvester walked up, wiping his forehead with a handkerchief. He didn’t look half as beat as I felt. Sometimes the world isn’t fair. “Ah, Quentin. A word with you?” I glanced to him, and he nodded. “It seems appropriate to do it now.”

I swallowed the urge to protest. “You’re the boss.” We’d have to tell Quentin eventually.

Quentin looked between us, frowning. “What’s going on, Your Grace?”

“Quentin, do you remember that I said I was looking for a knight for you?”

“Yes, Your Grace,” he said.

“If you assigned him to Etienne, I get to hit you,” May added.

I eyed her. “Why?”

“Because ‘boring’ is not a virtue.”

Sylvester smiled. “No, I’m not assigning him to Etienne.” Quentin’s shoulders relaxed: interesting. I hadn’t realized he felt so strongly about the subject. “I can guarantee that the knight I found for him isn’t boring.”

May gave me a speculative look. “Is that so?”

“May—”

“Your Grace, may I speak?”

Sylvester and I both stopped, blinking at Quentin. Sylvester recovered slightly faster than I did, and asked, “Yes, Quentin?”

“I’d like to request I be assigned to Sir Daye.”

All right, I hadn’t been expecting that. “Oak and ash, *why?*” I demanded, before I could stop myself.

“Because he has taste,” said May.

“Because I think I have a lot to learn from you,” Quentin said, before elbowing May sharply in the side. She yelped. “I like you, and you teach me things no one else does.”

“Like what it feels like to be shot?” I asked.

“Like how to do what needs to be done. Please, Your Grace, I’d like you to consider my request. If she’ll have me.”

I looked to Sylvester. He wasn’t making any effort to hide his smirk. I sighed. “I’ll have you,” I said.

“I already talked her into agreeing,” Sylvester added.

Quentin looked between us, eyes going wide. “Really?”

“Really,” I said.

“Wow. I owe you five bucks,” May said, looking to Sylvester.

“I told you she’d agree.” He clapped me on the shoulder with one hand. “Come on, you three. Marcia promised a celebratory lunch if I could convince Toby to take a squire.”

I gave him a sidelong look. “You were betting on this?”

“Yes, we were,” he said, nodding. “Now come on. We need to work out when his squiring ceremony will be held—and whether you’d like it here or at Shadowed Hills.” Still smiling, he turned and started to walk away. May flashed me a thumbs-up and followed.

Quentin hung back, asking, “You don’t mind, do you?”

Mind? That I’d been talked into taking a squire who obviously wanted to work with me? The vision of Quentin lying shot and dead on some field was receding, replaced by the slow realization that having a squire might not be such a bad deal after all. He already had my back whenever I needed him—hell, he’d helped Tybalt save my life when the Queen threw me in jail for Blind Michael’s murder, and that took guts, since it was technically treason. Maybe he was just a kid, but he knew what he was doing. He’d better: I’d taught him.

I grinned, putting my hand on his shoulder in much the same way Sylvester had put his hand on mine. We were almost the same height. Oak and ash, he was growing up fast. “Actually, Quentin,” I said, “I think this is going to work out just fine.”



TWO

MAY AND SYLVESTER WERE IN THE HALL playing one of May's favorite games, "spot the bogey." This involved staring fixedly at the rafters, waiting for the ceiling to move. I will never understand the things my former Fetch finds fun.

Bogeys are shapeshifting mischief-makers that infest abandoned places, like attics, old castles, and Goldengreen, which sat empty for almost two years before I claimed it. The bogeys were there when I opened the doors. Trying to make them leave was more trouble than it was worth, and so we'd come to a weird sort of peace instead, one where they didn't scare the crap out of the residents, and I didn't let the residents beat them to death with bricks.

Sylvester looked down as Quentin and I approached. "May was reminding me of some of the more . . . interesting . . . changes you've made." He smiled. "I do believe them to be improvements."

I smiled back. "That's good. So do I."

Goldengreen was in disrepair when I inherited it, but Sylvester never saw it that way. He probably remembered it the way Evening liked presenting it to people—perfect and static—and not as the crumbling shell it became.

It wasn't a crumbling shell anymore. It was just a little chaotic sometimes. Case in point: a flock of pixies burst from the kitchen, flying in tight formation as they held up the edges of a red-and-white-checked dish towel. The wind of their passage ruffled my hair. The four of us scattered, and I ducked just before one of the stragglers could kick me in the forehead.

Marcia came barreling after the pixies, waving a broom over her head and shouting, "Come back, you filthy little pests! Thieves!" Her eyes widened when she saw us, and she came skidding to a halt, a guilty look on her face. She tried to hide the broom behind her back, enhancing the ridiculousness of

the moment. “Uh, hi, Toby. May. Quentin. Um. Your Grace.”

“Hey, Marcia,” I said, amused. “What did they steal this time?” Pixies will steal anything that’s not nailed down, and the ones in Goldengreen seem to see Marcia as a form of entertainment. They know she’ll never catch them with her broom. As for Marcia, I think she’s playing with the pixies as much as they’re playing with her. She’ll just never admit it.

“Two loaves of bread and my good dish towel.”

“You’d better hurry before they shred the towel for loincloths.”

“I know. Sorry about this. Lunch is served.” She bobbed an awkward curtsy and took off running, following the trail of glittering pixie-sweat hanging in the air.

I turned to the others. “Well?” I asked. “Anybody hungry?”

“Starving,” said Quentin. He led the way into the kitchen, where a meal of cold chicken, tossed salad, and apple cake was waiting for us on the worktable. One definite advantage to having my own knowe: I was eating better, since Marcia seemed to have an almost preternatural ability to know when she’d be able to shove a fork into my hand, and her fae blood is just strong enough to grant her some basic hearth magic—like preparing meals at triple speed. Coffee is still a primary part of my diet, but it no longer has to play the role of multiple food groups.

May’s phone rang while we were eating, and she waved a distracted good-bye before running out of the knowe to meet her girlfriend in the museum parking lot outside the mortal entrance. Sylvester, Quentin, and I finished our lunch in comfortable silence.

I was in an excellent mood by the time I escorted Quentin and Sylvester out of Goldengreen. It was a crisp, dry night. The air tasted like summer, and the sky was free of clouds, leaving the stars to glitter brilliantly against the darkness. We were having the sort of June that people write bad love songs about, all perfect weather and clear skies. Nights like this reminded me why I love living in the Bay Area.

A lone cloud skidded in front of the moon, briefly hiding its face, and I shuddered. It had been less than a year since I was held captive in Blind Michael’s lands, being groomed to take his wife’s place and become his new consort. He’d been dead for almost eight months. I killed him. That didn’t make the memory of him sit any easier.

Sylvester’s vehicle for the evening was a classic Cadillac, painted a dark blue that almost blended with the shadows at the parking lot’s edge. Not that

the museum's human employees would have been able to see the car if it were bright red and parked in the rose garden—Sylvester's don't-look-here spells are things of beauty. He hugged me, saying, "You're doing well. Soon, we can start the *real* lessons."

I was still groaning theatrically when he and Quentin got into the car and drove off, leaving me to walk to my battered old Volkswagen Bug alone. I performed my usual check of the back before unlocking the door. Call me paranoid, but I only needed to find one assassin lurking in my car for that to become a lifetime habit.

Turning up the radio to ear-busting levels, I sang loudly—and badly—along with song after song as I drove back to my apartment. Even with traffic, I made it home in record time. The wards around my door were intact, meaning that my night might stay decent. Miracles never cease.

"Mary, Mary, quite contrary, how does your garden grow?" I chanted. "With thorny stings and other things that make it a bad place to go." I snapped my fingers. The wards dissolved, leaving the scent of copper hanging in the air. Piece of cake.

Wards are easier for me these days, since they're constructed and removed with brute force, and I hit harder than I used to, magically speaking. Sure, sometimes my spells go horribly wrong and things get scorched, but it's better than a ten-a-day Tylenol habit, right? I was never that attached to my security deposit, anyway.

Spike and the cats mobbed my ankles the second I got inside, meowing and chirping irritation over some perceived indignity. "Settle down, guys," I said, laughing as I squirmed out of my jacket. "I'll feed you in a second."

"Actually, I think they're upset because I'm here." The Luidaeg stood, dropping May's new *Entertainment Weekly* on the coffee table as she stepped away from the couch. "They don't seem to like me."

I froze and stared at her, my jacket slipping out of my suddenly nerveless fingers and falling to the floor with a thump. I've always known that my wards wouldn't stop anything *big*, but I'd never seen proof before.

The Luidaeg watched me levelly, waiting for the shock to fade. Finally, unsteadily, I said, "Luidaeg. You're . . . here."

"Good catch. You should go into detective work." Her amused tone was underscored with bleakness, like she was making jokes because it was easier than screaming. Somehow, that was even scarier than finding her in my apartment.

The Luidaeg isn't scary on the surface—most days she looks more human than I do, like the sort of plainly pretty woman you probably pass on the street every day. She stands about five-six, tan verging into sunburned, with freckles on her nose and the ghosts of old acne scars on her cheeks. Today she was wearing battered khaki pants and a gas station employee's shirt with a nametag that read "Annie," and her curly, shoulder-length black hair was pulled into pigtails tied off with electrical tape.

Her eyes were brown. That was encouraging, anyway. The Luidaeg's appearance is unnervingly variable. The more irritated she gets, the more her humanity slips, usually starting with her eyes. When the Luidaeg's eyes go strange, I look for an escape route.

The Luidaeg raised an eyebrow. "Is there something you need to do before you can pay attention to me?"

That was my chance to take control of the situation. I pounced on it. "I need coffee," I said, picking up my jacket and hanging it on the coat rack. "Can I get you anything?"

"Coffee's fine. Do you have any sour cream?" The Luidaeg followed me to the kitchen and sat down at the table, pushing a pile of junk mail out of the way. Spike and the cats followed her.

"I think so." I grabbed the half-full pot of coffee from the warmer and filled two mugs. I've always belonged to the school of thought that says coffee improves with age. Give me a pot of three-day-old diner coffee, and I'll prove that sleep is an unnecessary luxury.

"I'll take mine with salt and a spoonful of sour cream," said the Luidaeg. She gave the cats a thoughtful look. They looked back, unblinking. She nodded. "I thought so. You can go. Nothing I have to say is yours to repeat."

The cats didn't move.

The Luidaeg raised an eyebrow, asking, "Do you really think your King will hurt you worse than I will?"

That got through. Cagney and Lacey bolted from the room, their ears pressed flat and their tails sticking straight up in the air.

Spike stayed where it was, eyeing her warily. The Luidaeg smiled. "You can stay. Your loyalties have shifted." She glanced toward me. "You know the fleabags are spying for Tybalt, don't you?"

"I've been assuming." I opened the fridge, rummaging until I found a container of sour cream. May and Jazz both like to cook, and with Jazz spending more and more time at the apartment, our fridge has been acquiring

actual food. I never knew there were so many kinds of bread. Or that you needed so many knives for purposes beyond stabbing people. “Is that why you made them leave?”

“He’ll get the details soon enough. I don’t feel any need to stroke the man’s ego by telling him things he doesn’t need to know yet.”

“Right.” I put the sour cream and one of the mugs in front of the Luidaeg, indicating the salt shaker with a wave of my hand, and turned to start fixing my own coffee. “So why *are* you here? You haven’t exactly been social lately.” That was putting it mildly. I’d seen the Luidaeg exactly once since Lily got sick, when I went to her and demanded to know what I really was. She’d put a name to my mother’s bloodline—Dóchas Sidhe—and then she’d kicked me out.

She wasn’t there when I was pardoned. She didn’t answer her phone, and when I went looking for her apartment, I couldn’t find it. Now she was in my kitchen, and maybe I’m paranoid, but I didn’t trust the situation one bit.

“Getting down to business already?” She poured salt into her coffee. “Are you going to ask how I’ve been?”

“Why should I?” I finished sugaring my own coffee and sat down in front of her. “It’s not like you’ve been terribly concerned with my well-being since Mom played with my genetic code.”

“So you’re being sulky, is that it?” The Luidaeg shook her head. “You didn’t need me, Toby. There was nothing I could have done that you weren’t already doing. I knew Sylvester would take care of you.”

“That makes it okay for you to just disappear?”

“You have no idea what I’ve been doing since you last saw me.”

“Should I care?” I realized the answer was probably “yes” as soon as the words left my mouth. They don’t come much bigger or badder than the Luidaeg. If she’d been too busy to deal with me, it wasn’t because she’d been vacationing at Disney World.

“About something nasty enough to keep me distracted? Yes, October, you should care, if only because you don’t like people breaking your toys.” The Luidaeg touched the surface of her coffee with the tip of one finger, watching the ripples spread through the liquid. “You owe me.”

I wasn’t expecting that. I wasn’t sure what I *was* expecting . . . but that wasn’t it. “What?”

“You owe me.” She raised her head. “I showed you the way to my brother’s lands, twice; I broke his Ride for you, and I helped you kill him, if

only by getting you there. I did it because you asked, but I don't work free. I don't even work cheap. I told you that. You said you didn't care." The color was draining from her eyes, leaving them as pale and unforgiving as sea foam. "There are debts between us, October, daughter of Amandine, and it's time for you to start paying your bill."

I stiffened. "We were never friends, were we? You were just protecting your investment."

"This isn't the time. Believe me, I wish I could sit here and argue about your deluded ideals of friendship, but I can't. The hour is far too late." She picked up her coffee. "I'm sorry I haven't been here. I had things to take care of that were a little more important than a few problems I knew you could handle without me."

I stared at her. A few problems? Lily *died*. So did more than a dozen Cait Sidhe. *I* nearly died, and my survival meant giving up everything I'd believed I was. Unable to stop myself, I demanded, "What the fuck could you have been doing that was more important than being here?"

There was something satisfying about using human profanity on someone as inhuman as the Luidaeg—even if she wasn't above using human profanity herself, from time to time. My brief flare of satisfaction died when she implacably answered, "I've been trying to prevent a war."

It took a moment to find my voice again. Half-stammering, I asked, "Prevent a war? What war?"

Fae society divides itself along feudal lines—kings and queens, dukes and duchesses and knights and ladies and all the other things mortals romanticize and call "chivalry"—but we don't go to war without a reason. As far as I knew, no one was currently invading anyone else. Even Dreamer's Glass, with its paranoid, expansionistic Duchess, was quiet; they were too busy waiting for Tamed Lightning to explode to bother harassing the rest of us. There was always the possibility one of the other Kingdoms had decided to invade, but raising an army to threaten a throne is a tricky business that requires time, troops, and a lot of resources. We couldn't have missed movement on that sort of scale.

"How much do you know about the Undersea?"

"What, we're about to be attacked by mermaids?"

The Luidaeg looked at me flatly.

I realized she was serious.

Humans inhabit just one level of the world: the land. They can travel

through the air and sea, but being unable to fly or breathe water puts a damper on long-term habitation. The fae don't share their limitations. There are Kingdoms under the ocean and high in the clouds, thriving outside the range of mortal eyes . . . and most fae eyes, if we're being honest. Land fae rarely go to the trouble of visiting the Undersea, and the majority of the winged races are too weak to reach the Cloud Kingdoms. We may be everywhere, but that doesn't keep us from being divided by environment.

"Is it so difficult to believe? The land poisons their waters and kills their people. The Undersea has never dealt with humans when they didn't want to, and they don't understand why the land fae have let the humans get so out of control. They're in a state of mild annoyance about ninety percent of the time. Not actively pissed—hence the lack of annual invasion—but annoyed."

"So what's the problem?"

"In small words? Somebody's been harassing the Duchess of Saltmist and her family. You know Saltmist?"

"That's Connor's home Duchy." He technically hails from the Selkie fiefdom of Roan Rathad in Half Moon Bay, but Roan Rathad answers to Saltmist, which stretches the length of the Northern California shoreline. It was Saltmist that decided he was expendable enough to be sold into a diplomatic marriage with Rayseline Torquill. I'd never met its Duchess. I couldn't say I had much respect for her decision-making skills.

"It's a coastal fiefdom, with holdings in both land and sea, although it's primarily aquatic," said the Luidaeg, in a calm, "you should already know this" tone. "Duchess Lorden has been regent there for the last two hundred years."

"Merrow?" I guessed. Merrow are to the sea as Daoine Sidhe are to the land, only without the blood magic, and with a tendency to summon storms when annoyed. Oh, and fins, although they can have legs when they want to. Little Mermaid, eat your heart out.

"Yes." The Luidaeg sipped her coffee. "She was a contemporary of King Gilad's. He worked to maintain ties with the Undersea. The current Queen . . . doesn't."

I was starting to feel like I'd missed a whole series of memos. "King Gilad had open dealings with the Undersea?"

"Things were very different in this Kingdom before the 1906 quake." Her expression turned distant. She set her coffee cup gingerly down. "The Queen of the Mists hasn't cared to stay in Saltmist's good graces. I doubt she

believes they matter.”

“She has Sea Wight blood. Didn’t her parents teach her where she came from?”

The Luidaeg paused, looking at me levelly. Then she continued like I hadn’t spoken: “Dianda Lorden has a soft spot for land fae. Her husband’s Daoine Sidhe. He was a landless Baron before he ran off to play Ducal consort.”

“So how does he not drown?” I was interested despite my innate dislike of water. I’m pretty sure Daoine Sidhe aren’t aquatic. Someone would have told me.

“He’s married to a Merrow. They’ve had plenty of time to work something out. Sadly, there’s been some bad blood over the union, and the Lordens have been forced to cut off the majority of their relations with the land Courts.”

“Why?”

“Some people are more politically aware than kelp, Toby. Please note that I’m not including you in their number.” She sighed. “Most purebloods don’t like mixed marriages, and they especially dislike marriages that cross the realms. So when a land noble marries an Undersea Duchess . . .”

“But the Queen’s mixed, isn’t she? And my friend Mitch is part Nixie.”

“One, we don’t point fingers at kings or queens. Everyone knows the Queen of the Mists has sea-dweller blood, but nobody’s going to be gauche enough to point it out. Two, your friend is a changeling. He’s not in line for any thrones, and commoners aren’t as dangerous as legitimate heirs to noble titles. Three . . .” She hesitated, looking briefly uncertain. That was scarier than anything she could have said.

“Luidaeg?”

The sound of her name seemed to snap her out of it. She shook her head, repeating, “Three. Mixed blood can be unstable, depending on how distant the mix is. If two of Daddy’s descendants hook up, it doesn’t really matter what bloodline they’re from. If one of them decides to get it on with one of Mom’s descendants, well. There’s the potential for a lot of crazy.”

“Like changeling madness?”

“Exactly like changeling madness. We just don’t see as much of it in the mixed-bloods, because most of them either learn to hide it or get killed off. Some combinations are stable. Others, not so much. Most people aren’t happy when the nobility decides to risk it.”

“Right,” I said, feeling slightly numb as I reviewed all the mixed-bloods I

could think of. Sylvester's niece, January O'Leary, had a little bit of Tylwyth Teg blood and had been a little bit crazy. Devin was a changeling, but he was also a mixed-blood. And then there was Oleander, and Rayseline . . . "If Dianda and Patrick got married a hundred years ago, why is it a big deal now?"

"Someone's been threatening to kill their children."

I nearly dropped my coffee. "What?" The claim was so outrageous that I had trouble giving it credit, but the Luidaeg had never lied to me. She's alien even among the fae, and too old to think in a way anyone less than a thousand really understands, but she wasn't a liar.

Children are precious in Faerie, regardless of their heritage, and we don't have enough of them to go around making threats. Blind Michael had been protected by the fact that he was Firstborn and scarier than anyone wanted to deal with. Even that wouldn't have saved him if he'd taken his tithes more often. Offering to kill a noble's kids is a good way to find out how many armed guards that noble can command—and how many soldiers their friends have.

"Whoever it is claims to have the Queen's sanction. I've been trying to keep the Lordens from doing anything stupid, but their sons vanished this morning. Dianda and Patrick are scared. Frightened people—frightened *parents*—can do some incredibly destructive things." She pulled a slate-colored abalone shell the size of a silver dollar out of the empty air, dropping it on the table between us. "Carry this; if I need you, you'll know. The wards on my home are set to allow you. Come if you need me. I'll be there."

I'd been so focused on what she was saying that I'd managed to forget why she was saying it. She was calling in my debts. "What do I need to do?" I picked up the shell. It was cold to the touch.

"You need to help me stop this war." She stood.

"Luidaeg, what do you expect me to *do*? It's not like I have any experience in war prevention. Why me?"

"Who else would it be? And all I expect you to do is the best you can. That's all I ever wanted from your mother, and all I've ever asked of you. There's a gathering tomorrow night at the Queen's Court. The Lordens are coming to demand their children back; it's probably going to be their last attempt to prevent the war. The Queen is sending someone to insist you attend as the representative of Goldengreen. Dress nicely. Go armed."

"Luidaeg—"

“People will die if we don’t stop this. You could be one of them. So could I. We still have to do what we can.” She turned and walked out of the kitchen. I stood, shoving the shell into my pocket, and followed her.

Cagney and Lacey were sitting in front of the door, ears flat and tails lashing. The Luidaeg stopped, looking down at them. “Tell your King he can’t save her this time. My claim comes first, however far that means she has to go.”

“What are you talking about?”

“It doesn’t matter. They know what I mean.” She looked over her shoulder at me as she opened the door and stepped outside. “Be careful. Keep your eyes open. We don’t have time to screw around.”

“What are you—”

“Be careful,” she repeated, and closed the door.

I stared at the door for a moment, and then ran after her, wrenching it open. “Will you stop being obscure for ten seconds and explain yourself?” I demanded.

Dugan’s hand had been raised to knock. He lowered it. “Er,” he said.

I sagged, letting go of the doorknob. “Oh,” I said. “It’s you.”

Dugan Harrow worked for the Queen of the Mists. He was an untitled courtier from Deep Mists, and exactly the sort of prejudiced, arrogant bastard our system of nobility tends to encourage. The last time we “talked,” he was taking a really irritating amount of glee in carting me off to be executed.

We don’t get along.

Shaken by my distinctly nonstandard greeting, Dugan cleared his throat and asked, “May I come in?”

I gave him a weary look. “What time should I be there? Am I supposed to bring an escort?”

“I, uh . . . seven-thirty. And yes. It’s a formal event, and an escort is recommended.” Sounding unhappy, he added, “I was told to volunteer if—”

“That won’t be necessary.” I closed the door in his face, snapping the deadbolt into place with a decisive “click.” It was almost dawn; Connor might still be up if I called him soon. That would take care of the escort. As for the rest of it. . .

Missing children. The Luidaeg calling in my debts. Sometimes I wonder why I ever bother thinking life could be simple. That only happens in fairy tales.



THREE

THE PHONE RANG AS I WAS REACHING FOR IT. I grimaced and picked up, mentally making excuses for why I had to hang up immediately. “Hello?”

“Oh, good. You’re still up.”

All the tension went out of my shoulders. I slumped against the hallway wall, an involuntary smile tugging at my lips. “Connor, hey. I was just about to call you.”

“Then it’s a good thing I’m still up, too.” Connor’s laugh was slightly distracted, like his attention was being pulled in eight directions at once. “Can I see you?”

“That’s why I was calling. Connor—”

“Tell me about it when I get there. I’m right down the street.” He hung up before I could object. Not that I’d intended to; I needed a date to the Queen’s Court, and more than that, I needed a friend. I needed Connor.

Connor O’Dell and I started “dating” when I was a teenager. We broke up because his family said he couldn’t waste his time with a changeling, but we never got over each other, not even when I hooked up with a human man and he wound up in a diplomatic marriage to a crazy woman. I don’t think it surprised anyone when Connor celebrated his annulment by asking me to join him for breakfast. I know it didn’t surprise either of us when I said “yes.”

Breakfast started at sunset—a perfectly reasonable hour, since fae are primarily nocturnal—and lasted until the restaurant closed. After that, we wandered around the city, holding hands, talking, and remembering why we’d been attracted to each other in the first place. He kissed me good morning on my front porch ten minutes before sunrise, and I pulled him inside so he could kiss me good night. To hell with pleasantries and waiting for people to forget the scandal of his wife’s desertion. We’d waited years, and I wasn’t waiting anymore. Maybe it was a bad idea, but, by Maeve, I’d

earned a bad idea or two. We both had.

I was heading back to the kitchen to get my coffee when there was a knock at the door. I glanced at the clock as I moved to answer it. “You weren’t kidding when you said you were right down the street. That took you what, three minutes?”

Connor smiled wanly. “I barely remembered to call first.”

“I would have been happy to see you either way. Come in.”

I gave him an assessing look as he stepped inside. Connor’s taste in clothes had always run to beachcomber casual, and tonight was no different; he was wearing jeans and a white T-shirt, and his feet were bare. The sealskin that kept him tied to his fae nature was tied around his waist with a complicated sailor’s knot. His dappled brown-and-gray hair was fluffed up in that barely-dry way that made me want to comb it down with my fingers until it was tame, or until he distracted me with some tangles of my own.

Connor caught my appraisal and shook his head. “I got a ride over from a Kelpie. It’s been a long night.”

If I tried to ride a Kelpie, I’d wind up shredded and devoured before I could blink. “I’m pretty sure this is the calm before the storm.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” said Connor. He put his hands on my shoulders, turning me to face him, and leaned in to kiss me deeply. His lips tasted like kelp and sweetened seawater.

Connor’s kisses had a way of making even the worst nights seem like they weren’t such a big deal. I melted against him, curling the fingers of one hand through his hair and hooking the fingers of my other hand under the knot on his sealskin belt, effectively pinning him in place. I don’t like the water, but where Connor was concerned, I was willing to make an exception. If he was the sea, I was more than happy to drown.

I made a dissatisfied whining sound as he broke contact enough to murmur, “You taste like coffee.” His hands had somehow found their way under my shirt, and were tracing delicate lines down my back.

“There’s a surprise.” I kissed him again before resting my forehead against his, leaving my hands tangled where they were. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“So am I.” His expression turned serious. “Salt and sand, Toby, I don’t know how to say this, but . . .”

My heart sank. “Saltmist is sending you away, aren’t they?”

“What?” He pulled away. Heart sinking further, I let him. “Why would you think that?”

I forced a wry smile, despite the ache in my chest. “You’re wet, and the Luidaeg was here just before you called. Is it really as bad as she thinks? Are you leaving?”

Connor was quiet for a long moment, dark eyes searching my face. Finally, quietly, he said, “It’s probably worse. I think we’ll be lucky if we don’t go to war. And no, I’m not leaving yet, but . . . I don’t know. I might have to.”

“Maeve’s teeth.” I pulled my hands free, using them both to rake my hair away from my face. “Are you attending the thing at the Queen’s Court tomorrow night?”

“I’m still the diplomatic attaché to Shadowed Hills, at least until I’m recalled. I pretty much have to be there,” he said. “Are they summoning the gentry?”

“Got it in one—you just missed Dugan.”

Connor’s expression darkened. “That’s probably for the best. I’d rather not cause a diplomatic incident on the eve of war.”

“I like it when you’re protective,” I said, leaning in close and linking my hands behind his neck. For some reason, my boyfriend didn’t like the man who’d had me carted away in chains. Go figure. “Even if I thought I could get away with playing hooky, the Luidaeg wouldn’t let me. She doesn’t want us to go to war, so apparently, I get to stop it.”

Connor whistled, long and low. “She doesn’t ask for anything small, does she?”

“It’s not her style.” I kissed his chin. “What do you say? Be seen in public with me? And maybe vouch for me to the Lordens? This will be easier if they don’t hate me.”

“I’ll try,” he said, a deep fondness in his voice. “Are you planning to charge out and save the world tonight?”

“No. I can’t exactly visit the Undersea, and I know where the Lordens will be tomorrow night. I can meet with them then. Besides, it’s late. It’d be nice to start a crisis without a side order of sleep deprivation for once.” Fae society essentially shuts down when the sun comes up. If we were going to go to war, it wouldn’t be until late afternoon at the absolute earliest. Plenty of time for sleep . . . and other things.

“Can I stay the day?”

I smiled. “Like I’d let you leave?”

Connor didn’t answer me in words. Instead, he kissed me hard, lifting my feet off the floor in the process. I responded by kicking off my shoes and

locking my legs around his waist, grabbing hold of his sealskin belt again, this time for traction, and kissing him back, trying to grind myself all the way into him. He carried me down the hall like that, kissing me all the while, like he thought I might have forgotten how he felt about me sometime in the last five minutes.

I barely had the presence of mind to pull one hand free of his hair and slam the bedroom door before any of my pets could follow. I really didn't care if Cagney and Lacey were spying for Tybalt, but there were some things he just didn't need reported to him.

Connor kept backing up until he hit the bed and sat down, leaving me sitting in his lap. I unwound my legs so that I was straddling him, peeling his shirt off over his head at the same time. He was more than willing to help, especially since it meant he could balance the scales by unbuttoning my shirt and tossing it to the floor. I kissed him again while he worked the clasp on my bra with fingers that were surprisingly dexterous, considering that they were webbed all the way to the first knuckle.

Both of us were naked to the waist when he paused, giving me a sidelong look that made me glad I was already sitting down. I'd waited for a long, long time to see that expression on his face. Now that I saw it on a semi-regular basis, it was one of my favorite things in the world.

Then his hands were busy with the strap on my knife belt, and I forgot about anything beyond getting both of us as naked as possible, as fast as possible.

Selkies keep all their magic in the sealskins they carry with them. That meant that no matter what we did, Connor kept his belt somewhere on his body, keeping himself tied to Faerie. I barely even noticed anymore. His jeans joined mine on the floor, and then it was just us, tangled so tightly together that it would have taken an act of Oberon to pull us apart.

He grunted when he came, the sound a close cousin to a seal's bark. I just moaned, rocking harder before the movement died. We'd timed things exactly right. The sun was just starting to crest when we pulled apart . . . and then the pressure of sunrise slammed down, burning the magic out of the world.

I buried my face in Connor's shoulder, struggling to breathe. Sunrise doesn't hurt as much as it used to, but it still incapacitates me, and it still hurts like a bitch. Connor put his arms around me, holding tight. Skinshifters like the Selkies don't feel the dawn the way that the rest of us do. It hurts

them. It just doesn't render them completely useless.

The pressure faded, leaving the air ashy with the taste of dying magic. I coughed, curling against Connor and breathing the reassuring sea-salt scent of his skin as I drifted into an uneasy sleep.

The quality of the light filtering through the curtains was dusky when I woke: Lewis Carroll's classic golden afternoon. The sheets were twisted around my waist, evidence of a restless day's sleep. Connor stirred beside me. I snuggled against him. "You up?"

"Mmm."

"Good." I poked him in the shoulder. "It's already afternoon, sleepyhead."

He opened his eyes, smiling drowsily. "Hey," he said, tugging me closer. This close, his lack of pupils was very evident. His eyes were like a seal's, dark from side to side. "Did you sleep okay?"

I answered with a kiss. Connor replied in kind, sliding a webbed hand down my back to cup the swell of my hip. I wasn't thinking about the coming war, or the fact that I hadn't brushed my teeth. I was only thinking about the sleek line of Connor's body pressing against me. Selkies have less body hair in their human forms than you'd expect; they're natural swimmers, streamlined, with the sort of musculature Olympic athletes have to struggle for. He rolled me onto my back, wrapping his fingers around my wrists. The webs between them were as cool as the rest of his skin was hot.

"How about you?" I asked him sweetly, running the toes of one foot down the side of his leg. "Did *you* sleep okay?"

"Except for the snoring, sure," he said, and smiled.

I couldn't stop myself from laughing at that, resting my head against his shoulder. This time of year, the way the light was coming through the window meant we had two, maybe three hours before we needed to get serious about heading for the Queen's Court. I had too much to do to lie around in bed, the temptations of my Selkie lover aside.

"Sometimes being responsible sucks," I grumbled, and rolled out of bed. I grabbed my robe from the floor. "Come on, Connor. Time to face another night in Fairyland."

Connor groaned and followed me to the kitchen.

Conversation died in favor of nutrition, or what passed for it around my place. Connor ate fresh fruit and granola, while I had most of a pot of coffee, pouring the last of it into a bowl of Lucky Charms before starting a new pot.

"You eat like a six year old," said Connor, grinning at me as he put his

bowl in the sink.

“A *caffeinated* six year old,” I corrected.

“My apologies. You eat like a *caffeinated* six year old.” He walked back and kissed me lightly. “I need to check in and get changed for tonight. I’ll come back and get you in a few hours?”

“I should be getting ready myself,” I said regretfully. “Stay safe, okay? I’m not ready to break up with you again.”

He laughed a little. “I’ll try not to run into any knives.”

“I’ll hold you to that. Open roads.”

Connor kissed me again. “Open roads, sweet tides, and I’ll be back before you know it.”

“Liar,” I said, and let him go. That was something I was getting less and less comfortable doing . . . and if we couldn’t stop this war from happening that was something I might have to do forever.



FOUR

I FINISHED MY CEREAL after seeing Connor out. The Queen's Court isn't the sort of place I go when I want a good meal, and I was pretty sure there wouldn't be time for takeout afterward. When I was done, I picked up the portable phone and headed toward my room. If I was going to attend a formal affair without embarrassing myself, I was going to need a little help. That's why I have my friends on speed dial.

A cheery, out-of-breath female voice picked up on the second ring. "Hello?"

"Hey, Stacy." I held the phone between my cheek and shoulder as I started digging through my closet. What do you wear to a diplomatic event that's supposed to be the first step toward preventing a war? Besides "lots of weapons." The last thing I wanted to do was start a new conflict by wearing the wrong kind of sword.

"Toby! What's up, honey?" Someone was shrieking in the background. That actually helped my nerves. Stacy and her husband have five kids. I'd be more worried if someone *wasn't* shrieking in the background.

"Nothing much. Are you busy?"

"Not really—Jessica, you put your brother down!—why do you ask?" I couldn't blame her for sounding a little suspicious. Being one of my best friends has taught her to be wary of unexpected phone calls.

"I have to go to a thing at the Queen's Court tonight, and I have nothing to wear." I picked up a denim skirt from the closet floor. Either May had been committing acts of appliqué on my clothes, or it was hers. "Also, if I try to do my own hair, I'll wind up looking like someone's prize collie."

Stacy paused before asking, "Toby, what's going on?"

I bit back a sigh. Sometimes having observant friends is more trouble than it's worth. "It's a diplomatic event. Representatives from the local Undersea

Duchy will be there, and I'm supposed to represent Goldengreen, which means dressing like an adult."

"Ah, the joys of being a Countess." Stacy sounded relieved. "Diplomatic event" apparently didn't set off any warning bells in her head. "Do you need me to help you get ready?"

"Please?"

"No problem. Is May there?"

"Not right now. Why?"

"I have a horrible scarf for her. Karen silk-screened it in art class."

"I'm sure she'll love it. See you in an hour?"

"Something like that. Open roads." She hung up.

Most of the contents of my closet were on the floor by that point. I prodded them with a toe as I sat down on the bed. Assuming Stacy left when she said she was going to, I had about forty-five minutes to get cleaned up, get more coffee, and make a few more calls. I sighed and started dialing.

My next call was to a Glastig named Bucer O'Malley. We used to live together in a place called Home, back when I thought "street thug" was a legitimate career aspiration. We hadn't worked together in a long time, but I knew he was still in the Kingdom. A lot of Devin's former kids have stayed at least loosely in touch, tied by shared secrets and shared shame. If anyone local had hired a kidnapper, Bucer would know.

He didn't pick up his phone. I left a vague message, including the strong suggestion that he call me back, and dialed again, calling a contact I felt a lot better about: Danny, the Bridge Troll cab driver who's somehow become an ally of mine. I blame it on his underdeveloped sense of self-preservation. I'm just glad he's on my side. Sometimes it's handy to have a seven-foot-tall mountain that walks like a man and is willing to hit things on my behalf.

"Yo," said Danny, shouting to be heard over the barking of his pack of resident Barghests. His house could give Stacy's a run for the money in the area of sheer noise.

"Hey, Danny, it's Toby."

"Tobes!" he said, with undisguised delight. "What's up, girl? You need a ride somewhere?"

"Not a ride—a favor. Have you heard about what's going on with Saltmist?"

The delight vanished instantly. "Not in so many words, but everyone knows somethin's up. Nobody's seen any of the Merrow that usually hang by

the docks for days, an' most of the Selkies are gone, too. There somethin' I need to be aware of?"

"Well, we may be going to war. Does that count?" His silence said it did. "I want you to start asking around. See if anybody's come into money recently, or if anyone unfamiliar has been shopping around for henchmen."

"On it," said Danny. "You got anything else you need?"

"The sons of the Duchess of Saltmist have disappeared. I need to find them. First, I need to attend a diplomatic gathering at the Queen's Court. So if there's anything you can do while I'm unavoidably detained, I'd be in your debt."

"Don't need you in my debt, girly. Just need you to keep breathin'."

"I'm working on that. Open roads, Danny."

"Same to you."

I felt slightly better as I left the room. Between Danny and Bucer—I felt Bucer bothered calling me back—I at least had eyes at the street level while I was busy hobnobbing with people who didn't even like admitting the street existed. Sometimes I think it's a miracle Faerie can function at all, since we seem to be constantly in denial about how our society works.

Spike followed me to the bathroom, perching on the edge of the sink and chirping. I leaned over to stroke its thorny head while I waited for the water to warm up. Running water is one of the true beauties of mortal ingenuity. Faerie may have castles of glass and mirrors that talk, but it took humans to invent the flush toilet.

Much as I wanted to spend an hour or two in the shower, letting it work out the knots from my lesson with Sylvester—and my "lessons" with Connor—I had things to do. I rinsed off quickly, turning off the water and slipping on my bathrobe before opening the bathroom door.

May was waiting for me in the hall, an amused expression on her face. "Hi," she said.

"Hey, you're home." I brushed past her. "Bathroom's free."

"That's nice." She folded her arms, mock-glaring at me. "Jazz and I found Stacy sitting on the doorstep when we got home. You're a *bad* friend."

"How long ago was that?" I asked, before raising my voice to shout, "You're early!"

"I know!" Stacy called back.

I rolled my eyes. "This is going to be fun. Did she tell you why she's here?"

“No, but Luna did when she called me to come pick up your dress. You’re going to be the prettiest princess at the *whole* ball.” May dodged my ineffective swipe and flounced off toward the kitchen. She was a good flouncer. I glared at her retreating back, secretly relieved. I didn’t want to explain the situation with Stacy in the apartment. It would worry her, and worrying Stacy is never a good idea.

Stacy was waiting in my room. She’d cleared the clothes off my bed and floor while she waited, putting them away with a precision most of my wardrobe hadn’t experienced since leaving Old Navy.

She was eyeing my underwear drawer when I arrived. “Toby, I think some of these predate synthetic fabrics.”

“Hello to you, too,” I said dryly. “You’re here to do my hair, not mock my taste in clothes.”

“I’m here to help you get ready, sweetie, and that means doing both.” She moved to hug me, ignoring the fact that I was still dripping. Then she jabbed a finger at my desk chair, which had been dragged in front of the bedroom mirror. “You, sit. Your hair and I need to have a long overdue chat.”

“Is this going to hurt?” Having three daughters has helped Stacy keep up with modern fashions, and she has enough of a grasp of pureblood trends to know what is and isn’t acceptable. She was the best possible person to help me get ready. This did nothing to change my utter hatred of having my hair done.

“Probably.” Stacy pushed me into the chair, positioning herself behind me. “You need to take better care of your hair,” she said, plucking the towel from around my neck and beginning to dry my hair, one section at a time.

“Why? I’ve got you to do it for me.”

“I’m serious. You’re only in your fifties. What’re you going to do when you’re two hundred? Wear a wig?”

“It’s a thought,” I said, closing my eyes. “Think I could get one styled like yours?”

Stacy scoffed and kept drying. Both of us knew I was only half-kidding. Stacy and I are both brunettes, but her hair is an elegant chestnut, while mine is a faded ash-brown shot through with gold highlights. Her hair is thick and well-behaved; mine is stick-straight and fine enough to make anything more complex than a ponytail hard. Really, Stacy’s hair goes with the rest of her, because she can stop traffic with a smile. I can stop traffic, too. I just tend to do it by crashing my car into something.

“So they’re inviting you to diplomatic events now?” Stacy dropped the towel and started unsnarling my sodden hair with something that felt like a pick. I kept my eyes closed. “I wondered when they’d start showing sense.”

“I’m sure they’re just inviting me to even out the number of place settings.”

“Still, maybe you’ll add a touch of sanity to the proceedings.”

“Ha, ha,” I deadpanned.

Stacy laughed—a much more genuine sound. “Did I tell you that Anthony’s having his first slumber party next week?”

“No,” I said, relaxing and tilting my head back. “Tell me all about it.”

I let her words wash over me, concentrating on them rather than on the light, constant tugging at my hair. It was soothing, almost like the slumber parties we used to have, back when we were both teenagers, and the world was a much simpler place.

“I’m going to let this dry a little while I do your makeup,” she said, pulling her hands away. I heard jars clink as she got her makeup kit, and had to suppress the urge to bolt. “Have you seen the dress you’ll be wearing?”

“I was thinking I’d skip it. The Queen wants to see my new sweatshirt, right?” Stacy pinched me. I yelped. “Quit it! No, I haven’t seen it. Have you?”

“Yes. I think you’ll like it.” The jars rattled again before she started rubbing something on my eyelids. “I’m doing a simple, classic, smoky eye. Try not to smear it too much, okay? ‘Raccoon’ isn’t a good look for anybody.”

“I’ll try,” I said, resisting the urge to peek. That way lies madness, and getting a mascara wand in the eye.

Stacy worked for almost twenty minutes before she made a faint sound of approval. “Almost done,” she said, dusting her brush across my nose and forehead.

“And thank Titania for that,” I said fervently, as she went back to working on my hair.

“You *should* be thanking Titania,” said Stacy, spraying something that smelled like roses and cotton flowers into the air above my head. “If it weren’t for her, we’d be doing this the mortal way, and we’d be here for at least another hour.”

“Oh, *goody*,” I muttered.

“Toby!” called May, from the living room. “Connor’s here!”

“He can’t have her yet!” Stacy called back. “We’re busy!”

“Got it!”

Stacy grabbed a hairpin, twisting a lock of my hair up and back before spraying more of the cotton flower mist on my head. “That does sort of beg the question—are you sure you should be taking Connor? I mean, one minute he’s breaking up with you because Selkies don’t date changelings—”

“That wasn’t his fault!” I protested.

“—the next, he’s married, and now he’s single and suddenly he’s all over you again? I don’t want to see you get hurt, Toby.”

“Stacy . . .”

“It just seems like a lot of things ‘weren’t his fault.’ ” She gave my hair a hard tug. I winced. “Hold still while I pin this.”

“Yes, boss,” I muttered.

Her fingers tugged and darted, grabbing loops of hair and pinning them in place. Finally, she patted my shoulder. “Okay. We’re done.”

“Yippee.” I stood, rolling my head to ease the stiffness in my neck. Then I took a good look at my reflection and stopped, blinking.

My makeup was subtle, simple, and somehow perfect, calling attention to my best features while playing down my worst ones. My hair was pinned in sleek curls, held back with carved ash pins. The curls moved naturally when I turned my head, but fell right back to their original positions, not a hair going out of place.

“It should hold as long as you don’t get in a fight.” Stacy appeared behind me in the mirror, smiling. “I assume you won’t get in a fight?”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Good. Do you like it?”

“I do.” I risked a nod. Again, my hair moved without becoming disheveled. That was nothing short of a miracle.

“Even better. It should stay intact until morning, as long as you don’t get it wet.”

“No fights and no skinny-dipping; check.” I turned to face her. “Now, since my fashion sense clearly isn’t acceptable, where’s that dress?”

“I thought you’d never ask.” Stacy’s smile turned impish. “May, we’re ready!”

The bedroom door swung open and May stepped inside, something black draped across her arms. “Hey, Toby. Wow, Stacy, you made her look like a real girl.” With a wink, she added, “That means I like your hair.”

“I got that,” I said, eyeing the fabric she was holding. “Please tell me there’s more dress there than I think there is.”

She thrust her arms out toward me. “Luna said you’d say that. She told me to remind you that part of the purpose of a diplomatic event is looking impressive, which you can’t do in any of the things you pretend are fashionable. Now get dressed.”

“I . . .”

“Get dressed.”

I know when I’m beat. I sighed, and took the dress. It was light enough to seem weightless. I paused, frowning. “Is this spider silk?”

“Yes.”

Spider silk is rare, even by Faerie standards. It’s also unbelievably expensive. Most of it is purchased by purebloods, to wear to events like this one. The lower classes can get away with attending formal events in everyday clothes masked by illusion; members of the nobility are expected to hold themselves to a higher standard, even if they have to sell the farm to do it. People can tell when you’re wearing the real thing and not an illusion—at least, that’s what my mother always said. She lied about a lot of things, but I’ve never had reason to doubt her in the arenas of diplomacy or fashion.

Aware that I was holding a baronial fortune in my arms, I gave the dress a careful look. It looked black at first glance, but shimmered with patches of gold and silver when the light hit it. The colors shifted seamlessly, and the effect was dismayingly reminiscent of moonlight moving across calico scales.

“Try it,” said May, snapping me out of my contemplation. I raised my head, cocking an eyebrow. She met my eyes without hesitation. “It was Amandine’s.”

I stared at her.

May offered a small smile. “Raiding your mom’s closet is a time-honored tradition, right? Come on, Stacy.” She turned, stepping out of the room, with Stacy right behind her.

“We’ll be in the living room,” said Stacy, and closed the door.

“Right,” I said, to the empty room.

The idea of Luna raiding Amandine’s closet was new and unsettling. Mother’s tower has never needed much in the way of security—it’s self-aware enough to keep out anyone who hasn’t been explicitly invited. As far as I knew, neither Mother nor I ever gave Luna permission to go inside. Oh,

well. There'd be time to worry about that later, after we survived the night.

I shrugged off my robe, pulled on a pair of panties, and stepped into the dress. It was sleeveless, with a straight-cut neckline that came straight out of the 1950s. It was also several sizes too big, hanging around me like a tent.

That was easily fixed. I held the dress up with one hand as I reached behind me with the other, gathering the fabric against the small of my back. The spider silk writhed like a living thing as the dress tightened around me, becoming form-fitting to the point of being practically painted on. There are *reasons* the stuff is so expensive.

"Better," I said, letting go and turning to look at my reflection.

One of the nice things about spider silk is the way it conforms to the lines of the body. The dress fit like it was made for me, outlining every curve I have, and a few I hadn't been entirely aware of. The straight-cut neckline somehow managed to be flattering, largely, I think, because the top was tight enough to make a bra an unnecessary extravagance. The skirt was knee-length and gently pleated. It was a good cut for me, classic yet easy to move in, and it called attention to my legs. I have nice legs, probably because of all the running away I do. All my scars were visible, but I'm a knight. Scars are part of the job.

Depending on how I wanted to look at it, I either looked fantastic or like a little kid playing dress-up with Mommy's clothes. I was definitely voting the second. I've been an adult for a long time, but this . . . this wasn't me.

"Hey, Toby. You decent?" May didn't wait for me to answer before opening the bedroom door. She froze, eyebrows going up. Then she whistled low, saying, "*Nice*," and calling over her shoulder, "Hey, Connor, you won the lottery!"

"Stop that!" I hissed.

"No," said May, laughing. She tossed me a mesh bag. I caught it one-handed. "Put these on. And for the love of Oberon, lose the scowl. You look like you just bit into a lemon."

She slammed the door behind her as she left the room, still laughing. I glared at the place where she'd been standing for a moment before dumping the bag's contents out on the bed. It proved to hold a pair of low-slung black silk heels with ankle straps, my old footwear nemesis. I sighed as I picked them up. At least I wouldn't lose them if I had to make a run for it. There was also a black spider silk choker with an oval moonstone pendant the size of my thumbnail, and matching earrings—no surprise there.

I put everything on and turned to give myself another long look in the mirror, trying to swallow past the lump in my throat. Taken all together, the outfit worked some strange illusion that had nothing to do with magic, playing down my mortal features, playing up my resemblance to my mother, and making me look like what the Queen's Court wanted me to be. I didn't look like the girl who worked for Devin, earned her knighthood almost by accident, and once tried to ditch Faerie. I looked noble. I looked like I belonged.

I looked like the Countess of Goldengreen.

I took a deep breath to steady myself. I could do this. I could go out there and face the Queen's Court and play the part the Luidaeg and Goldengreen needed me to play. I owed it to the people who'd somehow become my subjects.

"Toby? May said to see if you were—" Connor stepped into the room, freezing in mid-step when he saw me. I guess I presented a startling picture, especially considering my customary cotton-and-denim chic.

"Yeah?" I asked, forcing a twist of a smile.

"You look . . ."

I had to forcibly restrain the urge to rake my hands through my hair. "I know. Sucks, don't it?"

"You look amazing." He gave me a besotted smile. "I mean it." He'd changed while he was out, replacing his white cotton shirt and denim jeans with a tailored blue vest, white silk shirt, and dark blue trousers a few shades lighter than his Victorian-style walking jacket. His hair was damp again, the artless tangle of his gray-and-brown curls somehow making the picture perfect. His smile widened when he saw me studying him. "You approve?"

"I do." I smoothed my skirt with the heels of my hands, ducking my head to hide the blush, and shouted, "May? How am I supposed to go armed in this getup?"

"You're not," she said, stepping into the room with Stacy behind her.

I crossed my arms. "That's not an option."

Stacy grinned. "You look great."

"I still need weapons," I said firmly.

Stacy blinked, looking briefly concerned. "You're going to the Queen's Court armed? She already doesn't like you. Are you sure that's wise?"

"No, but I'm going to do it anyway. I'm way too good at getting myself into trouble. I refuse to go without protection."

“I told Luna you’d be difficult,” said May, handing me a thigh sheath. “This, of course, is courtesy of Sylvester.”

“Of course,” I agreed, and strapped it on. My belt sheath was on the floor with my jeans. I picked it up and transferred my knife to the thigh sheath, checking twice to be sure the handle was in a convenient position in case it needed to be drawn. I used to carry two knives, one silver, one iron. That’s another thing that changed when Amandine changed my blood. Iron burns my skin now, and I can’t stand to touch it unless I’m wearing special gloves. I’ll replace it soon. But not just yet.

Digging the Luidaeg’s shell out of my jeans, I tucked it between the thigh sheath and my leg. The leather pressed the edges of the shell against me, spreading an oddly soothing chill across my skin.

Stacy smiled at me as I straightened up. “You look amazing,” she said earnestly. “May? Walk me to the car?”

“Sure,” said May. She lingered long enough to say, “You look awesome. Break a leg tonight.” Then she was gone, following Stacy out of the room. Connor and I exchanged a look.

“You really do look great,” he said.

“So do you. You ready?”

“No.”

“Good—me neither.” I sighed. “Come on. Let’s go see the Queen.”

Connor laughed as he we walked out into the hall. That was good. I was pretty sure we wouldn’t be doing much laughing after we got to the Queen’s knowe.



FIVE

CARS I VAGUELY RECOGNIZED filled about half the spots in the parking lot closest to the Queen's knowe. Other spots were apparently empty, but radiated an aura of "You don't want to park here" that betrayed the presence of vehicles hidden by don't-look-here charms that I still wasn't strong enough to see through.

Connor glanced my way, doubtless reading the tension in the set of my mouth and the way I was practically strangling the steering wheel. "You sure you're ready for this?"

"I pretty much have to be." I parked the car between two that I couldn't see, taking a weird sort of pleasure in leaving it visible. "Maeve's tits, I hate this place."

"You, too? I always feel like I'm being measured for the killing jar." Connor undid his seat belt and got out of the car.

"At least the Queen doesn't hate you," I offered, following him. My shoes provided a surprising amount of traction on both the sandy pavement of the parking lot and the loose sand of the beach beyond. Let's hear it for high-quality heels.

"Hey, think big—she probably hates me by now. I'm dating you, and she's already condemned you to death once."

"Sad for her that I'm hard to kill." I eyed the rocks between us and the cave leading to the Queen's knowe. "I'm going to fall in."

"That's not going to be a problem." Connor smiled as he took my hand. The scent of kelp rose around us, briefly overwhelming the smell of the sea. He tugged me forward. "Come on, it'll be fine."

I eyed him dubiously, but let him lead me around the rocks I would normally have walked across, down the last strip of sand, and into the shallow water. At least, it *looked* like he was leading me into the water. I

could see it lapping around my calves, but I couldn't feel a thing.

"Nice trick," I said.

His smile became a grin. "There are side benefits to dating a Selkie."

"You mean I'm getting something out of this besides the sex? Awesome."

Connor laughed.

Intangible waves eddied around us as we waded through them to the shallow, stagnant water that pooled on the floor of the cave. For possibly the first time ever, I was going to be visiting the Queen's knowe completely dry.

It was a lot lighter in the cave than I was used to, but that was due to the changes in me, not due to any change in the Queen's décor. My night vision has improved with the rest of me. I gave Connor one last sidelong glance, wishing we could skip out and go to a movie or something instead, and pulled him through the cave's rear wall.

The stone faded into cool mist, turning the world gray and sending electric tingles through my skin. We kept walking. The mist thinned and finally disappeared completely, leaving us standing in the Queen's knowe . . . but not the part of it I was expecting. Connor dropped my hand.

"Whoa," he said.

I silently shared the sentiment.

Normally, the beachside entrance to the Queen's knowe leads to a vast, cavernous ballroom that seems to extend for the better part of forever. Not this time. Instead, we were standing in a large antechamber, clearly intended to control the flow of arrivals. It might have seemed imposing if I hadn't been expecting the ballroom. Since I was, it just seemed ostentatious, like it was trying way too hard.

The walls were blue-white marble and pink coral, and the floor was pink-veined white marble. It was like we were standing inside a giant wedding cake. The room ended in set of ornately carved oak doors at least fifteen feet tall, flanked by a pair of Daoine Sidhe wearing the Queen's colors. One had dark blue hair; the other's hair was almost exactly the color of cotton candy.

"Can you even dye my eyes to match my gown? Jolly old town," I muttered.

"What?"

"Nothing. Ignore me." I released my human disguise, leaving the smell of copper and fresh-cut grass hanging in the air. "So are you ready now?"

Connor's disguise dissolved into the scent of kelp and seawater. "Still no."

"Good answer. Come on."

The blue-haired flunky stared straight ahead as we approached, his nose wrinkled slightly, like he smelled something bad. I grimaced as we got close enough for me to recognize him. Dugan Harrow, everybody's favorite landless asshole.

"Who comes?" he demanded, once we were too close to be ignored without violating the rules of propriety.

Even I knew better than to be flippant with a member of the Queen's retinue at a time like this. I straightened and said, "Countess October Christine Daye of Goldengreen, Knight of Lost Words, sworn to Duke Sylvester Torquill of Shadowed Hills."

"Connor O'Dell of Saltmist, current Undersea diplomatic emissary from Saltmist to Shadowed Hills," said Connor.

Dugan scowled. "You may pass," he said, not bothering to conceal his resentment. We—a changeling and a skinshifter—were invited guests, while he, a pureblood Daoine Sidhe, was stuck on door duty. He kept scowling as he turned in practiced tandem with the other footman to open the vast oak doors, revealing a long, dimly-lit hall that matched the entrance chamber's design. I walked past them with my head held high, not making eye contact.

Connor walked beside me, waiting until the doors were closed behind us to grin and say, "You always say you hate your name. Why don't you go by Christine?"

"Be quiet."

"We could call you Chrissie."

"Shut up."

Connor snorted and stopped talking. He didn't stop looking amused.

A series of diaphanous curtains the color of new-fallen snow billowed from the ceiling at the end of the hall, turning the ballroom beyond into a watercolor abstraction. Connor's hand sought mine, gripping tightly. I shot him what I hoped was a reassuring look, and we stepped together through the layers of hanging fabric.

The curtains parted around us like a slightly more solid version of the wall we'd walked through to enter the knowe—and just like the wall, when the last of them fell away, it was to reveal a world transformed.

The main hall had been decorated for the occasion, elevating it from "grand" to "practically unreal." Gray silk ribbons were wrapped around the filigreed ivory pillars studding the room, and layers of white covered the walls, making it impossible to pinpoint the entrances. The royal crest of the

Kingdom of the Mists hung from each of the four balconies; no matter where you looked, you'd know whose territory you were in.

More ribbons hung from the heavy chandeliers overhead, eddying with the movement of the crowd below until they drifted dangerously close to the candles around them. The candlelight itself was bright and diffuse at the same time, turning everything faintly unreal. I shuddered, squeezing Connor's hand. I hate candlelight.

And then there were the people.

There are dozens of fiefdoms in the Kingdom of the Mists. Most of them have at least one noble family, and for an event this size—an event meant to prevent a war—everyone had come out of the woodwork to prove their willingness to make an effort. *Everyone*. I didn't recognize half the people. They were all dressed to the nines, mingling and chatting while they ignored the servants weaving among them with trays of drinks and canapés. Only the faint air of unease disturbed the illusion of glamorous society; this might be the last peaceful night in the Kingdom for quite some time.

My feet were suddenly numb, refusing to let me move. "I don't think I can do this," I said.

"Just smile."

"I don't think I can do that either."

"Try."

I took a deep breath and scanned the room, looking for something safe to concentrate on. I found it in a woman standing at the nearest banquet table, picking disinterestedly at a roast Wyvern. She had marigold-colored hair, and was the only person in the room wearing jeans. I pointed at her. "Is that who I think it is?"

Connor followed my finger. Then he nodded. "Yup."

"Oh, thank Oberon. I was afraid we'd be the only sane ones here." I began to wade determinedly through the crowd, hauling Connor with me.

The woman looked up as though she could sense our approach, the light glinting off the lenses of her glasses, as she turned our way, smiled, and disappeared. The people she'd been standing next to stopped and stared. Very few people are as casual about teleportation as April O'Leary, even in Faerie. April makes her own rules. Being the only cyber-Dryad Countess in existence means she gets to do that.

Connor and I stepped to the side, moving into the shelter of one of the room's massive pillars. "At least now we know they're not letting *anybody*

off the hook,” I said. Moving April out of her County must have taken some pretty complicated hardware. It also left Tamed Lightning practically undefended, since she was both their Countess and their early warning system.

“We already knew that,” said Connor. “They invited you.”

The air in front of us shimmered before I could come up with a retort. When the shimmer cleared, April was simply standing there, green sparks dancing off the rims of her glasses. I was almost disappointed to see that she’d traded her jeans for a proper ball gown, all crushed green velvet and black satin ribbons. Being made entirely of light has its advantages.

“October. Connor.” She accompanied her greetings with small bobs of her head. “It is pleasant to see you again.”

“Same,” said Connor.

“Hey, April.” I waved. “I see they got to you, too.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “I did not wish to attend, but Elliot said I must preserve the illusion that we pay attention to events on the Kingdom level.”

That sounded like something Elliot would say. “Is he here with you?”

“No. He won the coin toss and elected to remain at the office. I am accompanied by one of the junior programmers. I believe he is trysting in the food preparation area with one of the resident Brownies. As long as my server is not compromised, it is none of my concern.” April shrugged, indicating how little she minded being abandoned. “It is interesting to see so many new faces. I still do not get out much. This was a valuable opportunity to test my new mobile server array.”

“We should fix that—the not getting out much, I mean.” I snagged two glasses of sparkling wine from a nearby servant, passing one of them to Connor. I’ve been poisoned that way in the past, but if someone wanted to go to that much trouble to assassinate me in the Queen’s own Court, they wouldn’t stop with a couple of poisoned drinks.

The wine was light and tartly sweet, with a faint aftertaste of apple blossoms.

“I am not sure I want to get out more.” April glanced around before adding, with some frustration, “These people are difficult to communicate with. They mostly just stare.”

I had to laugh. “They’re not used to you yet. You have to give them some time.” As far as I know, April is the only Dryad ever to hold a noble title. She’s definitely the only Dryad ever to have been transplanted into a piece of

computer hardware. Say what you like about her adoptive mother, the late January O’Leary, but the woman had a style all her own.

“I encounter this reaction frequently.” April brushed slightly pixelated hair out of her eyes. “I really am not sure what is expected of me if this comes to conflict. I doubt the Undersea has DSL lines for me to disconnect, and my range of movement is limited by my hardware.”

“To be honest, I don’t know what I’m supposed to do, either.” The Luidaeg’s shell chilled briefly, reminding me that one way or another, I was going to be doing *something*.

April tilted her head, looking between us, and asked, “When did you get married?”

Connor choked on his wine. I coughed into my hand, getting my breath back before asking, “Uh, what?”

“Is that incorrect? I am sorry.” April looked annoyed. “I assumed your mutual attendance signified something, given the disappearance of my cousin Rayseline. I really am terrible with this ‘interpersonal relationships’ thing. Elliot says I must find a man and attempt to have children if I wish to validate my rule.”

“Does he, now?” I asked, barely following her apparent change of subjects. Connor was still struggling to breathe. It was almost amusing, in a sadistic sort of way.

“It seems both silly and biologically improbable to me, but . . .” April shrugged, encompassing in a gesture how silly she found most social traditions. “If you will excuse me, I believe I see my Uncle Sylvester. I must say hello.” Her dress shimmered back into blue jeans and a sweater before she vanished, leaving the air to rush into the place where she’d been standing.

I gave Connor a sidelong look. “Normally this is where we’d go bother Sylvester, but for the moment, I think she can have him.”

A voice from my other side asked, “Is she like that all the time?”

“Mostly,” I answered automatically. “Other days she’s a little weird.” Then I paused, realizing the voice didn’t belong to anyone I knew. Wincing, I turned. “I’m sorry. We haven’t been properly introduced.”

The man beside me laughed with what sounded like sincere amusement. I didn’t know him. I would have remembered. He was Daoine Sidhe, but sturdier than the average, built more like a sailor than a nobleman. A light patina of verdigris covered his bronze hair, and his eyes were dark blue. His features were pleasant without being spectacular. That alone was unusual: the

Daoine Sidhe seem to make a habit out of unnaturally refined beauty.

He also looked exhausted. Thin worry lines were etched into the skin around his mouth, and he had the haggard complexion of a man who hadn't been eating or sleeping properly for days, if not weeks.

"Don't worry about it," he said. "It's nice to hear a little honesty around here. I don't think we've met, although you do look familiar."

"This is my first major diplomatic event." Connor had recovered from his coughing fit and was tugging on my elbow, trying to get my attention. I couldn't think of a way to stop the introduction without being rude, so I barreled on, saying, "That was Countess April O'Leary of Tamed Lightning. I'm Countess October Daye, from Goldengreen. You can call me Toby. This is my escort—"

"Connor O'Dell," said the stranger. Connor let go of my elbow. "We've met. But you . . . you're Amandine's daughter, aren't you? The one who killed Blind Michael."

Sometimes I think I'll never live either of those things down. "That's me."

The stranger nodded. "They say you're a hero."

"They say a lot of things." I looked at him blandly. "I'm afraid I didn't catch your name."

"Patrick." He smiled. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

I shot Connor an apologetic glance. Well, that explained why he'd been trying to get my attention. "Patrick *Lorden*?"

"The very same."

"You're married to the Duchess of Saltmist, aren't you?" Leave it to me to strike up an informal conversation with one of the people we were gathered to pacify.

"That would be me." Patrick didn't sound offended. That was something. "Dianda's yelling at the Queen, and I'm staying as far away as I can. My wife can be . . . forceful . . . when she gets going. Hello, Connor. Cute date."

"Your Grace," said Connor. He sounded mortified. I guess this wasn't how he'd pictured introducing his girlfriend to his liege.

"Forgive me for saying so, Your Grace, but you seem more relaxed than I expected," I said carefully. "I'd heard there were some issues."

"By 'issues,' you mean the kidnapping and threatened murder of my sons?" His smile held neither warmth nor humor. "My current calm is a facade, I assure you, but as I can't do anything to help Dianda negotiate their return, I'm staying out of the way."

“That’s very reasonable of you,” I said. “If something happened to my daughter, I’d be a lot less capable of being sensible.” And a lot more powerless—but in the end, that wouldn’t matter. If something happened to Gillian, I’d rip the world down to save her, even if she spat in my face when I did. That’s what parenthood means.

Patrick tilted his head. “You’re a parent?”

I used to be, I thought. Aloud, I said, “Yes. Her name is Gillian. She recently turned eighteen.”

Something in my voice must have told him not to push the point. Patrick nodded instead, and said, “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you.”

“Likewise.” Silence fell between the three of us, no one quite sure what to say or how to say it. I tried to cover my awkwardness by raising my glass for another drink, and stopped cold.

The candles were throwing hundreds of tiny, flickering shadows across the surface of my wine . . . everywhere but one small section at the rim of the glass, where the reflection of the room was crisp and perfectly clear. Everything but that one spot was distorted, like . . . like . . .

Like the loophole in a personal invisibility spell.

“Patrick?” I said casually, tilting my glass to get a better fix on the reflection. Now that I was really *looking*, I could make out the outline of a human-sized person on the balcony behind me, raising something that was either a gun or a small crossbow. The loophole wasn’t quite good enough to let me make out any details, like what kind of weapon was being aimed in our direction. If it was a gun, there was no way to guess whether the bullets would be iron. If it was a crossbow, it was probably loaded with elf-shot. Not a call I wanted to make from the other side of a ballroom.

“Yes?”

“I realize we’ve just met, and you’re probably going to think I’m insane, but I need you to do exactly what I say, okay? Don’t look surprised, don’t yell, just nod if you understand.”

I glanced to the side long enough to see Patrick’s nod. His shoulders were suddenly tense. I hoped our shooter wouldn’t notice. I was happier with them trying to line up “the perfect shot” than I was with the idea of an early shot that might get lucky.

“Good. I’m going to hand Connor my glass, and then I’m going to tackle you. Don’t fight me, don’t try to pull away. Connor, when I move, hit the floor. Don’t turn, just dive.”

“Toby, what—”

“Trust me.” I plastered a smile across my face as I turned to press my glass into Connor’s free hand. Then I launched myself into Patrick, knocking us both to the floor.

I heard, rather than saw, Connor following us down. He dropped the wineglasses as he fell, and they shattered when they hit the marble, sending glass shards flying in all directions. There was another, far more ominous sound at the same time: the zing of an arrow passing over my head. Someone screamed, and the ballroom dissolved into chaos.

People scattered, putting distance between themselves and us as quickly as they could. I ignored them, holding Patrick down and counting to ten. When no further shots were fired, I pushed myself back to my feet, letting Patrick and Connor get up on their own while I turned back to the balcony.

It was empty.

“Root and *branch*,” I snarled.

“Toby?”

“Alert the guards. That was an assassination attempt.” I stalked over to the arrow, crouching next to it.

It was only a few feet from where we’d been standing, the arrowhead buried in the marble floor at a depth many mortal bullets couldn’t have managed. Fae munitions may be old-fashioned, but they’re frighteningly effective. The shaft was polished, black-stained mistletoe—the generic option for elf-shot. The stain might be a clue if it had been any other color, since most noble houses keep a limited range of wood dyes on hand, but black is an assassin’s color, and there’s no noble house that doesn’t occasionally feel the need for one of those. It wasn’t going to do me any good at all.

I reached for the arrow, and stopped as the Luidaeg’s shell suddenly burned cold, telling me that touching the wood with my bare hands wasn’t the best idea. “Anybody got a shirt I can borrow?”

“Here,” said Patrick, shrugging out of his leather vest and offering it to me. I nodded the thanks that Faerie etiquette wouldn’t let me offer aloud before leaning over and carefully wrapping the vest around the arrow’s shaft.

“You may want to step back,” I said. “This thing could be rigged to explode.” On that cheery note, I gripped the arrow with both hands, and pulled.

The arrow came loose immediately—not what I’d been expecting from something that traveled with enough force to bury itself in solid stone. I

staggered backward, barely managing to keep from toppling over. Once I was sure I was stable, I raised the arrow to my nose and sniffed, looking for any lingering traces of magic. The wood smelled acrid; it was a bottled spell, and, unfortunately, it was a familiar one.

“Elf-shot,” I said, disgusted.

Connor was suddenly behind me, the air crackling with the salty scent of his magic as it gathered in response to the potential threat. “Are you all right?”

I stood, giving him a reassuring nod before turning to Patrick. I shifted the position of the vest so as to expose as much of the arrow as possible without actually touching the thing. “This is fletched with owl feathers,” I said. “Does it match any design you recognize?”

“No.” He was pale but standing, and he looked like he was staying reasonably calm; that was good. The last thing I needed was a hysterical Ducal consort. “It’s nothing I’ve seen before.”

The crowd was continuing to shrink. Many of them were already gone, pouring out the doors in a panic. I just hoped the Queen’s guard would be smart enough not to let them leave the knowe.

Speaking of the Queen’s guard . . . “Where the hell are the guards?” I asked. “They should be here by now.”

“Better question: who the hell are *you*?” The questioner shoved herself between us, expression challenging me to give her something to get pissed off about. I didn’t have to know who she was to know that wouldn’t be a good idea. It’s not a good idea to bait anyone who looks that ready to take your head off.

She was black-haired and dark-eyed, with skin the color of clean sand and delicately pointed ears that weren’t shaped quite right for her to be Daoine Sidhe. Narrow slits that I recognized as closed gills ran along the sides of her neck. Her dress was deep blue velvet over white samite, trimmed with pearls and bits of polished shell, and she wasn’t wearing shoes. That, as much as the way she reached for Patrick’s hand, told me who she had to be.

“Duchess Lorden.” I bowed, holding it just long enough to be polite. The Merrow are one of the few purely Undersea races that can take a bipedal form, even if it’s difficult for them to maintain it for long. It made sense that she’d want to meet the Queen on equal footing, so to speak. “I’m Toby Daye.”

“What she’s failing to mention is that she’s the new Countess of

Goldengreen, and that I'd be sleeping for a hundred years if not for her," said Patrick, letting Dianda take his hand. "Please keep that in mind, Di."

"I thought you'd prefer him unventilated," I said. Perhaps ill-advisedly, but I've never been good at keeping my mouth shut.

Dianda's eyes narrowed. "How did you become Countess of Goldengreen? I thought that knowe was sealed upon the Winterrose's death."

So the Undersea didn't share the aversion to admitting death existed? That was a nice change. If it weren't for the water part, I might have been tempted to start attending their ice cream socials. Or whatever it was they did down there.

"It was a royal appointment. I killed Blind Michael, and they couldn't give me a medal for murder, so they slapped me with a County instead." I started to fold my arms, and stopped, remembering the arrow.

Dianda kept glowering as she looked from my face to the arrow in my hand and back again. "How did you know?"

"The reflections in my wine were wrong." She looked at me blankly. I explained, "Personal invisibility spells can be tailored to work on specific surfaces, but that won't stop them from throwing reflections on things the spellcaster didn't think to block, like liquid. I noticed something out of place, and I'm a little paranoid about that sort of thing. Connor, you okay over there?"

"I think so." He bowed to Dianda. "Your Grace."

"Connor," she said frostily.

I cleared my throat. "Your Grace, I'm sorry I had to tackle your husband, but I'm glad to have been of service. I was . . . hoping to . . ." My voice trailed off. The Queen of the Mists was storming up behind Dianda, moonstruckmad eyes bright with fury. She had the skirt of her white silk gown clenched firmly in her hands, creating a sea-foam froth of fabric around her feet. I swallowed and tried my statement again, hoping to finish it before the Queen reached us. "Your Grace, not everyone here is against you."

Dianda never had a chance to answer. The Queen stepped between us, turning her back on Dianda and Patrick. "Countess Daye, what is the *meaning* of this?" she demanded, ignoring the Undersea nobles.

I've never been one of the Queen's favorite people, but I try not to piss her off. True anger lends her voice a dulcet shriek that can't help reminding me of her part-Banshee heritage—or of the damage she could do if she ever got really mad.

“There was an archer under a personal invisibility spell, Your Highness,” I said, holding up the arrow. “I saw him—or her—reflected in my wine and acted to protect your guests.”

“An archer, you say,” she sniffed. “How can I be sure it wasn’t you?”

“Because, Highness, the day I can shoot an arrow from behind myself and embed it in solid stone is the day I stop needing to shoot arrows at anyone.” She glared. I sighed. “Ask anyone you like; it wasn’t me. I strongly recommend you have the place searched before there’s another attack.”

“That won’t be necessary.” Dianda’s voice could have stopped a heat wave in its tracks. “It’s clear that there’s nothing to be settled here, and we’ll be going now.”

The Queen of the Mists gave her a look filled with the kind of loathing she normally reserved for me. “If you must.”

“We must. The land has made it perfectly clear what it wants, and we’ll see you on the field of battle,” said Dianda, and turned to stalk into the crowd. Patrick shot me a pleading look, and followed.

“Toby! What’s going on?” Sylvester and Luna came rushing up from the other side. The Queen glared daggers at them both. He ignored her, focusing his attention on me. “What just happened?”

“Someone tried to shoot the Duke of Saltmist. That’s bad. And this place is emptying like a sieve. That’s also bad. But I still have the arrow.” I was clinging to whatever hope I could find. It wasn’t much.

“It’s worse than that,” said the Queen.

I turned back to her, blinking. She smiled. It was a thin, bitter smile, and there was no joy in it.

There was no joy in her voice, either, as she raised it to address the room. I could feel her Banshee heritage at work, carrying her words through the knowe. “Lords and Ladies of the Court—those of you that remain—it is my duty as reigning monarch of the Kingdom of the Mists to inform you that as of this moment, we are at war.”

Her smile twisted, warping until it was practically a grimace. “May Oberon see fit to guard us,” she said, “for we’ll have little power left with which to guard ourselves.”



SIX

THE SILENCE FOLLOWING the Queen's announcement was broken only by the sound of skirts rustling and shoes scuffing against the floor. Then the whispering started. It was soft at first, but it swelled rapidly to a fever pitch as the Queen's final words sank in. I kept my eyes on the Queen. She watched me in return, a quiet challenge in her expression. The next move—whatever it was—was going to be mine.

Fine. I turned to consider the room. Maybe a quarter of the original guests remained; the rest had poured out like the tide rushing out to sea, either vanishing deeper into the knowe or fleeing to the mortal world. Connor was still standing next to me, but there were no other Undersea fae in evidence. There wasn't a Selkie or a Nixie to be seen.

Sylvester and Luna were only a few feet away, standing at the edge of one of the few groups remaining. Seeing them made me realize what my next step was. The Torquill family has always had . . . let's call them "unusual talents." Well, before she became Countess of Tamed Lightning, April O'Leary—Sylvester's adopted niece—had served as the County intercom, combining the Dryad talent for short-range teleportation with a total disregard for spatial relativity.

I cleared my throat. "April, could you come here, please?"

The air in front of me shimmered. There was a brief flare of ozone, and then April was simply standing there, looking annoyed. "Do you know what is going on?" she demanded. "Everyone appears to have gone insane. I have been forced to order my escort to remain with my server. He was prepared to run away and *leave me*." She sounded both wounded and amazed, like she had never previously considered that someone could do such a thing.

The faster I got the explanation out of the way, the faster we could get down to business. "An archer took a shot at one of the visiting nobles. They've stormed out in a huff, and now we're going to war." I held up the

arrow, gesturing at the Queen with my free hand. “Her guards aren’t stopping the exodus. Can you do a quick check for people who aren’t on the guest list?”

April looked at me blankly. “I could, if I had a copy of the guest list.” We both turned to the Queen.

An expression of dawning anger was spreading across her face. “It would be entirely inappropriate for me to share that information outside my Court,” she snapped. “Nor will any of my Court disclose it.”

Damn. Well, it was worth a shot. I looked back to April. “Can you check for people who look out of place and come back here if you see anything that looks suspicious?” It wasn’t a good compromise. It was the one I had.

“Certainly.” She vanished in a spray of sparks.

A hand gripped my shoulder. I turned to find myself facing the Queen. “What do you think you’re doing?” she demanded, moon-mad eyes narrowing with fury.

“I’m asking the Countess of Tamed Lightning to do a perimeter check, since otherwise we have no idea who’s here and who isn’t.” I stepped out from under her hand. The Luidaeg’s shell was so cold it hurt, but I didn’t dare pull it out until I was away from the Queen. “Unless you ordered an attack on Patrick Lorden, I can’t understand why you’re letting people leave. It doesn’t make *sense*.”

“This isn’t a mere crime,” said the Queen. Each word was precisely shaped, and pronounced as though it were being hurled at a disobedient child. “It was an act of war. Finding a single archer won’t change that.”

I stared. “Are you telling me some asshole can attempt an assassination and commit an entire Kingdom to suicide? That’s *stupid*.”

“Welcome to politics,” said Luna.

“If you want to stop the war, find the Lorden children,” said Sylvester. “Lives will be saved, possibly including theirs. People who steal children aren’t always careful with them.”

I winced. The subject of stolen children is very personal for Sylvester. His daughter, Rayseline, grew up in a magical prison. It drove her insane. His wife is the child of possibly the greatest kidnapper and destroyer of children Faerie has ever known. Calling them a family with issues is putting it mildly.

The Queen glared for a long moment before reluctantly saying, “Finding the children *might* stop the war, especially as someone is claiming my Court was responsible for their loss.”

“Was it?” I asked.

Her eyes widened. “What did you just say to me?”

“Was your Court in any way responsible for the disappearance of the Lorden children?” I shook my head. “I can’t do anything about it if you did, Your Highness, but if you stole them and you’re about to send me looking for them, it’d be nice to know before I follow the trail right back to you.”

“What in the world makes you think I would send you?” The Queen’s anger was fading into disdain. “Your failures outweigh your successes by too large a margin.”

Sylvester started to step forward. I gestured for him to stop. The Queen was still speaking in a reasonable tone, rather than using her Banshee gifts against me, and I was trying to take that as a good sign.

“Highness, despite my failures, I’m one of the few people in this Kingdom who actually knows anything about handling a kidnapping case,” I said. “Unless you want this war, you need me.”

The Queen looked from me to Sylvester and Luna, and then to Connor, who still stood silently beside me. Her expression calmed. “Never speak to me like this again,” she said, turning back to me. “If you do, no number of powerful ‘friends’ will save you. I will have you stripped of lands and titles and cast you as far from my shores as I can. I will send you into exile, and I will be glad. Do you understand?”

I swallowed. “Yes, Highness.”

“Very well.” She waved a hand dismissively. “You’re welcome to try. It’s not as if even you could make things any worse.”

“How long do I have?”

“Three days,” said Sylvester. We all turned to look at him. He shrugged. “That’s the traditional length of time between the declaration of war and the start of hostilities. The Lordens have to send official notice to all the local fiefdoms, and that slows things down.”

Pureblood honor sometimes works for us as much as it works against us—rarely, but rarely is better than never. The delay in hostilities would give the local fiefdoms time to send their children and fosters to safety before things got violent. Oberon’s Law allows adults to kill one another on the field of war, but there’s nothing that justifies killing a child.

I looked back to the Queen. “I’m going to need the authority to question your Court, Highness.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Are you questioning me again?”

“No, I’m asking to question the people *under* you. No matter how stainless your honor is, the people who work for you may be less admirable.”

The Queen hesitated before nodding, once. “Provided you ask no more than is necessary, you may speak to them, starting at dusk.”

“Dusk *tomorrow*? But that’s hours from—”

“I told you not to question me, Daye.” There was a dangerous edge to her voice. “My people need time to calm themselves and send notice that war is coming—and it *is* coming, unless you’ve somehow gained the power to perform miracles on demand. I’ll let you play your little detective game, but mark me: this will be settled on the battlefield.” She looked around our group. “How far Faerie has fallen that you, all of you, would stand here while this mongrel bitch challenged my authority. I rejoice that Oberon isn’t here to see this.”

“My grandfather would approve of Countess Daye’s actions,” said Luna softly.

The Queen stopped. None of us are quite used to thinking of Luna as the daughter of two Firstborn—and more, as someone who knew Oberon personally, as a loving grandparent, in the days before his disappearance. That gives her a certain scary credibility.

“Be that as it may,” said the Queen, finally, “he’s not here, and war stands before us.”

“That’s nice,” I said flatly. “Dusk?”

“Dusk.”

“May we be excused?” No one else asked before fleeing, but in this case, civility seemed like the better part of valor.

“Go.” The Queen pointed to the door.

I didn’t want to say anything that might set her off again, so I simply bowed before taking Connor’s hand and starting for the exit. Sylvester and Luna followed. They weren’t letting me turn my back on the Queen of the Mists alone, and I found that reassuring.

We had just passed through the curtain dividing the ballroom from the entrance hall when April appeared. “The guards of this establishment are exceedingly jumpy,” she said, scowling. “I got a crossbow bolt through my chest.”

April is only material when she wants to be. I still grimaced. “Glad you’re okay,” I said. “Did you find anything?”

“Nothing of interest. People fleeing. Poorly trained guards unable to

believe an attack would occur within a royal knowe, thus proving that they possess an insufficient grasp of historical fact. Several pages copulating in the kitchen. I believe they were upset when I appeared next to them.”

“There was no sign of our attacker?”

“None. I apologize.”

“It’s okay. You did your best.” I looked to Sylvester. “Sylvester—”

“I know. Do you really think you can find the boys?”

Probably not. But a girl’s got to try. “I hope so. If I can’t . . . will we *really* go to war?”

“You’ve never seen a war, have you?” Luna glanced at her husband. “I always forget how young she is.”

I’m more than fifty years old. By human standards, I’m middle aged. By fae standards, I’m little more than a highly precocious child. “I haven’t had the privilege.”

“It’s not a privilege,” said Sylvester. His voice was soft. “It’s the worst thing in our world. Consider yourself fortunate that it’s been so long since the War of Silences. I fought there. Part of my heart has never left that battlefield.”

“Oh, oak and ash,” I said. “I’m so sorry.”

The Kingdom of Silences meets the Kingdom of the Mists within a mile of where the state of Oregon meets the state of California. The War of Silences was fought there, shortly after King Gilad died. The Tylwyth Teg who used to rule in Silences didn’t like the proclamations our new Queen was making, and when diplomacy failed, they decided to overthrow her. What they didn’t count on was the Mists having an army of its own.

The war lasted six days.

Hundreds died on both sides: when Faerie goes to war, the night-haunts eat very, very well. When the dust cleared, the ruling family of Silences was broken, their heirs scattered and their army banished by the man who took the throne—a man who, coincidentally, used to be a Baron in the Court of the Mists. We’ve had good relations with the Kingdom of Silences ever since.

Of course, it’s not that hard to have good relations with a puppet government. It’s also easy to let your army fall into disrepair when your nearest neighbors would never dream of raising a hand against you. Silences might get the last laugh after all.

“That fight ended long ago,” said Sylvester. “Now it falls to us to keep the next war from beginning.”

I reached across our small circle to take his hand. “It won’t,” I said. “Not if I have anything to say about it.”



SEVEN

STARLIGHT FROSTED THE BEACH in gilded silver as we stepped from the shelter of the cave and waded through the water to the beach, all of us emerging perfectly dry, courtesy of Connor. Sylvester gave me a fierce hug and turned to walk, hand-in-hand with Luna, toward the parking lot.

April watched them go before turning back to me. “Is there anything else I can do?”

“Just get home safely, and tell your people to stay out of danger.” I allowed myself a brief smile. “I don’t have time to save their butts right now.”

“Acknowledged,” she said, and vanished in a haze of static, presumably returning to her escort.

Connor cast a quick don’t-look-here over the both of us, the briny smell of his magic blending into the smell of the waves. He took my free hand once the spell was complete, his eyes going to the water. “Toby . . .”

“I know.” I followed the direction of his gaze. “If it comes to that, I won’t blame you.”

“That’ll make one of us.”

“Connor . . .” The Luidaeg’s shell was getting steadily colder, reaching the point where “freeze” becomes “burn.” I shivered. “I shouldn’t have let April leave without asking if she had a phone. Do you have a phone?”

Connor blinked, apparently thrown. “Uh . . . no? I spend half my time underwater. They make diving watches, but they don’t make diving cell phones yet.”

“Oh, root and *branch*.” May’s been trying to get me to start carrying a cell phone for ages now. I hate it when she’s right. “Do you mind taking a detour? I think the Luidaeg’s trying to get hold of me.” I didn’t want to pull the shell out while I was standing on a public beach, don’t-look-here or not. It might

do anything, from transmitting her voice to exploding, and I didn't want to deal.

"I . . . guess not." Connor looked uneasy. I couldn't exactly blame him for that. If the Luidaeg is a legendary monster to most of Faerie, she's a well-known, and very real, danger in the Undersea. "If she wants you."

"Good. Come on."

The parking lot was empty by the time we reached my car. I passed Connor the arrow, still wrapped in Patrick's vest, and unlocked the doors. He offered the arrow back once we were in the car. I shook my head.

"Keep it while I drive. Try not to stab yourself."

Connor snorted. "There's a real vote of confidence."

"Stick around. Maybe you'll get another one."

He smiled a bit at that, setting the arrow across his knees with the pointy end toward the door. If anything got stabbed, it would be my poor car, which was better than the alternatives.

Jokes aside, the enormity of what was ahead of us was staggering. For Connor, this was a choice between loyalties. For me, it was just too damn much to think about. My mind kept skipping tracks, too overloaded to settle on which was more important—the Lorden children or the threat of war.

From the look on Connor's face, his thoughts were equally grim. I cleared my throat. "Are you sure you're okay with coming along on this?"

"I have to be."

"Why?"

"Because I'd rather deal with the Luidaeg than risk winding up on different sides of the battlefield."

I grimaced. "We're *not* going to war. I just need to find the kids, and this all goes away."

"That's assuming your Queen didn't kidnap them herself."

I didn't miss his choice of pronouns. The Undersea is technically part of the system of Courts and Kingdoms established by Oberon, but "technically" is a big word. There's a King somewhere in the Pacific Ocean. If Saltmist wanted to claim to belong to his Kingdom instead of to the Mists, nobody could really stop them. "I don't think she did, and anyway, it's not a good thing to say," I said carefully. "She was ready to banish me for suggesting it."

"Yeah, well, the Queen's not here now, and I don't trust her."

"There's something we have in common; neither do I. I get a little wary when people try to kill me."

“And I get a little pissed when people try to kill either one of us.” He sighed. “Toby, you know what’s going to happen if things get bad. I—”

“Do you really want to talk about that right now?”

“No.”

“Did you kidnap the Lorden kids?”

“What? No!”

“Then calm down until we get to the Luidaeg’s. We’re going to stop all this from happening, and then it won’t matter.” I flashed him a smile. “That’s the beauty of the future. We get to change it. Okay?”

“Okay.” Connor put his hand on my knee. I put my own hand over it, squeezing gently before returning my focus to staying on the road. It was only eight-thirty—were we really only at the Queen’s Court for an hour? It’s amazing how quickly things can fall apart—and there was too much traffic for me to safely get distracted.

The streets cleared once we moved into the less-reputable stretch of the waterfront, and the smell of the docks slipped in through the vents, filling the car with a familiar mix of fish and sweet decay. Weird as it seems, I found myself relaxing. The Luidaeg was one of Faerie’s monsters, but she was also a friend, and I trusted her.

The Luidaeg’s neighborhood looks like it might topple into the ocean at any moment. The people who live there tend to be the poorest of the poor, the ones who don’t have any other choice. And it’s probably one of the safest places in the city. I looked it up in the police department records once, after using a quick don’t-look-here to keep the police from realizing I wasn’t supposed to be there. Sure, you’ll find drug dealers in the shadows and hookers on the street corners, but no one ever seems to actually get *hurt*. All the crimes are victimless ones, and even the poorest children don’t go to bed hungry. There’s something to be said for living in the haunt of a fabulous monster.

I parked a block away from her apartment, taking the arrow from Connor before I got out of the car. He scanned the deserted street as he stood. “Um, Toby? Are we in the right place?”

“Not what you expected?”

“From the sea witch? Not really.” Connor shook his head. “I don’t know what I expected. But it wasn’t this.”

Oberon preserve me from purebloods and their expectations. “Just follow my lead, and try not to touch anything.”

I led him down the alley to the Luidaeg's door, a flat rectangle of rotting wood set in a crumbling frame. The door swung open before I could knock, revealing the Luidaeg herself. Connor froze. That's a natural response when confronted by the sea witch.

Good thing all my natural responses were burned out years ago. "Hey," I said.

"What in my mother's name took you so long?" she snarled, stepping out of the way as she gestured me briskly inside. "I expected you twenty minutes ago."

"Traffic," I said. The shell stopped radiating cold as soon as I was over her threshold. I rubbed my thigh through the fabric of my dress, wincing a little. I'd be lucky if I didn't have frostbite.

As if she could read my mind—there was a terrifying thought—the Luidaeg said, "Be grateful. It could have been a lot worse."

"I am," I said. I meant it, too. The Luidaeg could probably have blown my brains out with the thing, if she'd wanted to.

She swung her attention to Connor. "Selkie," she half-said, half-spat.

He swallowed, hard. "Ma'am."

"Oh, for Mom's sake." The Luidaeg rolled her eyes. "I don't have time for this. Get in here." He stepped inside, and she slammed the door behind him, casting the hall into darkness. "Now come on." She turned and strode down the hall. Not being entirely stupid, I followed. Connor followed me.

The carpet crackled underfoot, bits of debris catching on my heels. I don't know what color the carpet was when the Luidaeg moved in, and she keeps the lights low enough that even the improvements to my vision won't let me see what color it is now. There are some small mercies in this world. The crackling was accompanied by the sound of insects scuttling for cover. The cockroaches clever and quick enough to survive in the Luidaeg's presence breed prodigiously; she crushes or eats the dumb ones. If an insect uprising ever displaces the mammals as the titular head of the food chain, I expect it to start at her place.

The Luidaeg's living room is usually slightly better than the hall, in that the layers of junk covering the floor are shallower, and there are windows, which keeps the mold from getting more than a light foothold on the walls and furniture. The Luidaeg was standing at the center of the room, arms crossed, waiting. "Well?" she demanded. "What happened?"

"How do you know something happened?"

“You’re here, which means the shell reacted. That means something happened. What was it?”

I took a breath. “Somebody decided to take a shot at Patrick Lorden.”

“Oh, rot and wreck.” The Luidaeg took a step back, sitting heavily on the couch. Her eyes were wide. That was the scariest thing I’d seen all evening. “Is he dead?”

“No—I managed to knock him out of the way before the shot was fired.” I held up the arrow. “I dug this out of the floor.”

“Give it to me.” It wasn’t a request. I stepped forward, dropping the arrow into her outstretched hand. She peeled away Patrick’s vest, first sniffing the wood, then licking the feathers fletching the end. Making a sour face, she offered it back. “It’s just elf-shot. It’s safe to touch, as long as you don’t do anything stupid, like cutting yourself.”

Assurances aside, I still used Patrick’s vest to keep myself from touching the wood as I took it from her hands. She snorted, looking almost amused.

“I’ll ask Walther to take a look. Maybe he can figure out which recipe was used,” I said. Walther Davies is Tylwyth Teg, and possibly the only alchemist in Faerie who holds a PhD in chemistry. He cured my iron poisoning after I was rescued from the Queen’s dungeon, and was largely responsible for saving Luna’s life when Oleander poisoned her. If anyone could identify the specific spell used to craft the elf-shot, it would be him.

“Good. Now, while I was waiting for you, I got a visit from one of the Queen’s messengers.” She started peeling the electrical tape off her left pigtail, expression pensive. “Saltmist has declared war. You have to find those boys, Toby. You don’t understand just how screwed you are if you don’t.”

I frowned. “What do you mean? We’re going to war if I don’t find them. Isn’t that screwed enough?”

“He knows.” She jabbed a finger toward Connor. He looked away. She glared. “Oh, he knows. The Undersea is marshaling their forces, isn’t it, *Selkie*? It’s going to be a massacre, because while the land’s been getting soft, the sea’s stayed hard. The sea can’t afford to be soft, can it, *Selkie*?”

“No,” mumbled Connor.

“No,” repeated the Luidaeg. “Do you get that, Toby? The sea has more fighters than the land. They’re better trained, they’re better disciplined, and they’re not as politically divided. They’re going to slaughter you.”

“Us,” I said. The Luidaeg was silent. “Luidaeg? You mean they’re going to

slaughter *us*.”

“No.” She looked at me gravely. “I mean they’re going to slaughter *you*.”

“Luidaeg—”

“The Undersea knows my limits.” She dropped her pigtail, standing. “There’s no one there that’s willing to come here and take me on, but they know I won’t take the fight to them. I can’t attack the children of Titania. I *won’t* attack the children of Maeve. This one’s up to your Queen’s army, and guess what, October? Your Queen’s army ain’t up to the task.”

Connor wasn’t saying anything. That just made the Luidaeg’s tone—a mixture of anger, fear, and resignation—all the more terrifying. I squared my shoulders, trying to ignore the fact that I was standing in the apartment of the sea witch, wearing a fairy-tale prom gown, waiting for the attack of the mermaids.

“What do you want me to do?”

“Find the boys. I assume the Queen tasked you with the same thing?”

I snorted. “More like I bullied her into allowing it, but yes.”

“Good. Now listen to me: if you find them, you *must not* take them to her. Bring them to me, or find a way to get them to their parents, but don’t let her near them. I don’t trust her to remember that the land can’t win this war if she thinks she has the upper hand.”

“All right.” I shifted the arrow to my other hand. “Anything else?”

“One more thing—I’ve been scrying for the boys, and I can’t find them. That’s not a good sign. You don’t have much time.”

“I figured that out on my own.”

She pointed to the door. “Then what are you still doing here?”

“We’re on our way out.” I turned to go. Connor was right beside me, looking painfully relieved to be getting out of there.

We were almost to the door when the Luidaeg called, “Oh, and Toby?”

I looked back. “Yeah?”

“You’re going to need to bring me a shapeshifter soon. Not him. Never bring a Selkie here again. They’re not welcome.” Something in her voice told me not to ask. If she said I was going to need a shapeshifter, she meant it . . . and if Selkies weren’t welcome, she wasn’t going to tell me why with Connor in the room.

“All right,” I said, and grabbed Connor’s hand, yanking him out into the night.

I didn’t have to drag him for long. He pulled his hand out of mine as soon

as the door slammed behind us, starting to walk steadily faster. He was almost running by the time we reached the car. I grabbed his elbow. He whipped around to face me, eyes wide, breath coming short and panicky.

“Whoa!” I let go and took a step back, raising my hands. That probably wasn’t as reassuring as it could have been, given the poisoned arrow I was holding. “What’s wrong? What was all that *about*?”

“The sea witch doesn’t parley with Selkies,” he said. There was some ancient, wounded longing in his voice, like the sound of the tide rushing out. “Don’t ask me why. I can’t tell you.”

“All right,” I said. “I just . . . all right. Are you coming back to the apartment?”

“For a little while.” He sighed. “This doesn’t have anything to do with you. Okay?”

“Okay,” I said. “Now get in the car.”

It took almost half an hour to fight through the traffic and get back to my place. May and Jazz were snuggled together on the couch when we came in, watching a television show featuring a lot of twenty-something actors pretending to be teens. They looked up when the door opened, initial smiles dying as they saw the expression on Connor’s face and the arrow in my hand. Even for me, that sort of thing doesn’t normally spell “hot date.”

“Bad night?” asked May.

“About like I expected. We’re going to need to call Walther.” I closed the door and stuck the arrow in the umbrella stand, point down. Connor blinked at me. “You have a better idea?”

“Not really,” he admitted.

“Didn’t think so. Guys, the arrow in the umbrella stand is elf-shot. Don’t touch it.”

“And that’s why we’re calling Walther?” asked May.

“Exactly.”

“Right.” Jazz got up. “I’m going to make some coffee.”

“Good call.” One of the cats started twining around my ankles. I bent to scoop her up. “Hello, Cagney. You don’t care that we’re going to war, do you?” She purred. “Didn’t think so.”

“Is it official?” asked May quietly.

“Yeah,” I said. I stood there stroking Cagney as I started filling May in on the events of the night so far. I was about halfway through when Jazz emerged from the kitchen and offered me a mug of coffee, which I took

gratefully. Connor interjected occasionally, but was mostly silent, standing close and offering what support he could just by being there. It was surprisingly comforting.

A brief silence fell when I finished speaking. Finally, Jazz asked, “Do you really think Walther can figure out who made the elf-shot?”

“It’s worth a try.” I glanced to Connor. “The Luidaeg’s sidelined for this fight, except for whatever she can accomplish through me. So we’re basically on our own.”

“Super fun,” said May.

“I can take the arrow to Walther,” volunteered Jazz. We all looked at her. She shrugged. “I don’t need a car, remember?”

“Fair enough,” I allowed. “Just make sure you don’t scratch yourself. The best case scenario with elf-shot involves sleeping for a hundred years.”

“I’ll be careful,” said Jazz. She kissed May on the cheek, grabbed the arrow from the umbrella stand—only touching the leather, I noted approvingly—opened the door, and was gone. Mortal ravens don’t like to fly after dark. Fae ravens are more adaptable. They’re also a hell of a lot more resilient. Jazz could probably fly a hundred miles in a night, if she had to.

I took a breath. “Okay, that’s one problem down. Now for the big one: we have three days to find the Lorden boys before things get ugly.”

“Is finding the Lorden boys going to *stop* things from getting any worse, or is it just going to make them a little less worse?” May paused. “I’m not sure that was a sentence. Anyway, what I’m saying is if they’re at the stage of, like, shooting at people, are they going to back down just because we find the kids?”

“Probably not,” I admitted. “But at that point, at least we’d only be dealing with people who want to start a war, rather than dealing with them *and* an actual war. That has to be an improvement over what we have now, right?”

“It’s worth a try,” said Connor. He turned his head slightly, meeting my eyes. I almost flinched away. Selkie eyes are always dark, but the darkness in Connor’s expression wasn’t just a matter of biology; not tonight. He was a man looking at a choice he didn’t know how to make, and this time, he was the one who looked like he was in danger of drowning. Me or the Undersea? If he had to choose, who was going to win?

“Connor—” I began, and stopped as someone knocked on the front door. We all turned to cast wary looks in that direction. “May, did you order a pizza?”

“Good idea, but no,” she said.

“That’s what I was afraid you were going to say.” I put my coffee cup on the nearest bookshelf and walked to the door, calling, “Who is it?” I wasn’t going to waste the energy on a human disguise if I didn’t have to.

“We wouldn’t have to go through this little charade if you’d simply acknowledge me as an honored guest and agree that I can enter any time I like,” Tybalt replied, managing to sound amused and tired at the same time.

I opened the door.

Tybalt was standing on my doorstep, only the barest veil of human illusion between him and the mortal night. Raj—his nephew and titular heir to the Court of Cats, assuming he can live that long—stood next to him, looking near-terminally embarrassed. I barely even noticed he was there. I was too busy blinking at his uncle.

Tybalt blinked back.

San Francisco’s King of Cats is difficult to describe. Too much of his appeal is in the way he moves, the way he smiles, the subtle tilt of his head when he gives someone his full attention. Not that he’s not good-looking—he is—but he’s more than that. He has fewer feline traits than some of the other Cait Sidhe; cat-slit pupils, black tabby stripes in his dark brown hair. The rest of him could pass for Daoine Sidhe in the right lighting. Appearances can be deceiving. Tybalt’s a cat, through and through, and it’s best to keep that in mind.

I hadn’t seen him since I left the Court of Cats before my second “trial” in the Queen’s Court. He’s always been prone to disappearing, but he’d never been gone for so long before. The last thing he said to me before I left was: “Come back to me.” When I tried to do just that, I couldn’t find him. The Court of Cats is open only to those the King allows to enter, and he’d locked the doors without telling me why. Now here he was on my doorstep, staring at me with an expression that bordered on amazement.

Connor stepped up behind me, bringing the sharp smell of the sea in his wake—and, more importantly, reminding me that he was there. I drew myself up, realizing as I did that I was still dressed for the Queen’s Court. Well, that explained the staring. Tybalt had never seen me voluntarily wearing a dress before, and all the involuntary dresses had been of the Disney princess variety.

“Tybalt,” I said, as neutrally as I could. “I wasn’t expecting you.”

“What, really?” May shoved her way past Connor to the door. “Whoa.

Hey, Tybalt, long time no see. Come on in, Raj. They're probably going to stare at each other for a while before they get anything done." She offered her hand to the younger Cait Sidhe. He took it, letting himself be tugged into the apartment.

True to May's prediction, Tybalt was still staring at me. Finally, awkwardly, he said, "Toby . . ."

Was I happy to see Tybalt after a month of being avoided? Well, that depends. Could he possibly have picked a worse time than right after I'd failed to prevent a declaration of war? Knowing him, the answer was probably "yes." He has an amazing talent for showing up when I don't want him to.

He also has an amazing talent for saving my ass. No matter what we thought about each other, the fact remained that he was a King of Cats, and if I was going to stop the war, I could do worse than having him on my side.

"Forget it." I stepped back, opening the door wide enough to let him pass. "Come in if you're coming."

A look of momentary discomfiture flickered across his face, there and gone almost before I could blink. "As you like," he said, inclining his head, and stepped inside.



EIGHT

TYBALT HAUGHTILY SURVEYED the living room, arms crossed in an attitude of nonchalant disregard. It was a bit *too* regal; Tybalt doesn't normally feel the need to act like that. He allowed his attention to fall on Connor, who was standing beside me and glaring.

"Ah," said Tybalt. "I see that you have company."

He managed to infuse the statement with an almost believable note of surprise. Only almost; the timing of his visit was too convenient to be coincidental, and if he didn't have spies at the Queen's Court, I'm a Leprechaun. "You know Connor and May," I said. "I believe you worked together on a prison break not long ago."

"Oh, Tybs knows Connor," May said. "They totally hung out while you were sick. They're like, best buds." Tybalt and Connor shot her matching glares. I had to stifle a smile.

"We're acquainted," said Tybalt. "I suppose there's no accounting for the company you choose to keep."

I stiffened.

"Is there a problem?" asked Connor coldly. Being needled by Tybalt isn't fun, unless you have a serious urge to know what it's like to be a mouse.

"I'm simply wondering why you're still on dry land, O'Dell," Tybalt replied. "Shouldn't you be putting on your water wings and preparing to slaughter us all? I believe that's your predetermined role in this conflict."

"All right, that's enough." I scowled, taking a step forward and putting myself between them. "We don't have time for this. Now both of you are going to behave and play nicely, or I will put you out on the sidewalk." Raj shot me a grateful look. Dominance fights are serious business among the Cait Sidhe, and if I let Tybalt start something in my apartment, I was going to be responsible for stopping it. Raj and I both knew that wouldn't end well.

Connor hesitated before saying, “Actually, Toby, he’s right.”

“What?” May and I said in unison, turning to stare at him.

“That’s still creepy,” muttered Raj.

“I need to go to Saltmist and check in, or the Duchess may decide that I’m siding with the land and banish me from the Undersea. I don’t think we want that. I *know* I don’t want that.” Connor chuckled mirthlessly. “It would make family reunions awkward.”

I’d been expecting this. I’d been waiting for this. It still stung. I bit my lip before saying, “If you’re sure—”

“He’s sure,” said Tybalt. I shot a glare his way. He shrugged.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can,” said Connor, and kissed me.

There was a desperation in his embrace that was almost chilling. Whatever else was going on, Connor was a lot more scared than he was letting on.

I touched his cheek when he pulled away. “Be safe.”

“You, too,” he said. He glanced around the room. “It was good to see you, May. Tybalt, Raj . . . good night.”

“Bye,” mumbled Raj, looking mortified.

“Open roads, Connor,” said May.

I walked him the two steps to the door, opening it again. “Open roads, Connor. Try not to get yourself killed out there. If you do, I’ll kick your ass.”

“I’ll hold you to that.” He kissed my nose and was gone, pulling the door shut with a final-sounding click.

I locked the deadbolt and turned to look at Tybalt, raising an eyebrow. And I waited. His satisfied expression faded by inches, replaced by apparently genuine awkwardness.

“I didn’t say he had to go,” he said.

“But you jumped on the idea with both feet. What are you doing here, Tybalt? Is this your way of returning all those messages I left you? Because, seriously, I would have been happy with a phone call.”

“I was busy.”

The last time I’d seen him, his Court was in chaos following the deaths of several of his subjects, including Raj’s mother. I softened slightly, but kept frowning as I said, “Your timing sucks, Tybalt. Just so you know.”

Tybalt narrowed his eyes, expression going from awkward to challenging. I met his gaze and held it. He looked away first. “A messenger came to my Court with news of the war. He said you seemed determined to involve yourself. It . . . concerned me.”

“Well, at least now I know what it takes to get your attention.”

Tybalt’s head snapped around. “Thorn and tree, October, that isn’t fair.”

“But you ignoring me is? You’ve got a weird definition of ‘fair.’ All I wanted was to know that you were okay.”

May coughed. “Okay, I’ll be in my room if you need me. Please don’t need me. Also, Toby, remember that the curtains aren’t stain-proof, and Raj, if you need to hide, feel free to join me.” She vanished down the hall. Her door slammed a moment later.

“I . . .” Tybalt sighed. “You’re right. I apologize.”

I stopped. Of all the things he could have said, I don’t think anything could have surprised me more than a simple—and apparently sincere—apology. “Accepted,” I said. Glancing toward the hall, I added, “I think she’s battening down the hatches back there, in case we’re about to start throwing things.”

“Really?” Tybalt’s eyebrows rose. “Should we smash a few plates and scream before we have an actual conversation?”

“I don’t think we need to go that far, but I want to get some real clothes on before we continue. Can I trust you two not to break anything?”

“Yes,” said Raj, immediately.

“You might have an easier time trusting us if we continued while you changed,” said Tybalt, allowing his eyes to travel the length of my body.

I snorted, spreading my arms to give him the best possible view. “Go ahead and laugh, because this is your only shot. You’re staying out here while I get some pants on.”

“I had no intention of mocking you. I think you look lovely.” He hesitated a moment before adding, in a softer tone, “Whether you believe me or not, your mother was never as fair a child of Faerie as you are right now.”

“I . . .” The blush raced up my cheeks and the edges of my ears, leaving them burning. I let my arms drop to my sides, barely keeping myself from folding them over my chest. “I have to go change,” I managed, and turned to scurry down the hall.

My cheeks stayed hot even after I was in my bedroom with the door closed. I stripped off the spider silk dress, letting it puddle on the floor while I fumbled with the thigh sheath. Once that came loose, I pulled my jeans on and fastened my usual knife belt around my waist, sliding my knife back into its customary home before putting the Luidaeg’s shell in my pocket.

Sneakers and a long-sleeved red cotton shirt finished the change. I snagged a hair tie from the dresser on my way out of the room, snapping it around my

wrist before beginning to pull pins out of my hair. Stacy's handiwork was good—too good. I was still trying to restore my hair to its normal disarray as I emerged from the bedroom, swearing under my breath all the while.

Quiet voices were coming from the kitchen as I walked down the hall. I had to smother a smile as I realized that Raj was tutoring Tybalt on the way I like my coffee. That would have been funny no matter what. It was made funnier by the fact that I wasn't sure Tybalt knew how much time Raj has spent at my place since I saved him from Blind Michael. He wasn't around as much as, say, Quentin, but he still spent enough time sitting on my couch and hogging the TV remote that I've occasionally threatened to charge him rent.

I stopped in the kitchen doorway, watching Tybalt pour way too much sugar into a mug of coffee. "That's good," I said, before he could experiment with adding anything else. "You can stop there. Unless you're making coffee for a hummingbird."

Tybalt whipped around like he'd done something wrong, mild disappointment crossing his face when he saw my clothes. He picked up the mug and held it out in offering, saying awkwardly, "I made you coffee."

"I see that." I stopped fussing with my hair long enough to take the mug. Tybalt still looked uncomfortable. I took a sip of coffee to reassure him, and managed not to choke as the hot sugar sweetness of it hit the back of my throat. "It's very good," I said, coughing into my hand.

Tybalt looked relieved. "The principle was simple."

"Ye-ah." I put the mug on the counter in what I hoped was a nonchalant manner. For a moment, the three of us just stood there, looking at each other. I blinked, finally registering how underdressed Tybalt was, even by his own eclectic standards. His jeans were tattered, and there were stains on his white silk shirt that could have been pasta sauce but were more likely to be . . . for my own peace of mind, I decided to view them as pasta sauce.

"So why are you really here?" I asked. "I understand worrying about the war, but shouldn't you be consulting with someone who has, I don't know, an army?"

"That *is* why I'm here," said Tybalt. "Goldengreen is on the coast. How were you planning to defend your people?"

My stomach flipped over. ". . . Oh."

Mortal geography and Summerlands geography aren't always a perfect match, but the major things, like coastlines, usually translate. The mortal doors to Goldengreen are anchored on the edge of the cliff behind the Palace

of the Legion of Honor, and the actual buildings that make up the estate are right on the water. The knowe has no natural defenses, and the inhabitants aren't exactly warriors.

"My people will stand with yours, if you'll have us. One Cait Sidhe is worth ten of any other breed."

I gaped for a stunned moment before stammering, "Oak and ash, Tybalt, *why*? I'm not turning you down. I just don't understand why you're offering."

"We'll have to fight, no matter what, if this war gets bad enough. We have too many friends among the Courts to simply close our doors until the chaos passes," Tybalt said. "If we fight with you, at least we're fighting for something."

"And your people are okay with this?"

He blinked, looking bemused. "Why wouldn't they be? I'm their King."

"Right." I rubbed my forehead. "The offer is very kind."

"Will you accept?" he asked.

Tybalt wasn't bothering to conceal his anxiety. I blinked, glancing at Raj. His expression matched his uncle's line for line—and I suddenly understood why Tybalt was so concerned. They expected me to refuse. They thought I was going to try to hold Goldengreen alone, all because I was mad at Tybalt for ignoring me.

They were here because they didn't want me to die.

I forced a smile and said, "Of course I will. Thank you."

Tybalt's offer was almost a binding contract in and of itself, but my "thank you" eliminated the "almost." It wasn't the first time I'd thanked him for something—that happened in a dark alleyway, years and miles from where we were standing now—but it was the first time I'd meant what I was saying.

He blinked once, clearly surprised. Then he smiled, all the awkwardness and hauteur vanishing, so that only Tybalt was left. "You're welcome," he replied.

The last time he looked at me like that, I'd just recovered from iron poisoning after being rescued from the Queen's jail. Then he disappeared on me for a month. I took a breath, not sure what I was going to say, but certain that I needed to say something—*anything*—to keep him from vanishing again.

The phone rang.

I caught myself. I'd just come frighteningly close to reaching out to a man whose motives had never been clear to me, and still weren't. With everything

that was going on, that was the last thing I could afford to do. “Excuse me,” I said, stepping quickly away. “I need to get that.”

I turned my back on them as I grabbed the phone. Bucer’s voice was immediately in my ear, announcing, “I cost two hundred an hour, cash on the barrel, and I don’t do anything that might get violent.”

“Hello to you, too, Bucer,” I said. “How about I give you fifty dollars for answering some questions, and I don’t get violent?”

“Sounds fair,” he said, without hesitating. “How’s it been, Toby? Long time no hear. Word on the street says you’ve moved on to pissing off bigger and better folks.”

“If you mean the Queen of the Mists, yeah, I’ve managed to get on her bad side a time or two. What do you know about what’s going on with the Undersea?”

“I know I’m hopping on the next bus bound for Denver. I figure the fish ain’t likely to push it all the way up into the mountains.”

“The kidnappings, Bucer. Somebody’s kidnapped the sons of the Duke and Duchess of Saltmist, and that’s why we’re having all this trouble. Do you have any idea who that might have been?” It wasn’t a surprise that he was already planning to get out of Dodge. That sort of self-interest was exactly what Devin tried to instill in us when we worked for him. Obviously, it worked on some of us better than on others.

Bucer hesitated. “I don’t know if I should—”

“A hundred dollars, cash. Tonight.”

He sighed. “Word on the street is that it wasn’t any of the crew that’s been working this Kingdom in the last couple years.”

I turned to lean against the counter, bringing Tybalt and Raj back into view. They were watching me, not making any attempt to hide their eavesdropping. That was fine. It would save me time when it came to getting them up to speed. “So you’re saying it was someone from outside the Kingdom?”

“Not exactly.” He hesitated again, longer this time. “Look, Toby, I get that you have a thing for lost causes and shit, but maybe this is one you should leave alone. Dangerous people and dangerous places, y’know?”

“Two hundred dollars, cash.”

He took a deep breath. And then, reluctantly, he said the last thing I wanted to hear: “The folks that might know, the ones you’d think would get hired for something like this . . . they’re saying a little redhead girl did the deed. Came

around the markets, dropped some cash in some pockets, and then poof. The kids were gone.”

A little redhead girl. . . “Did they have anything else to say about her?” I asked, through lips that felt suddenly numb.

“You don’t want to know this.”

“Answer the question.”

“Just that she had them yellow eyes,” said Bucer. “You know the ones.”

Yes. I did. Every Torquill I’ve ever met has the same eyes, the color of honey wine. That includes Rayseline, Sylvester’s red-haired daughter, who disappeared after she tried—and failed—to kill her mother. “Are you sure?”

“It’s not like I exactly went digging for this shit, seeing as how I’m not in the mood for a shallow grave in the Marin headlands, but I got it from multiple sources. Red hair. Gold eyes. Giggle like she’s already seeing you with your throat cut.”

That was Rayseline all right. “Give me your address. I’ll send your money.”

“This better not be a trick.”

“Honestly, Bucer, I don’t have the time to fuck with you. It’s not a trick; you’ll get your fee. And if you learn *anything* else before you head for the hills, call this number and pass it on. As long as you keep talking, I’ll keep paying.”

“Shit,” he said, suddenly hushed. “You’re really serious about this, aren’t you?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“Cash?”

“Cash.”

He gave me the address. I hung up, after repeating my offer to pay him for any additional information he could dig up. Then I turned to Raj, and asked, “Can you do me a favor?”

“What?” he asked warily. Smart kid.

“I need somebody to run payment to Bucer. I figure if you go as a cat, you can dart in, drop the cash, and dart out without him getting the drop on you. I’d do it myself, but it would take too long. Right now, I have more pressing commitments.”

“Sure,” said Raj, looking relieved to have something to do. I understood the feeling.

Tybalt didn’t share his nephew’s relief. Folding his arms, he asked,

“Setting aside the question of what gives you the authority to give orders to a member of my Court, what could possibly press upon you more than visiting such a treasured contact?”

“I’m not giving orders. I’m asking for a favor. As for why, I’ve got to start looking for these kids, and if I go to Bucer, Titania only knows how long he’ll keep me there.” I resisted the urge to grab the over-sugared coffee. Rubbing my forehead instead, I said, “I can’t afford the delay.”

Tybalt’s expression turned suspicious, pupils narrowing. “What did he tell you?”

“Hang on.” I grabbed an envelope from the counter, scrawling Bucer’s address on the back. “Raj, get two hundred dollars from the jar on my desk and take it to this address. Don’t let anybody see you.”

“Sure.” Raj took the envelope, glancing at Tybalt one last time before practically running out of the kitchen. Tybalt watched without comment. His pupils were thin black slits against the green of his eyes when he turned back to me; if he’d possessed a tail in his human form, it would have been lashing.

“October . . .” he said, a warning growl underscoring the word.

“Bucer’s contacts have reason to suspect that Rayseline Torquill is involved with the kidnapping of the Lorden children.”

My voice was as neutral as I could make it. Tybalt’s response was anything but. His lips drew back from his teeth in an agitated snarl as he asked, “To what ends?”

“Who the hell knows with her? Maybe she was bored. Maybe she’s trying to kill us all. The possibilities are endless.” This time, I didn’t fight the impulse to pick up my too-sweet coffee. I’ve always had an easier time dealing with the world when over-caffeinated. “I need to go to Shadowed Hills. I have to talk to her parents.” I also needed to search the rooms she used to share with Connor, to see whether there was anything there that could tell me where to start hunting for the boys.

“I’m coming with you.”

“What?” I blinked. “Why?”

“Her intentions toward you have been well-established by this point, unless you can somehow interpret her attempts to have you executed for murder as a gesture of friendship. What sort of ally would I be if I allowed you to chase after her alone?”

The less confusing kind of ally, for a start. “Tybalt . . .”

“If you’re under the assumption that this is negotiable, I suggest you

reconsider. I'm coming with you. The only question is whether we travel together or apart." There was cold amusement in his smile. "I bet I can even beat you there."

I eyed him. He looked calmly back until I sighed and moved to grab a thermos from the cupboard. If I mixed my over-sweetened coffee with the rest of the pot, it might be halfway drinkable. "Fine, whatever. Just try to stay out of my way."

"There is nothing less obtrusive than a cat."

"Uh-huh." I decided to leave that one alone. "I should also go back to the Luidaeg's. I have the feeling I'll be visiting Saltmist in person soon, and that means I need to be able to survive underwater." I couldn't suppress my shudder. I have water issues. I used to be a bubble baths and beaches kind of girl, but spending fourteen years as a fish sort of changed my outlook. It's strictly showers these days, and I'm happiest staying inland.

Tybalt raised an eyebrow. "Is she having difficulties with her telephone connection?" His tone indicated that he knew the Luidaeg's phones were fine.

I grimaced. "I'd rather talk to her in person if I'm going to be asking her to do something for me. Besides, knowing her, she'll just tell me to come over if I call." It's harder to make me drink disgusting things when I'm not in her living room.

"I see. And you're forgetting an errand."

"I am?"

"Unless you wished to let my people invade your knowe without warning those already there? A second war could be amusing, but probably unproductive."

Images of Marcia trying to shoo the entire Court of Cats out with her broom filled my head. I sighed. "Right. Adding a stop at Goldengreen to the agenda."

"Well, then." Tybalt straightened. "With so much to do before tomorrow night, we should be underway."

"True enough." I poured the contents of the coffee pot into the thermos. They fit nicely on top of my original mug of coffee. "If you're planning to be underfoot all night, you can get me the milk."

"As you like." Tybalt opened the fridge and pulled out the milk. Our fingers grazed when I reached for the carton. I felt my ears go red, and Tybalt smiled, a slow, cat-with-a-canary expression that did its best to chase all

thoughts of war—and Connor—from my mind.

Connor. Oh, oak and ash, what was going to happen if we wound up on opposite sides of a war? Would the Undersea blame him if his ex-wife turned out to be the cause of their current situation? Maeve forbid, would the *Queen*?

I snatched the carton from Tybalt's hand with a quick, almost jerky motion, topping off the thermos before thrusting the milk back at him. "Put this away."

"Certainly," said Tybalt, taking the milk.

"Be right back." I trotted down the hall to bang on May's door. "Hey!"

She didn't open it. "Hey, what?"

"I'm going out. Call Danny if I'm not back by sunrise. Got it?"

"Got it!" She didn't ask any questions. May knows me well enough to know better. Any answers I gave would just make it harder for her to stay calm.

There wasn't anything else I could do in the apartment. I walked back to Tybalt, sure I was making a mistake, and utterly unable to guess what that mistake might be. "All right, come on. If you want a ride, now's the time."

"After you," he said, and followed me to the front door.

I grabbed my leather jacket from the rack as we passed. Even in June, the nights can be chilly in San Francisco. The fact that my jacket originally belonged to Tybalt didn't make any difference at all. Honestly, it didn't . . . and maybe if I kept telling myself that, it would start being true.

With Tybalt behind me and the thermos in my hand, I stepped out into the night.



NINE

TYBALT DIDN'T SAY ANYTHING as we drove; he just stared fixedly out the window. I spent a few minutes trying to figure out what I'd done wrong this time before I realized that it wasn't about me at all. Tybalt's older than I am. I've never asked how *much* older, but some of the things he's said make me guess that he's at least three hundred. I grew up with cars, and he didn't.

That's the thing about living forever. You eventually stop getting used to the way the world changes. "We're almost there," I said, as reassuringly as I could.

He shot me a grateful look before catching himself and sitting up in his seat. "Are we? I was enjoying the scenery."

"Well, we could go around the block a few times if you want—"

"No," he said hurriedly. Then he sighed, rubbing his face with one hand. "No, please. I'm quite prepared to be out of this infernal construction. We could have walked the Shadow Roads, you know. We would have been there long since."

"What, and miss the fun of driving?" I offered a sympathetic smile. "It's okay. Have you been to the Luidaeg's before?"

"I have never had the privilege—or the need." It was his turn to smile, putting a trace of wryness under the expression. "It seems you spend more time than most in a state of sheer emergency."

"It's a gift."

"Yes." He chuckled. "I suppose it is."

We drove in silence for a while longer. I was thinking about turning on the radio when Tybalt said, almost to himself, "I don't understand why it always comes to this."

I barely stopped myself from twisting to look at him. That would probably have sent us careening into the nearest tree. "I don't understand."

“War. It seems that in Faerie, conflicts such as these must always come to war.”

“But . . . you’re Cait Sidhe. No offense, but your people are some of the most violent I’ve ever seen. You fight constantly.”

“Yes; we fight from the day we’re born—and we learn that fights have consequences. When you cut someone, he bleeds. When someone cuts you, you scar. Nothing is free. Sometimes I think we’re the only ones in Faerie who remember that.”

I slanted a frown toward him. “*Everyone* knows wars have costs.”

“If they did, they wouldn’t fight them. Watch. The veterans are smart enough to leave for other Kingdoms while they still can; most of the ones who come when the call goes out won’t have ever fought a war before. They’ll come because they think it’s honorable, or because they want to be called heroes. They’ll show up in their pretty armor, and they’ll litter the battlefield like leaves.” He sighed, running a hand over his face. “I’ve been to war. Believe me. What’s coming won’t be anything honorable.”

“I thought Cait Sidhe didn’t have wars.” Bloody, brutal battles for succession, sure, but not wars.

“We don’t.” Tybalt flashed a humorless smile. “What makes you think you’re the first of your kind to befriend me? I’m older than you. I’ve had time to put some skeletons in my closet.”

“It’s the ones you buried in the backyard that worry me.” My attempt at levity sounded flat even to my own ears. If we went to war, people were going to die.

The joke pretty much killed the conversation. He shook his head, turning his gaze back to the window. I sighed and kept driving. Only a few blocks later, we entered the Luidaeg’s neighborhood, and a thick fog that smelled like brine and ashes rose to envelop the car. The buildings that lined the street were dark, the mist blurring them into architectural ghosts. I was willing to bet that the Luidaeg’s mortal neighbors, few as they were, had been gripped with the sudden desire to visit friends or relatives as far from the coast as possible, leaving their homes abandoned.

I caught Tybalt looking out the windows in confusion, like he didn’t remember where we were or what we were doing there. “This is a seriously good misdirection spell,” I said. “It’s a good thing she told it I was coming, huh?”

Tybalt glanced at me, seeming briefly confused that *I* was there. The

moment passed. “You’re an ally,” he said, shaking his head. “She’s wise to remember that.”

“Maybe,” I agreed, pulling up to the curb. Tybalt was out of the car before I turned the engine off. He stopped about five feet away, half-bleached by the fog, and stayed there, shuddering slightly and taking large, shaky breaths. I took my time getting out of the car, giving him a chance to calm down.

He jumped when I closed my door, casting another bewildered glance my way. Acting purely on instinct, I crossed to him and took hold of his elbow. His expression cleared, replaced by embarrassment.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I forgot . . . briefly, I’m afraid that I forgot you were here.”

“Yeah, well.” I shrugged. “I’m forgettable. You okay?”

“No.” He stepped a little closer as he scanned the fog surrounding us. “Perhaps you’d best keep your grip. This enchantment seems somewhat over fond of claiming me.”

“Not a problem.” I started into the fog. “This way.”

“As you like.” Tybalt let me pull him along. His footsteps made no noise on the broken, gravel-studded sidewalks, while I sounded like an entire invading army all by myself. “What, if anything, do you know about the Lordens?”

“Patrick seems nice. Dianda was a little cranky, but I’d be cranky, too, if someone stole my kids and tried to put an arrow through my husband.” I shrugged, kicking a chunk of glass out of the way. “Why? Do you have some great revelations to share?”

“Not great, but they might be of use.” His gaze went distant as he tried to put his next words in order. “The Duchess—Dianda—has reigned in Saltmist since before I moved to the Mists. She used to be seen in the Courts quite often, when Gilad was King. She’s a traditionalist, of a kind, but unlike some, she’s never preached separation of land and sea. That’s part of why she married Patrick.”

“Only part?”

Tybalt gave me a half-amused, half-exasperated look. “They fell in love,” he said. “It *does* happen.”

I was grateful for the fog surrounding us. I could at least pretend he couldn’t see me blushing. “Right. So what does that mean?”

“It means she didn’t take it well when people started shunning him, or when he started having ‘accidents.’ King Gilad was an attendant at their

wedding—he didn’t just approve, he gave his blessing—but things changed when the new Queen took the throne. It wasn’t acceptable to be a land noble married to a sea Duchess anymore. That’s when Patrick renounced his titles.” Tybalt started walking faster. I tightened my hand on his elbow.

“Do you think you can find the Luidaeg’s on your own?” I asked.

He eyed me. “No,” he admitted.

“Then slow down.”

Grudgingly, Tybalt slowed his pace.

“That’s better. Now, back to the Lordens. You’re saying they had some resentment before some idiot decided to snatch their kids.”

“They’ve had a long time to feel hurt and persecuted, and the Duchess has never forgiven easily.” He cast a sidelong look at me. “That’s something her Court and mine have always had in common.”

I didn’t know how to answer that. I didn’t have to; we’d reached the Luidaeg’s door. It was open, flooding the surrounding fog with warm lamplight, and the Luidaeg herself was sitting on the threshold, eating Ben and Jerry’s Phish Food out of the carton. She stuck the spoon into the ice cream and stood when she saw us, flicking one electric-taped pigtail carelessly back over her shoulder.

“I thought that was you,” she said. “And you brought a friend. It’s good to see you playing nicely with the other children, even if this isn’t the best time to develop a social life.”

Tybalt folded a hand over mine as he offered her a cordial bow. “Milady of the Moors. It has been too long.”

“No, it hasn’t,” the Luidaeg replied, mildly enough. The last time they’d seen each other, he’d been helping to steal me back from Blind Michael. Not exactly the sort of thing that inspires a lasting friendship. “Has the Court of Dreaming Cats declared alliance?”

“Yes,” he said. He didn’t let go of my hand.

The Luidaeg lifted an eyebrow, looking amused. “Is that so? Well, you’re here now. I guess you might as well come in.” She turned, heading into the hall. Tybalt and I exchanged a look before shrugging, almost in unison, and stepping inside.

The door slammed shut behind us.

The smell of brine and ashes was stronger inside the apartment, and golden lamplight seemed to radiate from the walls, probably anchoring the misdirection spell blanketing the neighborhood. The light made the mess in

the hall seem less severe, blunting the edges into an abstraction, like the treasure in a dragon's lair. The muck-colored carpet still crackled underfoot. I found that reassuring.

The Luidaeg was settled on the couch in a disarmingly casual pose when we reached the living room. "Well?" she asked, around a mouthful of ice cream. "Why are you already back? Did you save the world or something?"

"I'm still working on it." I sat down on an old wooden chest. It creaked under my weight. "Tybalt's here because the Cait Sidhe are going to help defend Goldengreen, if things come to that."

"Brave little kitty." She watched Tybalt pick his way across the floor, her gaze as flat and cold as a shark's. "You going to run out the moment things get difficult, cat?"

"That isn't my intention," he replied, haughtiness warring with caution in his tone. Only the narrowing of his pupils betrayed how much her question annoyed him. "Cats may be fickle, but my word has value."

"Good." The Luidaeg took another bite of ice cream, turning back to me. "You'd have called if that was all you had. What is it, and what do you want?"

"I got some information from a Glastig I know. He says the Lorden boys were stolen by a woman with red hair and yellow eyes. Know anyone who fits the description?" She was silent. I nodded. "Thought so. I'm going to Shadowed Hills next, to tell the Torquills in person and search Rayseline's quarters. There's a chance, even if it's a slim one, that she'll have left something there that could give me a clue to why she's doing this—and whether she's doing it alone."

The Luidaeg's eyebrows rose. "You're thinking conspiracy?"

"Does Rayseline strike *you* as smart enough to pull this off without help?"

"Smart, maybe; stable, no. I'm surprised she can put her own shoes on without written directions." The Luidaeg took another bite of ice cream. Finally, she asked, "What else?"

I took a deep breath. "I need to meet with the Lordens. Can you arrange it?"

"I can," said the Luidaeg. "Your reputation may actually help for once, since everyone knows the Queen hates you. That's still not enough to make you come here, instead of calling me."

"I missed your smiling face?"

She lifted an eyebrow.

So much for that. “I don’t think I’m going to be able to find the kids if I can’t search the place where they were taken. That means I’m going to need a way to travel to Salt-mist without drowning.”

The Luidaeg nodded. “I hoped you’d figure that out before I explained it to you. It comes easier this way.”

“Yeah. I guess so.” The Luidaeg knows how much I hate water. More, she knows how much I hate having anyone use transformation magic on me, and even the simplest water-breathing spell is a kind of transformation. She’d probably been expecting me to pitch a fit.

“There are ways for an air-breather to survive underwater—Patrick Lorden proves that—but he gets his enchantments from his wife, and he doesn’t spend much time in the open sea without her. You’ll need something longer-lasting.”

I’d worked out most of this for myself. That didn’t make hearing it any better. “Longer-lasting? You’re not coming with me?”

“I can’t. If I enter the water right now . . .” She let the sentence trail off.

“The sea witch traditionally owes her allegiance to the Undersea,” said Tybalt. His voice was studiously neutral. “I believe that, if she were to enter the waters, she would not be able to return until this conflict was done.”

The Luidaeg nodded. “Bingo.”

“As I thought.” Tybalt crossed his arms. “What, then, are you proposing?”

“Can’t you guess?” asked the Luidaeg.

I glared. “Could you just answer the damn question?”

The Luidaeg sighed, throwing her half-empty container into the corner. It splashed ice cream across the wall as it fell. “Both of you, come with me.” Tybalt blinked. She sniffed, standing. “Yes, you, kitty-boy. I don’t leave anyone alone in my apartment without good reason.”

“Besides, you’d just make me tell you what she says anyway,” I said, smiling weakly as I stood. “At least this way, we’re cutting out the middleman.”

Tybalt snorted. “I suppose that’s true. Very well, then. Let us go.”

We followed the Luidaeg to her bedroom. She knocked three times on the doorframe before opening the door, either to dispel some ward too subtle for me to see or to warn something inside to get out of view. Then she turned the knob, waving for us to follow her into the dazzling candlelight on the other side.

If most of the Luidaeg’s apartment is decorated in “early decay,” her

bedroom is more like a cross between a movie version of a medieval castle and an aquarium. Candles cover every available surface, and saltwater tanks filled with strange fish and stranger creatures line the walls. A sea dragon the length of my arm swam in the largest tank, casting a disapproving pearl-eyed gaze over everything it surveyed. I couldn't sleep in that room if you paid me, but the Luidaeg likes it; it's the one room in her apartment that she bothers to take care of. The few times I've seen it, it's been spotless, lit by those ever-burning candles . . . and candlelight is no comfort to me. Not since Blind Michael.

The Luidaeg saw my shudder. There was a trace of sympathy in her expression as she closed the door, saying, "My little brother left his marks on people who knew him."

"You can say that again." I tried to focus on a tank of orange-and-white-striped hippocampi—tiny, literal sea horses that chased each other in and out of the colorful anemones lining their tank, their miniature hooves lashing. "So what are we in here for?"

"You need to go to the Undersea." The Luidaeg opened a drawer in her nightstand, pulling out a long, wicked-looking pin crusted with pearls and loops of verdigris-stained silver. Straightening, she said imperiously, "Give me your hand."

"Is this one of those things where you injure me to make a point?" I asked, already extending my left hand toward her.

"Yes." She lashed out like a striking snake, burying the pin in the meaty part of my thumb. I'd been expecting the pain—I've learned to anticipate bleeding once the Luidaeg has a weapon—but I yelped all the same, jerking my wounded hand away from her. Tybalt hissed, suddenly beside me.

"Settle down, kitty-cat; I'll be needing your blood in a moment," said the Luidaeg, right before she drove the pin into the palm of her own hand. Voice still calm, she continued, "It's all a matter of getting the right mix. Toby's not a shapeshifter, which is bad for our purposes, but she's easily changed, which is good for them. It's just a matter of telling her what to be—and how to come back to what she is."

"No big, then," I said numbly, trying not to look at the pin sticking out of the Luidaeg's hand. I *hate* the sight of blood.

Tybalt's hand was a heavy, welcome weight on my shoulder. "My blood only knows one transformation, and cats can't breathe underwater," he said.

"True. But your blood knows what it is to go from one thing to another and

back again.” The Luidaeg smiled, pulling the pin free. “Mine’s a bit more malleable, and I figure she’d like to go back to her semi-original shape when she’s done.”

“The word ‘semi’ is a problem for me in that sentence,” I said.

“Like you’re mint in the box right now? You are what you were made to be, you’re not what you’ve always been—your poor body is almost as confused as you are.” She walked to the tank where the sea dragon swam and knocked her finger against the glass. “Come to the surface, Ketea. I need you.”

“What, precisely, are you attempting to do?” demanded Tybalt.

“What I was asked to do. Send October down to the depths and bring her back again, with no nasty loopholes or conditions to complicate our lives.” The sea dragon stuck its head out of the water. The Luidaeg stroked it with a finger, cooing in what sounded like Greek before continuing, “Normally, I’d charge for something like this, but since you’re doing it for me—and it amuses the shit out of me—we’ll call this a freebie.”

“That’s sweet of you,” I said blandly.

“I know.” The Luidaeg stroked her dragon’s head one more time before pinching a scale between her thumb and forefinger and plucking it loose. The dragon hissed at her. “Hush, now, Ketea. You’re a good boy. I’ll bring you an eel tomorrow.”

The dragon seemed to approve of this. It stopped hissing and ducked back beneath the surface of the water.

The Luidaeg smiled indulgently as she turned back toward us. “He does love eels,” she said. Then her expression hardened, attention fixing on Tybalt. “Hand, kitty-cat.”

Tybalt narrowed his eyes as he extended his hand toward her, but didn’t pull away as she drove the pin in her hand into the meaty part of his thumb.

“Should we be getting worried about infection?” I asked, looking at my own hand to keep from seeing Tybalt bleed. The place where she’d stabbed me was already scabbing over. Bouncing back fast seems to be a Dóchas Sidhe trait. It’s hard to know for sure, since as far as I know, I’m the only one in existence. Amandine doesn’t count—she’s our Firstborn.

“Give me a little credit, will you?” I looked back as she pulled the pin from Tybalt’s hand. She dipped it in the water of the sea dragon’s tank three times in quick succession before holding it, and the scale, out to me. “Here you go.”

It's always best to take what the Luidaeg offers you. I did so, holding pin and scale at arm's length. "What do I do with them?" I asked.

"When the time comes, you swallow the scale and jam the pin into your leg." The Luidaeg mimed stabbing herself in the thigh, smiling in an unsettling fashion. "You'll have five hours after that. Just don't fight it."

I glanced uneasily at Tybalt, who was staring at her with such intensity that she would have been in danger if looks could actually kill. "What, exactly, will it do?"

"What you asked for." She opened the bedroom door. A thin stream of red-black blood from her puncture wound ran down the side of her hand, making the entire room smell like a marsh. "Now get out of here. I have a Duchess to contact, and you have a war to prevent. Time isn't stopping while we stand around here like a bunch of idiots."

"I'm going," I said. I slid the scale into my jacket pocket, sticking the pin through a fold of the lining. I wasn't worried about losing it so much as I was worried about poking myself by mistake. "You're not going to tell me what this is going to do, are you?"

"No," said the Luidaeg, and left the room.

Tybalt slanted a glance in my direction. "Is she always this forthcoming?"

"Oh, no." I smiled wryly. "Sometimes, she's downright obscure."

He actually laughed as we left the Luidaeg's bedroom. It sounded so natural, so normal, that I found myself joining in. We kept laughing as the Luidaeg ushered us down the hall and out the door, back into the cool mist that blanketed the San Francisco night. War was coming, I was almost certainly going to wind up underwater before things were finished, but we could still laugh.

That was nice.



TEN

THE LAUGHTER FADED once the door was closed. Tybalt waited until we were out of the Luidaeg's alley before saying, "The first time we met, she was very properly formal. This time . . . she was very unlike what I had expected."

"She tends to have that effect on people." I drew my jacket a little tighter, shivering. "I think she enjoys it."

"She is only the second of the First that I have met—that I know of. There may be others, hiding among us, choosing obscurity over infamy."

"I wouldn't be surprised." I gave him a sidelong look. "Who was the first?"

"Your mother."

I grimaced. "I'll never get used to that." The car appeared in the mist ahead of us. I quickened my steps. "Come on. We need to hurry up and get to Goldengreen if we're also planning to hit Shadowed Hills tonight." I glanced up. "If you're coming?"

"We've been through this," Tybalt said, somewhat sharply, and got into the car. I followed, occupying myself with buckling my belt before looking up to ask him to fasten his. Then I stopped, just looking at him.

Tybalt was sitting stock-still, staring out the windshield like a man on the way to his own execution. It was clear he didn't want to be there, but he wasn't willing to leave or take the Shadow Roads to Goldengreen if I wasn't willing to go with him. He might hate the car, but he was sticking with me.

That sort of loyalty is rare. "You can ride as a cat if that would be better," I offered. "I can listen to the radio."

He almost jumped before twisting to stare at me. I was on the verge of taking back the suggestion as a bad idea when he nodded. "That might be . . . for the best. I don't think I like the car."

“Okay,” I said, trying not to show my relief. I knew how much that admission must have cost him. “Go ahead and shift down, and we’ll get going.”

Transformation is graphic and painful. Shapeshifting isn’t. The smell of pennyroyal and musk filled the car, and Tybalt was gone, replaced by a tabby tomcat with one tattered ear. He stretched, tail twitching as he dug his claws into the upholstery. Then he curled up, watching me intently.

Sometimes I envy shapeshifters. They make it look so easy. I flashed Tybalt a smile as I started the engine. “Besides, you’re quieter this way.”

If he had a response, he wasn’t willing to return to human form to deliver it. He yawned instead, displaying his teeth before closing his eyes. I smiled to myself and started the car.

No rest for the wicked.

Riding in cat form really did seem to soothe Tybalt’s nerves; he stayed curled on the seat, alternately grooming himself and feigning sleep. Traffic in the city was light, and we made good time to the San Francisco Art Museum. All the lights were off inside. I’d been expecting that. It was way past closing time, after all.

I parked the car in the deepest shadows I could find before prodding Tybalt. He rose and stretched, giving a few cursory licks to one paw. Then he looked at me expectantly. I raised an eyebrow. “What?”

He looked from my door to his, flattening an ear.

I sighed, unfastening my belt. “Yes, O master.” I got out of the car, walking around to open the passenger side door. “Just hurry it up, okay?”

Tybalt leaped out onto the blacktop, the smell of pennyroyal and musk already gathering. He reared up onto his hind legs and was suddenly a man again, variegated hair in disarray. Slicking it back with one hand, he offered a fang-baring smile before snapping his fingers and clothing himself in the glittering film of a human disguise. “You were right; that was much better.”

“Show-off,” I said. “I suppose you were too comfortable to turn back in the car?”

“Cats aren’t built to sit like humans,” he replied. “Any reasonable position would have given me a concussion.”

The image of Tybalt smacking his head against the roof of the car made me smile. “Fair enough. Come on.”

“Will we be diving off any cliffs this evening?”

I smirked. Goldengreen’s least popular entrance requires walking off the

side of the cliff and hoping you're in the right spot. Only the Selkies think this is fun. When they misjudge their entrance, they can turn into seals and enjoy the plummet to the ocean below. The rest of us . . . let's just say that I have better taste in extreme sports.

"We'll be using the main entrance." I held up my keys. "Apartment, car, secret entrance into my private kingdom beneath the proverbial hollow hill."

"Yes, but do you have a can opener?"

"I'll get right on that." I led Tybalt out of the parking lot and toward a rusty-looking old shed. Its doors looked like they were barely holding on. Appearances can be deceiving. Inserting my key into a crack in the metal eight inches away from the visible keyhole, I turned it to the left, and chanted, "Three blind mice, three blind mice, see how they run, see how they run. You'd run too, if a hungry Cait Sidhe was on your ass." My magic rose around us in a veil of cut grass and copper, and the door to Goldengreen—the *real* door, the one that had nothing to do with keys or sheds—swung open.

Tybalt gave me an amused look. "I assume that was for my benefit?"

"Assume away." I swept a hand toward the entrance. "After you."

Chuckling, he stepped through the open door. I pulled it shut behind me as I followed.

There's a moment of transition when you move between the mortal world and the interior of a knowe, a brief second where you aren't sure where you are or how you got there. The disorientation faded as quickly as it came, and I turned to Tybalt, who was looking around the hall with undisguised curiosity.

"Come on," I said. "We need to find Marcia."

"I do adore a scavenger hunt," he said dryly.

Nobles are supposed to be innately connected to their knowes, able to sense the moods and states of their hollow hills. My connection is tenuous at best, thanks to the part where the knowe really regards the pixies and bogeys as its owners. I have to rely on more mundane means, like following the sound of voices down the hall and into the courtyard.

If there was a goal in mind when Goldengreen's courtyard was constructed, I don't know what it was. The circular room looks like it should be outside, part of a large ornamental garden or something. The door opens onto the front level, which is small for a courtyard, since it's only about sixty feet across. That's because the walls are arranged in six shallow concentric tiers, each planted with a variety of flowers, herbs, and grasses. The top tier holds willows transplanted from Lily's knowe before it sealed itself

completely. Her former handmaids spend a lot of time with those trees, curling up among their roots and not saying anything to anyone. I think it helps them cope with the pain of losing her. I'm not going to be the one who stops them.

Marcia was sitting on the edge of the polished brass fountain at the center of the room, chatting amiably with a pair of Satyrs. She looked up at the sound of our footsteps, and stood as soon as she realized who we were. "Toby! Is it true?"

There was only one thing she could be asking me about. I nodded. "It's true. The Undersea has declared war."

"Oh, oak and ash." Marcia went pale. "What are we going to do?"

"First? We're going to let the Cait Sidhe in." I gestured toward Tybalt. "The King of Cats has graciously extended his protection to us in these trying times."

Marcia turned to him, blinking. "Really?"

If I'd asked that, he would have been offended that I was questioning his word. Because it was Marcia, he simply nodded, trying his best to look encouraging as he said, "Yes, really. It will be our honor."

"Tha—" She caught herself, and curtsied instead, suffusing the motion with every ounce of her gratitude. Most of the nobles in this Kingdom could take lessons from her on what a curtsy's supposed to be.

"It really is my pleasure," Tybalt said.

One of the Satyrs raised his hand, like a schoolchild requesting permission to speak, and said, "Your Excellency? Do you—I mean, do we—can we leave?"

"Yes," I said firmly. "If you want to leave the city, get away from the coast, if you can. Goldengreen will be open to you when you return." Assuming it was still standing, which was a possibility I didn't feel like voicing out loud.

The Satyr nodded his appreciation and grabbed his companion's hand, hauling him from the room. The sound of their hooves on the floor faded down the hall. I sighed. "Look, Marcia. I can't stay—I need to get to Shadowed Hills—but I want you to tell anyone who asks what I just said. If they're too scared to stay, they can go. They'll be welcome when all this is over."

Marcia nodded solemnly. "I will. I'll even tell the pixies."

"Good." I paused. "There's something else I've been meaning to discuss

with you.”

“What is it?” Her expression turned wary in an instant, the face of someone who’s had their hand slapped one time too many for daring to reach beyond their station. I know that face all too well. Every changeling I’ve ever known has worn it way too often. “Did I do something wrong?”

“No. You did something exactly right. Look, I’m going to be running around a lot until all this is taken care of. Someone needs to be able to make decisions when I’m not here. You’ve got the job, if you want it.”

“What?” She blinked at me, anxiety fading into confusion. “I don’t understand.”

“I’m making you my seneschal, Marcia. I should have done it months ago. I’m sorry.”

“But—wait—really?”

“Yeah, really. It’ll be my next official decree.”

A smile broke through her amazement. “You should probably start making those, then.”

“Yeah, probably.” I turned to Tybalt. “Did you get all that?”

“Heard, and witnessed,” he said formally. Offering a deep bow to Marcia, he asked, “May I be the first to congratulate the new Seneschal of Goldengreen?”

Marcia, looking stunned, just giggled.

“Okay, good.” I looked between the two of them. “Now that we’ve got that taken care of, Tybalt and I need to get to Shadowed Hills. Can you manage things here?”

Marcia nodded mutely.

“Good. If you need anything, if you have any trouble at all, call the apartment. May is there, and she can get me a message. Otherwise—”

“My subjects can always find me,” said Tybalt.

“That, too,” I said. Stepping forward, I gave Marcia a quick hug. “You’re going to be fine. Call if you need anything.”

“I will,” she whispered, and hugged me back. “I’ll make you proud of me.”

“You already have. Open roads, Marcia.”

“Open roads,” she echoed.

I turned and walked back the way we’d come. Tybalt followed close behind me, leaving Marcia standing shell-shocked next to the fountain.

Pitching his voice low, he said, “That was a kindness.”

“No.” I smiled. “That was the right thing to do.”

He gave me a thoughtful look, and nodded, not saying anything else as we left the knowe and walked to the car. He didn't wait to be asked this time, but shifted straight to cat form, leaping through my open door to settle, purring, on the passenger seat.

"Hope you like nineties rock," I said, and turned the radio on, blasting Meatloaf. He was willing to do anything for love. Tybalt, meanwhile, was willing to take a nap while I drove. Cats never change.

The lack of traffic extended past San Francisco. The Bay Bridge was practically deserted, and we made good time all the way to Paso Nogal Park, in Pleasant Hill. That's where the mortal side of Sylvester's demesne is anchored.

The parking lot was empty when we arrived. No surprise there—humans find the park unsettling at night. It's filled with strange shadows and noises they can't explain. Standing on an active knowe can do that to people, and the rose goblins that throng around the place are fond of playing tricks on mortals. There's not much I can do about that. If Luna won't control the rose goblins, I certainly can't.

I left Tybalt's door open as I stepped away from the car, studying the park, and waited there until I heard the door close behind me. "Now what?" asked Tybalt.

"Now?" I turned to face him. "Now we go in."

He eyed me. "I don't suppose they've installed a more convenient door since the last time I was here?"

"You *are* feeling optimistic tonight." On a whim, I reached over and took his arm. "Come on."

I know the route into Shadowed Hills better than almost anyone—practice makes perfect—but that didn't stop Tybalt from practically running rings around me all the way up the hill. I was in the best shape of my life. Tybalt was still better, a point that was driven home when he reached the top of the hill a full ten steps ahead of me.

He smirked. "Should we take the long way next time?"

"Very funny." A door appeared in the hollow oak. I knocked three times, and had barely pulled my hand away when the door opened, revealing a short, sleek-haired woman with gauzy mayfly's wings. She looked harried, but she smiled when she saw me.

"Toby! Hey, honey, I was just thinking about you. Largely in the capacity of 'I wonder what she's managed to break recently,' sure, but . . ." She trailed

off when she spotted Tybalt. She tilted her head, wings twitching. “The King of Dreaming Cats, I presume?”

“You presume correctly,” said Tybalt.

“Hi, Jin,” I said. “Is the Duke in? I need to see him.”

Jin’s been Sylvester’s personal physician for as long as I can remember, but she’s only been short and dark for a few months. Ellyllon change appearance periodically, shedding their old skins like butterflies breaking out of cocoons. She swears it isn’t any more painful than losing a few strands of hair when you brush. I find that difficult to believe. Still, to each their own.

“Given that people are taking potshots at his Undersea equivalent during formal events? Yes, he’s in.” She offered Tybalt her hand. “I’m Jin.”

“Tybalt.” He took her hand and kissed it before letting go. “A pleasure.”

“Aren’t you sweet?” Jin smiled wearily before turning to head into the knowe. “Come on. His Grace will want to see you.”

“Right,” I said, and stepped inside.

The entrance hall was bustling with pages and courtiers, all shuttling fabric-wrapped bundles into the ballroom. I looked toward Jin, raising an eyebrow in silent question. She shook her head.

“Not my place, Toby, so don’t even ask.”

“Right,” I repeated, frowning as I followed her down the hall. Tybalt paced silently behind me. I took an odd degree of comfort from his presence.

Jin stopped at the throne room doors, giving us an apologetic look. “This is where I leave you,” she said. “I have some things I need to take care of. I only got the door because everybody else was busy.”

“I’m pretty sure we can handle it from here,” I said.

“Good.” Jin squinted at me. “You’re tired. Please get some sleep once you’ve made sure we don’t have to host a war.”

“Is that an order?” I asked, amused.

“Mmmm.” She turned to Tybalt. “You’re a big boy. If she doesn’t go to bed on her own, get some rope and tie her down.”

I couldn’t even shake off my shock enough to sputter as she vanished in a hail of green glitter. Tybalt gave me an amused smile that I could swear was almost gentle as he reached past me and rapped on the throne room doors. They swung open.

“After you,” he said.

Gathering my dignity as best I could, I stepped inside.

All of Shadowed Hills is built on the “way too big, way too gaudy”

blueprint, and the throne room is no different. The walls are draped with watered silk in the Duchy's colors, and the floor is checkerboard-patterned marble that always makes me feel like a misplaced chess piece. Tybalt's footsteps are naturally silent, but even my shoes made no sound against the stone.

The doors swung closed behind us, clicking shut with a snap like ice breaking.

Luna was sitting on her throne on the dais at the head of the room, watching Sylvester pace. He'd set his Ducal circlet aside in favor of running his hands through his hair until it stuck up along the sides of his head in russet spikes. They both looked toward the sound of the door closing. Luna half-stood, and Sylvester stopped where he was. Neither said a word as we crossed to them and stopped in front of the dais, bowing.

I was amused to see that Tybalt bowed deeper than I did. The Cait Sidhe aren't part of the noble structure—they have their own hierarchy, sanctioned by Oberon himself—but they show respect when it suits them, and Tybalt respects the Torquills. There aren't many nobles in Faerie who can say they've earned the respect of a King of Cats.

"Are you all right?" asked Luna, shattering the silence. "We didn't think we'd hear from you so soon."

"I've been digging around for information. Some of the things I've found have been . . ." I stopped, finally finishing lamely, "I didn't want to tell you over the phone."

"Well, you just missed the Queen's herald," said Sylvester, in a tone that implied he would have been quite happy to have done the same. "Every landholder in the kingdom has been ordered to come to the aid of the crown—even if we're too far inland to be directly affected, and would rather have played haven to those who aren't equipped to fight, we still have to provide arms, and the warriors to wield them. I'm called to active duty. 'Retirement' is apparently a luxury I am no longer allowed."

"Every available hand is emptying the armory into the grand ballroom, in preparation for the Queen's men coming to collect," added Luna.

That explained why Jin answered the door. I glanced automatically toward the western wall, asking, "Is Amandine . . . ?"

"She's summoned with the rest of us," said Sylvester. "That is, she will be, if they can find her. I'm not sure they've even managed to find her tower."

I allowed a fleeting smile. "Mother always liked her privacy." Privacy,

insanity, they're basically the same where Amandine's concerned. It's easier to understand how she gets away with it now that I know she's Firstborn.

Sylvester stopped pacing and moved to settle in his throne. Luna leaned over, taking his hand in hers. "Have you seen her recently?"

"No." I bit my lip, watching them. The fae don't age, but we wear out when we push ourselves too hard. Thin lines were etched around Sylvester's eyes, and Luna—always pale now that she's lost her borrowed Kitsune skin—looked almost waxy. War is one of the few things that truly frightens the fae, because it represents an ending. Win or lose, there's someone who doesn't walk away. "Sylvester, I . . ."

Tybalt's hand on my shoulder stopped me. I looked toward him, blinking.

"I believe this is better discussed without my presence," he said. He offered a shallow bow to Sylvester and Luna as he stepped away. "I will wait for October in the hall, if you don't mind?"

"Not at all," said Sylvester. He looked relieved. He's known me long enough to know that my discomfort meant I was almost certainly about to say something he didn't want to hear, and he'd feel better hearing it without someone who wasn't family in the room. "If you need anything, Jin or Melly will be happy to provide it for you."

Things were worse than I thought if Jin was being drafted into helping the household staff with more than just opening the doors. I shot Tybalt a grateful look, which he answered with a smile before turning and walking toward the doors. They swung open at his approach, swinging closed again behind him.

I turned back to the Torquills. "Sylvester . . ."

"I'm glad he'll stand with you," said Luna, pulling our attention to her. "I doubt Connor would. He didn't stand with Rayseline."

"I'm not sure that's fair," I said carefully. Luna hadn't commented on my relationship with Connor before that moment—something I'd been deeply grateful for, since I wasn't planning to break up with him, no matter *what* she said. "She made her choices. He's made his."

"Her choices were made for her." Luna lifted one bone-white hand, looking at it thoughtfully. "Blood decides so much for us. All of us."

I shifted my weight from foot to foot, not sure what to say, although I was pretty sure pointing out that Connor didn't choose Raysel in the first place wouldn't go over well. Luna was right; in Faerie, blood will tell. I was starting to wonder how much of her calm had actually belonged to Hoshibara,

the Kitsune girl whose skin Luna used to escape her father's lands.

"Rayseline was wed for diplomatic reasons," said Sylvester sharply. "The choice to end the marriage was hers, and was made when she left her duties. Toby, please. What was so important that you had to come here to tell us?"

I took a deep breath, holding it for a moment before I breathed out, and said, "I called a Glastig I know from Home and asked him about the kidnappings. He didn't really reach beyond his roots after leaving Devin. He generally knows what's going on in the underworld."

"And?" asked Sylvester.

Here it was: the moment of truth. "He said the only person who was asking the right kind of questions was a red-haired girl with yellow eyes and a laugh like . . ." I couldn't finish that sentence. "He described Rayseline."

Silence crashed down around us. Luna's hand tightened on Sylvester's. For his part, he simply closed his eyes, breathing slowly in and out. Finally:

"I see. I suppose, again, that blood will tell." Sylvester opened his eyes. "What will you do?"

There were so many questions packed into that short, seemingly-simple sentence. What *would* I do? Would I hand Rayseline over to the justice of the Undersea? To the Queen's justice? To anyone at all? She and I were close, once, before she was stolen and raised in darkness. It wasn't her fault that she grew up broken—and sadly, the fact that it wasn't her fault wasn't enough to un-break her.

"I don't know," I said. "I'm going to prevent this war. I don't know what that's going to mean, but I'm *going* to prevent this war. I need to search her rooms. I need to know if there's anything here that might help me figure out what's really going on."

Sylvester nodded. Luna wasn't saying anything. Her eyes were closed, pink lashes unnaturally bright against the stark whiteness of her skin.

"I . . . appreciate that you did not call us with this news. This is too important for that." Sylvester sighed. "You have free run of her apartments. Etienne will accompany you and provide anything else you need."

"He isn't needed in the armory?"

"This is more important," said Sylvester. "You'll be sure we know the situation?"

"I will," I said, with all the sincerity of a promise.

"Good."

That was my dismissal; it couldn't have been any clearer. I turned, walking

back across the throne room to the doors. They didn't call me back, and I didn't turn around. Then the doors swung open, and I left my liege and his lady behind.



ELEVEN

TYBALT WAS LEANING against the wall with his arms crossed, watching the pages walk by with their armfuls of weaponry. I stopped in my tracks, struggling with the image of Tybalt looking so at home in Shadowed Hills. He'd always been a part of my life, a figure lurking on the fringes making snide comments and yet somehow, reliably, coming to my rescue when I needed him.

How long had it taken me to notice that?

He straightened when he saw me. "I take it you've finished?" he asked. There was open concern in his tone.

"Yeah. I told them."

"How did they react?"

"As well as could be expected." I sighed, pinching the bridge of my nose. "I need to find Etienne. He's going to accompany us for the search of Rayseline's rooms."

Tybalt blinked. "Really? Why?"

"Because otherwise, the Queen could question any evidence you produced," replied Etienne, stepping through a doorway that hadn't been there a moment before—a glittering hole in the air that vanished as soon as he was through it. "A changeling with reason to have a grudge against the accused, and a King of Cats with his own agendas? Best not to give her the opening."

"I hate politics," I sighed. "Hi, Etienne."

"Countess Daye," he replied. Tybalt received a nod, which he returned without visible annoyance. It can be hard for the more traditionalist members of the nobility to know how they should address a King of Cats—"Your Majesty" gives them too much credit, but anything else verges on insult.

Most days, watching Etienne talk to Tybalt would be high comedy, and I'd

be the first to break out the popcorn. Unfortunately, I didn't have time. "You know the way?"

Etienne nodded. "Sir Grianne will be meeting us there."

"Good. Let's go."

Etienne waved his hand, filling the air with the smell of limes and cedar smoke. A glittering hole opened in the wall next to Tybalt. I could see the arched windows of the Torquills' private hall through the portal. Grianne, another of Sylvester's knights, was waiting for us there.

"I love the Tuatha Express," I said.

All breeds of fae have their own strange skills. The Tuatha de Dannan are teleporters, capable of opening temporary doors between places. They used to manage the gates between the realms of Faerie, before Oberon sealed them and left the Tuatha looking for something else to do with their time. Most have chosen Etienne's career path. The rest have Courts of their own, and make pretty decent regents. Some people say they're just killing time until Oberon returns and puts them all back to work. Stranger things have happened.

Tybalt and Etienne entered the gate close behind me. There was a moment's blinding light, like I was stepping between the levels of a knowe—
—and I was standing in a different hall. Grianne turned in our direction, the glowing spheres of her Merry Dancers spinning in wide circles around her. She didn't say anything. That wasn't unusual; I've never met a chatty Candela, and Grianne makes most of her race seem positively loquacious.

"What will you need from us?" asked Etienne. He closed the portal with another wave of his hand.

I resisted the urge to answer "More coffee." Instead, I asked, "Has either of you been in Raysel's rooms before?"

"I have," said Grianne grudgingly, like even that much communication hadn't been in her plans for the day.

"Good. I'm going to need you to tell me if anything's out of place." The lintel above the nearest door was marked with a circlet of pale pink roses, identifying the rooms beyond as Rayseline's. I started to step forward, and paused, a feeling of undeniable *wrongness* washing over me. After squinting at the doorframe for a long moment, I realized what it was.

There were no wards, either active or inactive. There weren't even signs that there had been wards set in the past. "Etienne?" I said uncertainly.

He followed my gaze, and sighed. "The young Mistress Torquill never

made much use of her magical gifts. Her quarters have never been warded.”

“Oh,” I said, cringing inwardly. Wards are complicated magic. They don’t come instinctively, like basic illusions or some racial gifts. Rayseline never had a childhood; she never got the training that was her birthright.

Out of everyone in Faerie, she might be one of the few who had less of a clue about her own abilities than I did. Something about that struck me as unutterably sad. But there was nothing to be done about it now, and, tragic or not, Rayseline was no longer on the side of the angels. I took a breath to steady myself, trying to dismiss any preconceptions, and stepped past Grianne into the receiving room.

My first impression was of overwhelming pinkness. Everything was one shade of pink or another—the walls, the rugs, even the upholstery on the chairs. Evening Winter-rose had had a similar decorating scheme for her apartment, but while she’d made it look like a private Valentine, this looked more like a preschooler’s room, one who dreamed in Disney princesses and once-upon-a-times.

Oh. That was exactly what this was: the room Sylvester and Luna decorated for their precious baby girl. Then she went away, and came back broken. They didn’t know what to change, what would help her heal . . . and so they didn’t change anything at all, and they never taught her about growing up. I don’t think anyone, or anything, ever did.

There were traces of her adulthood visible around the edges, but not many. Raysel shared this room with the ghost of her own childhood, the little girl who died on the day when she was swept off into the darkness. Her kidnapping was—and is—the case I couldn’t solve. We’re all still paying for it.

I walked forward, scanning the area. This was a showroom, the entry to a noble’s private space. If Raysel had slipped up, it wouldn’t be here. There were two doors at the back of the room. I indicated them, asking, “Grianne, where do these doors lead?”

“Bedroom. Washroom.” Each word was accompanied by a Merry Dancer soaring over to bob in front of the indicated door. Grianne paused before adding, “There’s a door from the bedroom to the family’s private garden.”

“Gotcha.” I started for the bedroom door. “Tybalt, can you shift to cat form and see if anything smells out of place?”

“Will you never learn that I am not a bloodhound?” he asked without rancor.

“Nope.” The door was warm under my fingertips, like some unseen sun had been shining on it. I tried the knob. It turned easily, the door swinging open to reveal a darkened room that seemed like a much better match for Rayseline’s adult character. Heavy drapes were drawn across the windows, blocking any light that might have tried to slip inside. “Grianne?”

She didn’t answer me, but the Merry Dancer that had been marking the door swooped inside and hovered slightly above head height, brightening to cast a soft white glow through the entire room. I stopped where I was, taking a moment to simply look. This was where Raysel had lived, free from the expectations of her family. This was where she hadn’t been forced to hide.

The walls had been papered pink, at one point; scraps of wallpaper still clung around the ceiling and near the floor. The rest had been ripped away, revealing smooth plaster. Even some of that had been torn down, leaving bare the rough gray stone of the actual walls. The floor was hard, uncovered oak. Raysel had removed any trace of softness, leaving the room as stark as she could. A standing wardrobe was shoved against one wall, and a simple bureau was up against the other. In the darkest corner of the room, the one farthest from the windows, a twin bed that was practically a cot had been made up with a thin blanket and a single pillow.

A lump formed in my throat as I looked around. Raysel might have returned from the darkness that stole her, but in a very real way, she never came home.

A tabby-striped tomcat slipped past my feet, nose pressed low to the ground as he stalked through the room. That snapped me out of my momentary freeze. “Etienne, search the wardrobe; Grianne, get the bureau.” I started for the bed.

“What are we looking for?” asked Etienne.

“Anything that shouldn’t be there.” I knelt, peering into the narrow, shadow-filled space between the floor and the bottom of the mattress. If Raysel had kept anything hidden there, it was long gone; the only things I saw were dust bunnies and a few more scraps of wallpaper.

“How specific,” said Etienne, as he started going through the wardrobe.

“I live to serve.” Peeling back the blanket revealed nothing but the mattress, sliced open along the side to allow for the removal of half the stuffing. I reached cautiously through the slit, and found nothing but wadded lumps of silk. “This isn’t a room for two.”

“No,” said Etienne. “Master O’Dell maintained his own quarters.”

“Oh.” I always knew things between Connor and Raysel were less than ideal—I wasn’t even sure the marriage had been consummated, and I’d never quite been able to bring myself to ask—but somehow, I thought they would have shared at least an apartment, if not a bed. That’s what I get for being an occasional idealist, I guess.

Tybalt stalked over to the bureau, letting out an earsplitting yowl. I stood, turning in his direction. “What’s that, Lassie? Timmy’s down the well?”

The look he gave me could have peeled paint. I snickered as I walked over to him, motioning for Grianne to step aside.

“What?”

Tybalt reached out with one paw and tapped the front of the bureau’s bottommost drawer. He meowed again, just to be sure I got the point.

“I’m on it,” I said, and sat down on the floor. “Grianne, a little light down here?” The second Merry Dancer swung into position. “That’s good.”

The drawer stuck a little as I tugged it free. The reason became clear when I looked at its contents: shoeboxes full of rocks. Dozens and dozens of rocks. They looked perfectly ordinary, like they’d been harvested from paths and flowerbeds around the knowe. I picked one up, squinting at it. “Okay, what the hell?”

“She used to pick those up,” Grianne said. The sound of her voice was surprising enough that I turned toward it, the rock forgotten. She shrugged. “When she was walking, and thought no one watched her, she would pick them up from wherever she happened to be. I never asked her why. I doubted she would give me an answer.”

“Yeah, probably not.” I was sickeningly sure I knew what the answer would have been, if Raysel had been compelled to tell the truth. She’d spent so many years lost in the darkness that she must have lived every day afraid the world would fall away again, leaving her alone in the nothingness. Rocks were little things, simple things, and they were *solid*. They were *real*. If they symbolized nothing else, they proved that she was in a place that actually existed.

I put the rock back among its brothers before gripping the sides of the drawer and giving it one last, firm tug. It popped loose and thudded to the floor. I checked the sides and bottom for hidden panels or secret documents, and then pushed it aside. Tybalt gave it a sniff before meowing and crouching to peer into the hole in the bureau.

“I got it,” I said. “If there’s nothing else, you can have thumbs again.”

He yawned, whiskers curling forward in what looked distinctly like amusement. Then he turned and walked away.

“Remember pants,” I called, and reached into the opening, feeling around. My fingers brushed the surface of a wooden box. I lifted it out.

Stickers obscured most of the varnished pine of the box itself, a mix that ranged from cartoon characters I recognized from Gilly’s childhood to more recent bumper stickers and band logos. I remembered giving her some of the older ones, treasures smuggled in from the mortal world. There was no rhyme or reason to the way they were layered; they seemed to have been slapped on entirely at random.

“What do you have?” asked Tybalt, stepping up behind me.

“I don’t know yet,” I replied. Putting down the box, I carefully removed the lid. “Did you remember pants?”

“Blessedly, yes,” said Etienne.

“Good.” The box was filled with scraps of paper that seemed as random as the stickers at first glance. I picked up the first one; a list of chores, written out by one of the house Hobs, clearly intended for a child. Half the chores were crossed off in purple crayon. I bit my lip, digging a little deeper. The crayon was there, about three layers down. I remembered bringing her that, too. “Oh, oak and ash.”

“What is it?” asked Tybalt.

“Her childhood.” I tipped the box out onto the floor. Lists of chores, crayon sketches, dried flowers taped to pieces of parchment . . . all the things I would have expected to find in the dresser drawer of the child she’d been when she was taken. One of the papers landed upsidedown, revealing a block of much tighter, more compressed writing. I picked it up, skimming quickly.

Rayseline’s handwriting never improved much beyond her initial childish scrawl, but it was legible. Almost too legible. She’d turned her scraps into a sort of disassembled diary, one that became more comprehensible as I flipped more and more of them over and shuffled them into something like chronological order.

“Toby?”

“Just a second.”

—understand what they want from me. I don’t think they understand what they want from me—

—light is always so bright here, the edges of things are so sharp, and they won’t stop talking to me TALKING TALKING TALKING I just want them to

all SHUT UP and let me THINK—

—don't even know my mother anymore—

Taken together, they painted the picture of a girl who was terribly angry, both younger and older than she was meant to be, and scared almost out of her mind by the world she'd been thrust back into. The “almost” was the first to go. Etienne was looking at me in silent curiosity, years of training forbidding him to interrupt. Wordlessly, I handed him the paper in my hand. It managed, in just five words, to be the worst one I'd found so far.

Sometimes I miss the dark.

Etienne read the slip of paper without comment, passing it to Grianne. Her face remained impassive, but her Merry Dancers flared a brief, sickly red, outward manifestations of her internal dismay. Tybalt was the last to read the paper. Like the others, he didn't say anything. Just handed it back to me, and waited.

“I want to see whether I can get these into any sort of real order,” I said, starting to shove scraps of paper back into the box. “I don't expect them to have a full blueprint for the kidnapping, but . . . well . . .”

“Any port in a storm,” said Tybalt quietly.

I glanced at him and nodded. “Yes. Exactly. Come on—let's finish searching this place. We have a lot to do before tomorrow.”

We combed through the rest of Rayseline's bedroom, and found nothing else that seemed relevant. She had a lot of dresses, any one of which probably cost more than I make in a year; she had a lot of broken toys, hidden in the bottom of her wardrobe. I left them where they were, unable to shake the feeling that I had done something wrong by finding them in the first place.

In the washroom, I found a vial of something pale blue taped to the bottom of her cured-oak bathtub. There was a ribbon taped next to it, holding a dozen shining silver needles in place. I was very careful not to touch their points as I peeled back the tape and added them to the small assortment of things to be taken away.

The needles were a chilling reminder that Raysel had been working with Oleander de Merelands when she tried to use poison to assassinate Luna. Just wondering what might be on those needles made me feel like running screaming from the room. We didn't find anything after that, and I was secretly glad; I'd had about as much as I could handle. In the end, I was grateful to take what we'd found—the box, the bottle, the needles, and the drawer of shoeboxes filled with rocks—and leave. I wanted to be gone. Even

the Queen's Court would be a pleasant change after seeing the prison Rayseline had made to replace the one she'd lost.

Tybalt carried the drawer, leaving me with the rest. I placed the needles and vial in the box of papers, waiting while Etienne opened a gateway back to the receiving hall. Tybalt cast a glance in my direction.

"Are you all right?"

"No," I said. "But right now, that's going to have to be good enough. Let's get the hell out of here."

"So soon?" He smiled wryly. "I was just becoming accustomed to the décor."

That was surprising enough to wring a laugh out of me. I was still laughing as I stepped through Etienne's gateway, feeling the familiar dip-and-weave as the knowe settled into its new configuration. Tybalt followed half a step behind. Grianne was already gone. I raised an eyebrow at Etienne.

"Sir Grianne had duties elsewhere," he said, closing the gate with a crisp motion of his hand. "I shall give her your regards, if you would like."

"Yeah, I'd like that." I looked down at the things I was holding. "Look, I hate to ask you to do this, but can you—"

"I will inform His Grace of our findings, and make him aware that you're removing them for further study." Etienne's gaze darted toward the throne room doors. "He'll ask where you'll be. He'll ask when you'll know anything."

"Yeah, well. I'm going to be at the Queen's Court at dusk tomorrow. She's agreed to let me question the staff. And at some point, I'm going to be visiting Saltmist. I need to search the boys' rooms."

"Can you be reached?"

"I have *got* to get a phone." The urge to rake my hair back was thwarted by the things in my hands. I settled for blowing my bangs out of my eyes. "If you need me, call the apartment. I'll check in regularly, and May can pass along any messages."

"I suppose that will have to be sufficient." Etienne sighed. "This is a twice-cursed mess, October."

"Oh, believe me, I know. But I'll do the best I can to bring it to a resolution that doesn't kill us all."

"I'll hold you to that," said Etienne, and bowed before turning to walk slowly toward the throne room doors. He was moving like that to give us time to get out of the area before Sylvester could call me back. I know an

escape when it's offered to me, and I took it without hesitating. Nodding toward the end of the hall to signal Tybalt to follow, I started briskly for the exit.

It was long past time to get moving. The world wasn't going to hold still while I caught up with it.



TWELVE

TYBALT WAITED UNTIL THERE WAS a corner and half a hallway between us and Etienne before asking, “So now what happens?”

“Now I call Walther and ask him to analyze the contents of the vial,” I said, nodding toward the box I was carrying. “I’m willing to bet that it’s poison, but I’d like specifics. I’m going to check with the Luidaeg to see if she’s arranged that meeting with Dianda. After that, I’ll head for the Queen’s Court, and . . .” I sighed. “After that comes whatever comes after that. I can’t be any more specific. A nap might be nice.”

“It’s a beginning,” said Tybalt. “Whatever comes next, we’ll confront it. There’s nothing more than that to be done.”

I smiled a little. “Deal.”

Tybalt smiled back. It was nice how normal that was starting to seem to me.

The stream of pages and courtiers heading for the ballroom grew thicker as we moved through the knowe. Their burdens had grown more obviously awkward; they’d had time to empty the lighter parts of the armory, stripping away the arrows, daggers, and chain mail shirts that blocked the serious weapons of war. I suppressed a shudder as a Candela staggered by, half-bent under the weight of a Bridge Troll-sized shield.

Purebloods are immortal, but they can be killed. Faerie wars used to decimate the population so much that entire races died out, becoming legends even to the fae. We kill each other when the excuse seems good enough—as if there’s any excuse good enough to justify killing something that was meant to live forever. The Luidaeg once said, in a moment of particularly black humor, that nature made us territorial and temperamental because otherwise we’d have overrun the world within five generations. Times like this made me wonder if she was right.

No one came to stop us or wave good-bye as we stepped out the exit and into the warm air of the mortal night. Everything smelled green, like the mustard flowers and tall grass that grew all throughout Paso Nogal Park. It was the kind of night that makes war seem impossible, even when you know that it's inevitable. I sighed and started down the hill, with Tybalt pacing alongside me. His presence was reassuring. I'm not used to being uneasy in Shadowed Hills, but with the threat of war so close at hand, I couldn't help but wonder about the shadows too deep for me to see into. Having Tybalt there made it easier; if anything attacked me, I wouldn't be fighting it off alone.

Crickets chirped in the tall grass, and pixies chattered in the distance, their tinkling-bell voices adding to the illusion that everything was business as usual in Shadowed Hills. That illusion died when we reached the edge of the parking lot, and I stopped just short of the pavement, swearing under my breath.

Quentin was sitting on the hood of my car, his increasingly copper-colored hair reclaiming some of its childhood gold in the glow of the streetlights. A rose goblin was curled in his lap. He stroked its yellow-gray back with one hand as it kneaded his leg, keeping the bulk of his attention on one of the more common pathways down the hill.

Tybalt followed my gaze, and blinked. "Perhaps he wishes to avoid heavy lifting?"

"Oberon only knows," I said, and started walking again. "Come on."

The rose goblin spotted us before Quentin did. It stood, rattling its thorns in greeting as it stepped off him. Quentin looked up, eyes wide. Then he slid off the hood, standing at something approximating attention. No longer in possession of a convenient lap, the rose goblin jumped off the car and trotted into the darkness.

"Quentin." I stopped in front of him, Tybalt a silent presence by my side. "Shouldn't you be emptying the armory with everybody else?"

"No, sir." Quentin looked me squarely in the eyes. "I should be right here." Sir? Uh-oh. "Why?"

"In times of war, all squires are required to attend their knights." He flashed a smile. "That's you."

I groaned. "Did Sylvester put you up to this?"

"Of course." Quentin shrugged. "That doesn't mean I argued. He says you've got more problems than just the war. I'm your squire. Your problems

are my problems.”

“You have a squire now?” asked Tybalt, sounding amused. “When were you going to mention this to me?”

“Oh, half an hour after never,” I said. “Quentin, this is too dangerous. You need to stay at Shadowed Hills.”

“So this is more dangerous than getting shot by a crazy woman?”

“Well, no, but—”

“Oh, so it’s more dangerous than stealing my human girlfriend back from the crazy Firstborn who turned her into a horse.”

“Not exactly, but—” I stopped. “You’re not going to let me talk you out of this, are you?”

Quentin smiled. “No, sir. I learned stubbornness from the best.”

Tybalt made a noise that sounded suspiciously like someone coughing to cover laughter. I shot him a dirty look. He coughed harder. Right. I sighed, handing Quentin the box from Raysel’s room before digging the car keys from my pocket. I dropped them on top of the box.

“Unlock the car and get in. Do *not* mess with the radio.”

Quentin’s smile became a grin. “Yes, sir!”

“And stop calling me ‘sir.’ ”

This time, Tybalt definitely laughed. I scowled at both of them. Still grinning, Quentin ducked away and moved to open the car. I turned my focus to Tybalt. “So.”

His laughter died, his expression sobering. “Is this the point at which you tell me that my company is no longer desired?” he asked.

“No. This is the point where I tell you I need your help.”

Tybalt blinked. Whatever he’d been expecting, it wasn’t that. “I am intrigued, and will hear your proposition.”

“All right. I . . .” I paused, glancing back toward the car. Quentin was in the passenger seat, clearly pretending not to eavesdrop as he buckled himself in. I returned my attention to Tybalt. “I have a lot to get done, and a limited amount of time to do it. I can only be in so many places at once.”

“Whereas I can be in quite a few,” he said slowly. “Am I correct in presuming that you want me to talk to the cats?”

“I do. Ask them if they’ve seen anything, *anything*, that might lead us to the Lorden boys—or to Rayseline. I’m going to do what I can at the Queen’s Court, but I don’t think that’s going to be enough. Not without some extra help.” Extra help, and one hell of a lot of luck.

He stepped a little closer, the air between us crackling with the hot pennyroyal and musk scent of his magic. “And if I do this for you?”

“I’ll owe you a favor.” I offered him a small smile. “Also, maybe we’ll all survive long enough for me to repay it.”

“Perhaps we will.” He looked at me gravely. “October . . .”

“Yes?”

Tybalt stopped, and shook himself, looking for all the world like he was trying to dry himself off after an unexpected dunking. “Nothing. Open roads, October; I’ll see you shortly.” He handed me the drawer before he stepped backward, drawing the shadows around his body like a veil, and was gone.

Well, that was one problem dealt with, at least for now. Cats get just about everywhere, and even the ones that aren’t Cait Sidhe are usually willing to cooperate with their King. If anybody would be able to find out more about what was going on, it would be the cats, and through them, Tybalt.

I put the drawer in the backseat before getting in the front and taking the keys from Quentin. “And we’re off.”

“Where did Tybalt go?” asked Quentin. “Did you guys have another fight? Because I don’t know *anybody* who fights as much as you two.”

“Your insight is appreciated, squire,” I said dryly, and started the car. “Aren’t you supposed to be respectful now, or something?”

He snorted.

“About what I thought,” I said, and pulled out of the parking lot.

Quentin spent most of the drive back to San Francisco changing the radio station and telling me about the war preparations at Shadowed Hills. They were worrisome, to say the least. Sylvester might believe this war could be avoided, but the Queen was going full speed ahead getting the Kingdom ready. I suppose it made sense—better to be prepared and not need it than unprepared and in serious trouble—but it felt almost like she *wanted* this war. And that scared me.

Having Quentin along was useful for at least one thing: I made him carry the drawer of rocks down the path to my apartment, while I took the substantially lighter collection of papers. The living room lights were on when we arrived, and the wards were open. I opened the door and stepped inside, calling, “Hey. I’m back.”

“Hey,” May replied. She was on the couch with Jazz’s head in her lap; the Raven-maid was sound asleep, black hair fanned out like glossy feathers on her girlfriend’s leg. She probably needed the rest. Keeping up with us

nocturnal folk can be exhausting. A masked psychopath was on the TV, vivisectioning a teenage girl in a way that was probably supposed to be new and inventive, but was nothing compared to watching a Kelpie shred a surfer.

“Sorry.” I closed the door, motioning for Quentin to put the drawer of rocks on the floor next to the umbrella stand. He did so, with obvious relief.

“Don’t worry about the noise—I don’t think a nuclear explosion could wake her right now.” May clicked off the TV. “You brought Quentin. That’s new.”

“Hi, May,” he said.

“Hi.” She twisted around to focus on me. “So what’s going on?”

“What do you mean?” I leaned over the back of the couch, putting the box of papers down before scooping Spike off the cushion where it was curled. It chirped before ramming its head, catlike, against my upper arm. I winced. “Ouch. Yes, I missed you, too.” Spike chirped again, sounding pleased. The sound caused the lump of fur on the beanbag chair to raise all three of its heads. Two were brown and cream, belonging to my half-Siamese cats. The third was russet-red, and belonged to Raj, currently lounging in the form of an Abyssinian cat.

“You left with Tybalt and came back with Quentin.” May said. “I’m a little worried. I’d appreciate it if you’d throw me a bone before I gnaw my fingernails to the quick.”

“Ah.” I sighed. “Well, we’re going to war.”

“I knew that.”

Raj yawned, blinking glass-green eyes first at me, then at Quentin. “Hi, Raj,” said Quentin. Raj mewed in answer.

I stayed focused on May. “I mean we’re *really* going to war. Sylvester’s pages are emptying the armory, and the Queen’s men are looking for Amandine so they can ask her to contribute.”

“Contribute *what*?” asked May, with horrified fascination.

“I don’t know. A headache?” I put Spike down. It shook itself, rattling like a maraca, and wandered over to sniff at Quentin.

“So where’s Tybalt?” asked May, causing Raj to turn and watch me intently.

“I asked him if he’d talk to the cats for me. People aren’t always careful to check the corners for strays before they open their mouths, and I need information.” I pointed to the drawer of rocks. “We need to get these to Walther.”

“These being . . . ?”

“Rayseline’s rock collection. I want him to see if there’s anything special about them.”

“No.”

I blinked. “No?”

“No, we’re not getting them to Walther.”

“Then who—?”

“Oh, I don’t know. How about that big Bridge Troll guy that’s always hanging around? You know, the one who talks to rocks for fun? I’m just putting that out there.”

“You mean Danny?”

“Yes, Danny. Who has, by the way, called twice to say that he hasn’t found anything, but he wants to help. Poor guy’s going to show up and start offering to get things down from high shelves if we don’t give him something to do soon.” May shrugged. “Interrogating a box of rocks is probably about right.”

“Okay. Good. That’s a good idea.” I leaned over again, gingerly removing the needles and vial from the box of papers. “I need you to start sorting through these scraps. Try to put them in order by the writing on the backs, not whatever happens to be on the front.”

She gave the box an uneasy glance. “Do I want to know?”

“It’s Raysel’s diary. Sort of.”

“Of course it is.” May shuddered, jostling Jazz. Jazz made a sleepy sound of protest and snuggled closer, eyes still shut. “What’s that you’re holding?”

“I don’t know yet, but these *are* going to Walther.” I ducked into the kitchen, returning with Raysel’s potential poisoning gear in a sealed Ziploc baggie. “I found them in Raysel’s bathroom.”

“Charming.” May wrinkled her nose. “How did things go with the Luidaeg?”

“She’s contacting the Lordens to arrange a meeting, and she made this for me.” Opening my jacket, I displayed the pin shoved through the lining. “This will let me visit the Undersea, somehow. I’m a little fuzzy on the details. That’s probably intentional. The Luidaeg likes to keep me guessing.”

“That’s because she knows you well enough to know that you wouldn’t go through with things if you knew what you were getting into,” said May, in an irritatingly logical tone. “I mean, really, if *I* wanted you to go underwater for an extended period of time, I’d want you to do as little thinking as possible

before you went under. You'd be less likely to freak out that way."

"Oh, that's real nice," I said, wrinkling my nose at her. "Aren't you supposed to be on my side here? A little support would be—"

The sound of the doorbell cut me off mid-sentence. Jazz sat up with a squeak, while Raj arched his back and hissed. Even Quentin jumped, hand going to his belt where—through the glitter of his human disguise—I could just see the outline of a scabbard.

I stalked to the door, wrenching it open. "What?!"

Connor didn't flinch. Putting his hands against the sides of my face, he stepped close and kissed me deeply. I grabbed his wrists, using the added leverage to pull myself closer to him. For a moment—a brief, sweet moment—I forgot we were on the verge of war. His skin was damp, and his lips tasted even more like salt than they usually did. He'd been in the water recently. Connor was the only one who could make that thought appealing to me.

He broke the kiss but didn't let go. Pressing his forehead to mine, he asked, "Are you all right?"

"Yes. No. Maybe. I don't know." I laughed unsteadily. "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to see you." He kissed me again. This one didn't last as long, but what it lacked in length, it made up for in sheer knee-weakening need. Finally, he pulled away, and said, "I'm also here on business. The Duchess wants you. Can you come?"

It took me a moment to realize he meant Duchess Lorden, not Luna. I stared at him before looking back to the others. Quentin was looking at the wall, cheeks and ears burning red.

May shook her head. "Never a moment's peace around here, is there? Go. Do your job. Also, hi, Connor. I'm glad I'm not the one who opened the door."

"Hi, May." Connor smiled at her, letting go of me. "Don't worry, I can tell the two of you apart."

"You have no idea what a relief that is. Now make sure she comes home." May turned her attention to Jazz, who was looking sleepily around the room. Dating a day-dweller isn't easy. I did it when I was with Cliff, and I didn't envy May the challenge.

The situation was getting away from me again. "I've got time," I said. "The Queen doesn't expect me until dusk tomorrow. Let's go."

“I’m coming,” announced Quentin. “I’m her squire.”

Connor blinked. “Okay, wow, I missed that memo. Sure, whatever. No one’s going to separate you from your knight.” He offered me a quick smile. “I brought a car.”

“Great. We’re definitely going to die.” I stepped onto the front porch, adding, “I’ll be back as soon as I can.” May waved after us, and Quentin closed the door behind himself as he followed us outside.

Connor’s car was a boxy white rental, the sort of thing even the tourists try to avoid. Even better, it was illegally parked in front of a fire hydrant. He unlocked the doors with a click of the keys, and all three of us got in.

I fastened my seat belt, checking it to make sure it was tight. Connor’s not the world’s worst driver—that honor’s reserved for May—but that doesn’t make him *good*. “Where are we going?” I asked, once I was sure I wouldn’t fly out of the moving car.

“Ghirardelli Square.”

I stared at him. “Are you serious?”

“We’re meeting Duchess Lorden at a secure location just down the street,” he said, and started the engine.

San Francisco is a city full of people who like it when our desserts come with a floorshow, and that makes Ghirardelli Square a San Francisco institution. Where else can you get expensive chocolate *and* the amusement of watching tourists try to eat sundaes bigger than their heads? Unfortunately, that means the Square gets filled to capacity with people who think it’s “quaint.” Driving in that area is a nightmare. It wasn’t likely to be as bad at four in the morning, but after living in the city as long as I have, I’ve developed a natural aversion.

I got increasingly tense as we drove toward the wharf area where Ghirardelli Square is located. Connor’s driving wasn’t helping. I closed my eyes after the third time he turned the wrong way on a one-way street. That was when Quentin started popping his knuckles, producing a nerve-grinding sound that made my teeth itch. Every time I thought he was finished, he started over again, as Connor drove us jerkily toward our destination.

I was starting to think there’d be a homicide before we got there, and I wasn’t sure which one of us was going to be the killer.

The car pulled to a halt, and Connor said, “We’re here.”

I opened my eyes.

We were parked on the street outside the Square, where the slope of the

hill was shallow enough to make parallel parking only somewhat dangerous, rather than actively suicidal. The lights in the surrounding shops were off, and the running lights of distant ships reflected off the smooth obsidian surface of the San Francisco Bay.

“Come on,” said Connor.

We went.

He led us down the empty, fog-shrouded street, heading for the patch of captive ocean on the other side. Instead of continuing down to the beach, he stopped at the bus shelter. Quentin and I stopped behind him, waiting for him to wave his hands and open some hidden entrance to an Undersea knowe. He did nothing of the sort. He just leaned up against the pole that marked the stop, waiting.

“What are we doing?” I asked.

Connor smiled. “Waiting for the bus.”

“Why did we leave behind your perfectly good car if it means we have to take the bus? If you say it was for the fresh air, I hit you.”

“You can’t find the place we’re going in a car. The bus stop, on the other hand, will work. I didn’t design the spell, but I’ve given up trying to work around it.” Connor shrugged as a bus pulled up. Grinning at my expression, he stepped backward, toward the opening doors. “My lady’s chariot awaits.”

“Whee,” I deadpanned, and followed him.

Connor boarded first, paying all three of our fares with a handful of quarters that would probably turn into sand dollars at sunrise. The driver grunted acknowledgment and waved us toward the back, not waiting for us to sit before he pulled away from the curb. I caught myself on one of the metal posts, swinging my ass into a seat. Quentin and Connor sat to either side of me.

There are always a few people on the all-night buses. They viewed our arrival with everything from exhaustion to mild suspicion, but didn’t say anything. Connor leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, and started talking, voice pitched low and urgent.

“You *have* to play nice. The rules she follows aren’t the ones you know, and the penalties for screwing with her are big. They don’t play games where she comes from.”

I nodded. He was speaking in generalities; anyone overhearing us would think we were going to meet his dealer or something. His advice was likely to be good. He’s always known how to play the system, and he’s a lot more

political than I am. Then again, that's how he wound up married to Rayseline Torquill. Maybe there are advantages to being politically inept. "So what do we—"

"Here's where we get off." Connor hit the signal button, bringing the bus shuddering to a stop. The other passengers watched in silence as we rose from our seats and filed out the rear doors.

The bus stop was about five blocks and a hell of a lot of hill from where we'd started. Looking down gave me a view of the ocean from a practically vertical angle. "Now where?" I asked, tearing my eyes away from the dizzying drop.

"This way." Connor pointed at a dingy storefront whose guttering neon sign identified it as "Bill's Seafood." It was the only thing on the block that looked open. A menu was taped to the window, next to a sign that offered a ten percent discount for anyone who wore a shirt and shoes but no pants. Cute. And risky, at least in San Francisco, where people would probably be more than happy to take the management up on their offer.

"Well, Quentin," I said, "it looks like we're having dinner." He offered an uneasy smile, and the two of us followed Connor inside.



THIRTEEN

THE DINER WAS SMALL ENOUGH to be claustrophobic, and the state of the floors and windows told me the owners weren't particularly worried about the Health Department. The smell of hot grease and fried fish was so thick that breathing it was probably enough to clog the average man's arteries. Pixies hovered above the counter, occasionally diving to seize chunks of deep-fried *something* from a platter that seemed to have been set out for that express purpose.

The man working the grill was portly, balding, and blue-skinned, with fringed gills ringing his neck. This had to be a purely fae establishment, like Home used to be—a business on the borderline between worlds, owned and operated without mortal intervention.

I glanced at Connor. “Could I find this place without you?”

Connor grinned. “Not unless Bill wanted you to.” He raised a hand in greeting to the man behind the counter. “Hey, Bill.”

Bill looked up, jerking a thumb toward the door at the back of the diner. “She’s waitin’ for you.”

“Got it,” said Connor. “Toby, come on.”

“Private room?” I asked, following. Quentin was only a step behind me, although his attention was diverted by the fish on the counter. Daoine Sidhe and knight-in-training or not, he’s still a teenage boy. “Do they serve food back there?”

Quentin shot me a grateful look. Connor nodded.

“Sure.” Looking back over his shoulder, he called, “Bill! Three seafood stews and a fish and chips platter to the back.” He glanced at Quentin and added, “And a chocolate milkshake.”

“Large,” said Quentin.

“Got it,” rumbled Bill. “Herself has already been here for a while. I’d

move it if I were you.”

“We’re moving,” said Connor. He pushed open the door to the back, shooting me a pleading look before stepping inside. I’d have had to be blind to miss the “please behave” in his expression.

I rolled my eyes, following him into the room, and stopped dead. “Holy . . .”

We could have been standing in the main dining room of a five-star restaurant, the sort that tourists would sell kidneys to get reservations with. The opposite wall consisted of three sets of massive sliding glass doors, leading out to a balcony that might, on a warmer night, have been a pleasant place to nurse a cocktail or two. They were open, letting a breeze blow in to circulate the air. The other walls were varnished redwood, and the tabletops were gray slate shot through with veins of white. An appetizer in a place like this would cost me a month’s rent. Maybe two.

Dianda Lorden sat alone at the sole occupied table. A half-empty plate of seafood linguine was pushed to one side, and she was sipping from a wineglass of cloudy liquid. Whatever she was drinking was probably heavily laced with salt. Merrow shunt salt almost as fast as they take it in. Normally, just breathing underwater would replenish her body’s supply. Up here, she needed to find other ways to add it to her diet.

The other local Duchess of my acquaintance, Luna Torquill, nearly died from salt poisoning not that long ago. The irony didn’t escape me.

Dianda seemed to be wearing a long blue dress and sitting in an oddly low chair. I looked again and realized that it was actually a short blue blouse; she was sitting in a wheelchair. That made sense. The wheels would give her a certain amount of mobility out of the water without the strain of being bipedal—and she was definitely *not* bipedal. Where her legs had been she now had a classic mermaid’s tail, scaled in jewel-toned blue, green, and purple. Her flukes trailed to brush the floor, flipping upward every few seconds in what looked like an involuntary motion. She couldn’t have been mistaken for human, or even for Daoine Sidhe . . . but oak and ash, she was beautiful.

She looked up, gaze going from me to Quentin, and finally to Connor, before she raised her eyebrows in silent question.

If anyone was going to justify Quentin’s presence, it was me. “He’s my squire, Your Grace.” On land, any invitation issued to a knight automatically includes their squires. I didn’t know if things worked differently in the

Undersea, but Connor hadn't said anything, and I trusted him to keep me from sticking my foot too far into my mouth.

Dianda's attention swung to me. "Countess Daye," she said, raising her wineglass for another sip. "Patrick couldn't join us. He was afraid you'd decide to knock him over again." A slight quirk of her lips told me she was joking. Maybe.

"I could have decided not to, Your Grace, but then he'd probably have been out cold until sometime next century." Elf-shot won't kill a pureblood, but it'll put a major crimp in their social life. "I appreciate your seeing me on such short notice."

"When the Luidaeg asks me to do something, I try to oblige." She set her glass aside. "Besides, I know you. You're Sylvester's changeling knight, or you were, until they decided to give you the Winterrose's County. You're the one who killed Blind Michael. The Undersea owes you a debt of gratitude for that. He took from us, too." She paused before adding, more quietly, "You're Amandine's daughter."

"All true," I admitted, walking over to her table. "May we sit?"

Dianda looked at me appraisingly before turning to Connor. "Take the kid to the front and feed him. Feed yourself, too. Those landers let you get way too thin."

"Quentin, go with Connor," I said, still facing Dianda.

"But—"

"You'll be between us and the door. Now go eat your fish. We'll be out in a minute."

"Come on," said Connor. Quentin doubtless wanted to stay and argue more, but his training won out; arguing with me in front of a Duchess would have been inappropriate. Two sets of footsteps moved away.

Dianda's flukes slapped the floor as the sound of the closing door echoed through the room. "Now you may sit."

"Good." I took the chair across from her. "Nice, um, fins."

"Legs are tiring when the water is distant. I need to save my strength."

"Right, about that . . . I want to find your sons. I need your help for that."

"Why don't you try asking your queen?" she asked mildly.

"Because I don't think she has them." I shrugged. "Everyone knows the Queen of the Mists hates me. She wouldn't let me anywhere near this investigation if she had your sons, because she knows that if I find them, you'll get them back. Not her, not anyone else, *you*. They won't be

bargaining chips.”

Dianda reached for her wineglass, picking it up and turning it in her hand. She seemed to reach a decision, because, without looking up, she said, “Their names are Dean and Peter. Dean’s older—he’s almost eighteen—and he’s less willing to trust strangers. He lost his best friend to a fishing boat a few years back, and it’s made him cautious.”

“There’s no way he’d have gone willingly?”

“Not unless it was someone he knew, and my demesne has been searched. We deal with conspiracies quickly and permanently in the Undersea. If it were one of my people, the boys would be home by now.”

“What’s Peter like?”

“Innocent. Sweet. He’s twelve.” Dianda’s expression was pained. “He likes the sun. Says it’s pretty. He takes more after my side of the family.”

“Takes after . . .” Dianda was Merrow, but Patrick was Daoine Sidhe. Daoine Sidhe can’t breathe water. “How do you keep Dean alive?”

Her wince told me I’d guessed right. “The Court alchemist brews a special potion for him and for his father.”

“How often does the dosage need to be refreshed?”

“Once a day.”

If Dean was being held underwater, he was either dead already or would be soon. The son of a mermaid, drowning. There was a sort of horrible poetry to the idea. “So we don’t have much time. Do you know anything that might help me find them?”

She paused, studying me as she put her wineglass down again. “You mean it, don’t you? This isn’t some crazy attempt to stall for time. You’re serious.”

“Even if you said that proving the innocence of the land Courts wouldn’t make you call off the attack, I’d look for your kids.” I shook my head. “Children aren’t pawns. They deserve better than this.”

Dianda offered her hand across the table. “That’s what I needed to hear.”

“Good.” I took her hand. Her skin was chilly; almost cold. I let go. “I’d like your permission to visit Saltmist. I need to see the place the boys were taken from.”

Dianda nodded. “How, exactly, were you planning to manage that?”

“I’d say ‘scuba gear,’ but I have something a little better.” I opened my jacket, showing her the pin. “The Luidaeg made this for me; she says it should let me visit your land safely. Well. Assuming we count ‘capable of surviving’ as safety. I guess you could still have me shot on sight.”

“The Luidaeg gave you that?” said Dianda. Her expression was torn, half-dubious, half-hopeful.

“More like made it for me, but yeah. She used my blood, her blood, the blood of the local King of Cats . . . it was a production. Things with her generally are.”

“I . . . she said I should meet with you. She didn’t mention that.” Her flukes slapped the floor again before she nodded. “All right. You are welcome in my waters.”

It was a ritual phrase, and that meant it carried the weight of law. I nodded the thanks I couldn’t give her. “Good. Now, I was wondering if—” I paused, eyeing the glass doors with sudden suspicion. The fog outside reduced visibility to mere feet. I was getting real sick of fog. “Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

“I’m taking that as a ‘no.’ ” I rose, starting for the wall. “Stay where you are.”

“Why?” She pushed herself back from the table.

“No, really, I—” She was already wheeling herself in my direction. I sighed. “Suit yourself.”

I stepped onto the balcony, noting the gate and three broad steps connecting it to the sidewalk below. The wood had been treated with some sort of varnish that kept it dry despite the fog, and made it easier for me to keep my footing. There are advantages to being in an establishment owned by the Undersea. Nothing gets wet unless they want it to.

The angle was all wrong, and the surrounding buildings were unfamiliar. It took me a moment to realize why; I was facing away from the direction my internal compass said I should be facing. Somehow, the balcony was oriented entirely in opposition to the rest of the building. If I squinted, I could make out the word “Leavenworth” on the nearest street sign. I shot a glance back at Dianda. “Leavenworth? That’s a mile from where we came in. And on the other side of the street.”

She shrugged. “We like our privacy.”

A lot of people like their privacy. Few like it enough to put the front and back rooms of a diner several streets apart. I was considering the geography when I heard the sound again, more clearly this time: a short, crisp snap, like a branch breaking . . . or a crossbow bolt being slotted into place.

“Your Grace?” I took a step back. “Do you have any guards here?”

Dianda stiffened, expression registering mild alarm. “Just Bill and Connor.

I was trying to be subtle.”

Bill and Connor were up front, which meant—issues of geography aside—they were probably distracted by Quentin, the appetite that walks like a squire. “You managed it,” I said. The fog was getting thicker. “Can you please stay where you are?” This time, she did as I asked. That was a small mercy . . . or maybe it was just that she was starting to pick up on the growing air of something not quite right.

My only warning before the shot was fired was an eddy in the fog to my left, a swirl of motion that could have been natural if not for the light glinting off something at its center. I hit the deck—literally—as the arrow whizzed through the space where my head had been a moment before. Dianda gasped. I lunged to my feet and ran back to her, scanning the room.

The corners were full of fog that was too thick to be natural. There were three more small snaps from the room behind us, as more bolts were slotted into place.

“Right,” I said, and leaned over to grip the handles of Dianda’s chair. “Your Grace, I just want you to know that I’m really, really sorry about this.”

“What?” she asked. Another snap sounded behind us. There wasn’t time to explain. I started to run.

Dianda was shouting for me to let go and stop acting like a crazy woman when we hit the balcony. I turned the chair to face the room while I fumbled for the latch on the gate, and her shouting got even louder, turning frantic. I glanced up to see what she was yelling about, and swore, redoubling my efforts to find the latch as four men stepped out of the fog. Three were Goblins, one was strange and bat-eared. They weren’t wearing the colors of any fiefdom I knew, but that mattered less to me than the loaded crossbows in their hands.

The latch wasn’t *there*. I kicked the gate as one of the Goblins opened fire. Dianda shrieked and ducked to the side of her chair, letting the bolt embed itself harmlessly in the padding. I boosted myself up and hit the gate with both feet as hard as I could. The gate swung open.

“Brace yourself!” I shouted, and stepped off the edge.

Going down a short flight of stairs is easy. Doing it while pulling a wheelchair full of agitated mermaid is a little harder. We thumped hard down to street-level, and I danced rapidly backward to keep Dianda from overbalancing. She was clinging to the arms for dear life, barely keeping her head from knocking against the back of the chair.

Shouts from the balcony told me we didn't have long. I backpedaled into the middle of the street. Dianda twisted around to stare at me, face white, eyes wide.

"Hold on," I said.

She must have realized what I was doing, because she shouted, "Are you *insane?!?*" as I started to run, pushing her along in front of me.

Like many major streets in San Francisco, Leavenworth runs up one side of a hill and down the other. It's at an angle sharp enough to discourage all but the most dedicated walkers, and joggers regard it as one of the lesser circles of Hell. We picked up speed at an impressive pace. The sound of feet behind us told me our lead was getting narrower, despite momentum and gravity combining to keep us moving ever faster.

The marina stretched out at the bottom of the hill, sparkling dimly in the darkness. I only saw one way we were going to reach the water alive. I just had to hope Dianda would forgive me for the indignity. Still clinging to the right handle of the chair, I moved to one side and sped up until I was running alongside it.

Dianda stared at me. "What are you doing? This thing doesn't have any brakes!"

I didn't have the breath left to shout. Leaning over her, I grabbed the left arm and hoisted myself onto her lap. Freed from the drag of my feet, the wheelchair started to accelerate, plunging straight down Leavenworth. Crossbow bolts zinged past. I folded my arms over Dianda's head, keeping her down, and ducked my own head as low as it would go. If we could avoid getting shot until we reached the bottom of the hill . . .

This entire escapade was breaking several rules of life in the mortal world, chief among them the injunction to never, *ever* go out in public without wearing a human disguise. I was still wearing my illusions. Dianda and the Goblins, on the other hand, were totally exposed. There wasn't time to worry about it. Hopefully, anyone who saw a woman riding a screaming mermaid in a wheelchair down Leavenworth at a quarter to five in the morning would just think they'd had too much to drink.

We were still accelerating. Gasping, I managed to ask, "Is this a good time for that visit?" Dianda stared at me, eyes widening in understanding, before she nodded.

We were almost to the bottom of the hill when I fumbled the scale out of my pocket and shoved it into my mouth. It dissolved like spun sugar, leaving

my tongue coated in a gummy film that tasted like strawberries. A taxi blared by, horn blazing as we hit the dock, shooting forward. Dianda screamed again, the sound magnified by proximity to my ears, and I heard a crossbow bolt whiz by as I yanked the pin from the lining of my jacket and jammed it into the meaty part of my right thigh with all the force I could muster.

Then we hit the water, and everything went black.



FOURTEEN

I ONLY LOST CONSCIOUSNESS for a moment. Then the cold shocked me awake, and I started thrashing, trying to find the surface. A crossbow bolt pierced the water next to my face, missing me by inches, and I froze, only to have Dianda grab me from behind and yank me deeper into the water. She stopped when we hit the rocky seabed, and we huddled there, with crossbow bolts flashing around us and failing, thankfully, to find their marks.

A wooden arrow the length of my arm sliced through the water like it was air. Dianda visibly relaxed, hair waving in front of her eyes like a strange new type of kelp as she pushed away from the seabed, pulling me with her. I didn't struggle. There's almost nothing I hate more than being in the water, and I'd expected to have a little more time to prepare myself before I let the Luidaeg's spell do whatever it was it was going to do to me. I just wasn't anticipating Goblin assassins with crossbows pushing me into a situation where the only viable exit involved riding a mermaid's wheelchair into the marina.

Sometimes I think my life is too complicated.

I gasped as we surfaced, more out of reflex than an actual need for air; we'd been under for several minutes, but my lungs didn't hurt. That was probably a bad sign. "Can you keep yourself above water?" asked Dianda, from over my shoulder. She was still holding me up, her chin nearly brushing the side of my neck.

"I have no idea," I said honestly, and shoved my sodden hair out of my eyes with one hand. Then I stopped, blinking at the scene in front of me. ". . . Whoa."

We were surrounded. Archers lined the dock on all sides, longbows raised. About half of them faced away from us, scanning for threats. The other half faced the water, arrows notched and pointed directly at . . . me. At least they

were aiming for the center of my body, where they'd be least likely to hit Dianda. The glitter of their human disguises couldn't stop me from breathing in the taste of their Selkie heritage: Dianda's previously absent guard.

"Where were you guys a few minutes ago?" I muttered.

"Milady?" asked one of the archers.

Dianda murmured, "I'm letting go of you now. Try not to sink." Then her arms were unwinding themselves from around my waist and she was swimming toward the dock, her flukes brushing my hip as she passed me. Those fins weren't just for show; a Merrow moving at full speed can overtake practically anything else in the ocean. In the water, in her native form, Dianda was the one in control.

Speaking of native forms . . . when she let me go, I bobbed a few inches lower in the water before recovering my equilibrium, and I realized, without any real surprise, that I couldn't feel my legs. Oh, I felt *something*, but I didn't have the necessary frame of reference to know exactly what it was. I raised my hand and spread my fingers. Thin webs connected them to the first knuckle, turned translucent by the harbor lights.

"Yeah," I said, to myself as much to anyone else. "That's about what I thought."

"Send half your men up the hill looking for the men who were shooting at us, and stand the rest down, Aine," said Dianda. The tallest of the female Selkies nodded and turned, gesturing toward Leavenworth. Half the archers turned and ran into the night, while the other half lowered their bows. That was a relief, anyway.

Dianda sounded wearier than I expected. I dropped my hand, studying her. I didn't see any blood. The gills lining her neck were open, revealing the pearly fringe inside. I sighed, relieved to see that our emergency trip down the hill hadn't been enough to get her hurt.

She must have heard me. She looked back over her shoulder, smiling thinly. "In case you were wondering, I am uninjured."

"Good." I looked down at the water. It was dark enough that I couldn't see what it might be hiding. That wasn't particularly reassuring. "Not to be alarmist or anything, but do you know where my feet are?"

Dianda's smile broadened, becoming genuinely amused. "You mean you don't *know*?"

"Not as such, no. The Luidaeg didn't tell me exactly what her charm would do, just that it would give me five hours to visit your Duchy without

drowning.”

“Take a look.” She grabbed the edge of the dock, flukes flashing just below the surface of the water as she pulled herself into a static position.

In for a penny, in for a pound. It wasn’t like I could change my mind at this point, even if I wanted to. Taking a breath I was starting to suspect I didn’t actually need, I stopped trying to stay above water, and went under.

It was easier to see than I expected, my eyes sorting through the darkness of the waves the way they would normally sort through the darkness of the world above. I could even see colors—green clots of kelp, mossy barnacles clinging to the pilings, the jewel-tone sweep of Dianda’s tail. And beneath me, in the space where my legs should have been, the crimson-and-copper scales covering my own tail. It wasn’t a surprise. That didn’t stop my heart from dropping into my stomach, and for a brief, terrible moment, I wasn’t sure I was going to be able to swallow my panic.

Well, at least you can’t drown, I thought dizzily.

That struck me as funny for some reason. I swallowed my laughter, since I wasn’t sure what would happen if I sucked in a lungful of water; the effort helped me get the panic back under control. I tipped farther forward, trying to get a good look at myself. The combination of buoyancy and the unfamiliar length of my body turned the motion into a somersault, fins flashing past my face just before I broke the surface.

Dianda watched me expectantly, waiting for my reaction. The Selkie archers were doing much the same. At least they’d lowered their bows when given the command to stand down. I pushed the hair out of my eyes, tucking it behind my ears. My pointed ears—I guess there’s no point in wearing a human disguise if you’re going to run around being a fish from the waist down.

“Well,” I said, “that’s different.”

Dianda raised her eyebrows. “You’re fairly calm.”

“I don’t think I have a choice just now.” I felt better for knowing what was going on, even if the Luidaeg and I were going to have stern words later about her turning me halfway back into a fish without more in the way of an explicit warning. “I’m sorry about the whole, um, riding thing. It seemed like a good idea at the time.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Dianda waved a hand. “I saw them shooting at us. Still, if you ever do something like that again without telling me first, I’m not calling off my archers.”

“Noted.” I gave the circle of Selkies another look. I didn’t recognize any of them, but a few looked similar enough to Connor that they might have been family. “So now what?”

“Now I take you to see my Duchy. If you can find my sons and prove the land Courts didn’t do this, maybe I’ll call off the war. No promises. And if I find out you’ve played me . . .”

“If I were playing you, I’d have toes right now.” Footsteps came pounding down the dock. One of the Selkies turned, starting to raise her bow, and stopped, lowering it again. I allowed myself a small smile. “I think I hear my knights in shining armor.”

“Make that singular,” she said, relaxing. “One of them is mine.”

The footsteps were joined by a second set, and the sound of panting. “You need to work out more,” said Quentin, as the top of his head came into view.

“Hey, guys.” I waved, turning to face them.

Connor staggered to a stop, bracing his hands on his knees as he struggled to breathe. “Hello, Your Grace,” he wheezed, toward Dianda, before looking anxiously in my direction. He knows how much I hate water. “Toby???”

“Hello, Connor.” Dianda twisted her tail around one of the dock supports like a sea horse, letting it anchor her as she leaned back in the water. It made sense; given the way the water moved, Merrow had to have a way to keep from drifting. I never really thought about it before, and now I was taking notes. “I take it you’re both unhurt?”

“Yes, Your Grace.” His worried eyes didn’t leave my face. “We came when we heard the shouting, but—”

“You couldn’t have helped,” I said, swimming over to join Dianda. Quentin stepped up next to him and gasped. My fins must have shown through the water. So much for breaking the news gently. “Hey, Quentin. How was the fish?”

He swallowed hard, composing himself before he said, “You’re in the water.”

“Yes. Gravity made sure of that.”

“And you have . . .”

“Fins. You can blame the Luidaeg for that part.” Movie mermaids are always slapping their tails against the water to make a point, or just to show off how much of the special effects budget went into designing them. I would have done it, but I couldn’t think of how to start without con-cussing myself on the dock in the process. “I’m going to visit Saltmist now. Since I’m pretty

sure I'd be a little awkward on land at the moment."

Connor's eyes went wide as he finally caught up with current events. "Wait . . . you mean you . . . ?"

"I am going to need an uncountable number of cups of coffee when this is over," I replied, and turned to Quentin. "Call Danny. Tell him you need a ride back to the apartment. I'd take you with me, but I'm pretty sure it wouldn't work."

"I understand," he said. "Do I need to stay at the apartment?"

"Not if you find something better to do—visit the Luidaeg, go help Walther, whatever. Just make sure someone knows where you are, so I can find you when I get back. And make sure Danny comes inside—May has a job for him."

"Okay." Quentin took a step back, looking anxious. "Please don't get killed?"

"I'll do my best."

"This is lovely, but my children are still missing." Dianda pushed away from the dock, flukes unfurling in a swirl of green and purple. "Connor, come on. I'll need you to help show our guest around the knowe."

"Um. Right," said Connor, and dove, fully clothed, off the dock.

That made me think of something I hadn't thought of until that moment: "Hey, what the hell happened to my pants?"

"Among many other excellent questions," said Dianda. She offered me her hand. "Come along. I'll pull you."

"I appreciate it," I said. I couldn't figure out how to take her hand without crushing the webbing between her fingers—or between my own—and so I grabbed her wrist, holding tight.

"Don't hold your breath," she advised, and pulled me under.

The strange lightness under the waves remained, making it almost easier to see below than it had been above. Dianda's scales cast their own faint, luminous glow. Even if she hadn't been pulling me, I wouldn't have lost sight of her. Smiling encouragingly, she tugged me forward, away from the dock, into the open sea.

Splashes from behind us signaled the remaining Selkie archers entering the water. In a matter of seconds, the sea was alive with harbor seals, their silver-and-charcoal coats turning them into virtual ghosts. I couldn't pick Connor out of the throng. I've seen him in seal form dozens, if not hundreds of times, but all the swimming Selkies looked alike to me. Anyway, I was preoccupied

by the effort of keeping up with Dianda, something that got harder when I tried to think about what I was doing. It was like my body knew how to swim, but my brain complicated everything by insisting I was doing it wrong.

Thinking too much also had the unpleasant side effect of making me realize that I wasn't actually breathing. Gills just aren't the same. Finally, I stopped thinking and let myself go, trusting Dianda to get us where we were going. Things got better after that.

I'm no oceanographer, but I know enough to know that it's supposed to get darker as you go deeper. That wasn't happening here. Instead, we swam through a series of small temperature changes, wafting, diffuse things that would signify the transition between the mortal and fae worlds if they appeared in a land knowe. The fish swimming by got flashier, all bright colors and flamboyant patterns of the sort I usually only saw on the Discovery Channel. The Selkies wove a complicated pattern around us, acting as escort and guard. And in the middle of it all swam Dianda, cutting through the water with me firmly in tow.

Ahead of us, the Selkies began to vanish. Nothing was taking them, and they weren't swimming away; they were swimming forward, and then they were gone, moving into some other sea. Dianda looked back, nodding her head toward the place where the Selkies disappeared. I nodded, bracing myself as much as I could while still swimming faster than a man could run. Dianda smiled and put on a burst of speed, towing me into a patch of water so cold it was like liquid ice. The world twisted—

—and we were through, entering an ocean full of moonlight. I thought it was easy to see in the mortal ocean. I was wrong. It was easy to see *here*, where the light clung to everything and the shadows were all but nonexistent. Even the saltwater tasted sweet, with no trace of pollution or modern industry. We were in the Summerlands sea.

An elegant stone palace decked in mother-of-pearl and patches of living kelp rose from the seafloor ahead of us, cradled in rings of multicolored coral. It had been constructed with no regard for gravity, resulting in dozens of tapering towers, high balconies that went nowhere, and wide windows instead of doors. Why bother building to constraints that don't apply to you?

Dianda kept pulling me forward. I realized she was singing. It was a high, sweet sound, barely this side of whale song—and the sea answered her. Dozens of fae poured from the palace windows, swimming out to join our escort. They ranged from the expected Merrow and Sirens to stranger things,

women with the lower bodies of octopi instead of the standard Merrow's tail, men with slick, blue-black skin and the smooth fluidity of eels. Many of them belonged to fae races I had never seen before, Undersea denizens for whom the land held no attractions.

They surrounded us in a coruscating curtain of living bodies and brightly-colored scales. Most were wearing garments that were equally bright, like they were competing with the ocean around them. As if anything could have managed that. This sea was too wild and strange for anything to have ever truly competed with it.

All the sea fae were singing, their individual pitches and melodies joining with Dianda's into a single sweet chorus that didn't make a bit of sense. Words were impossible under the water—at least without magic—and it made sense that they would have found a way to fill that gap. I could even see a few of them signing to each other, waving their hands or tentacles in quick, fluid gestures that didn't look a damn thing like American Sign Language. I hoped they all spoke English, and that we'd be in a place where talking was an option, or this visit was going to be like a pantomime in Hell.

The palace was just ahead of us. Dianda let go of my hand, gesturing for me to follow as she swam for the nearest window. Several members of our impromptu escort swam in ahead of her. The rest peeled off to the sides, leaving space for me to enter.

As if I could do anything else? After coming this far—out of my world, literally out of my element, and even out of my own natural form—following her through the window was no big deal. I twisted around to make sure I wouldn't catch my flukes on the sill, and swam through. This was definitely turning out to be an interesting night.

Hell, maybe I'd get lucky, and someone in the Undersea would know what coffee was.



FIFTEEN

THE ROOM WE SWAM INTO made the grand ballroom at Shadowed Hills look tiny. The gleaming mother-of-pearl walls were mostly obscured by elaborate loops of coral shaped like an abstract jungle gym. I thought it was purely decorative until half the fae in our escort swam off and settled themselves among the nooks and handholds. Several of the octopus-merfolk actually suspended themselves from what should have been the ceiling, hanging there and watching us as we passed.

“Creepy,” I muttered—or would have, if I’d been above water. As it was, I just managed a few bubbles. I scowled, swimming after Dianda. She was moving more slowly now that we were out of open water. That was a good thing; I would never have been able to keep up with her otherwise.

The hall paid no attention to conventional geometry, twisting and looping like a piece of tangled string, until I could only tell up from down by the direction people’s hair floated. The ones that *had* hair, anyway. I’m used to fae with feathers or scales or even willow branches in place of hair. Kelp, coral, bristling sea urchin spines, and lionfish fins . . . those were new to me.

Dianda doubled back to grab my wrist before diving upward into a long passage. She gathered speed as she went. I did the same, or as close to the same as I could manage. This “swimming” thing was harder than it looked. At least it was keeping me from thinking too hard about the fact that I was underwater, and worse, actually *breathing* water, just like I did in the pond.

Even that brief acknowledgment of the fact that I was surrounded by water was enough to make me start panicking again. I surged forward, nearly smacking my tail against the walls, and actually pulled even with Dianda for a brief second. She nodded approvingly, jerked me closer, and sped up.

Her momentum carried us out of the tunnel into a shallow blue-watered pool that spread out around us like a basin. I gasped as we broke the surface,

as much from reflex as from the actual need to feel air, real *air*, filling my lungs. Something tickled the sides of my neck; my gills, closing themselves now that they weren't needed. Because that wasn't creepy or anything.

My hair fell into my eyes as soon as my head was out of the water. I shoved it aside and took a good look at the room around us. It was built much more along the lines I've come to expect from buildings: walls that went straight up, rather than curving and twisting in odd angles, and ended at a flat ceiling. Everything looked like it had been carved from a single massive piece of pink coral, but aside from that, it was all *normal*. If it weren't for the pink walls and the lack of windows, I could easily have believed that we had somehow managed to swim into a land knowe.

There was even furniture, clearly designed for use by human-shaped people. It looked like it had been scavenged from old sailing ships, creating a sort of "Jules Verne meets Martha Stewart" design aesthetic. Even the chandeliers appeared to have been fashioned from old ship's wheels, with glowing anemone-things in place of candles.

Dianda paddled to the edge of the pool and pulled herself out of the water, twisting into a sitting position. All she needed was a hairbrush and a ship to sink and she could have passed for a Waterhouse painting. "I'm betting you don't know how to do this."

"Since I don't know what 'this' is, you're probably right." The water got shallower as I got closer to Dianda. I stopped trying to swim and put my hands on the bottom of the pool, "walking" myself along. "What are we doing?"

"We're going to see my sons' rooms. That means we need to get out of the water." Dianda frowned thoughtfully. "Most of our children figure this out on their own. I'm going to try something that works with the ones who don't. Close your eyes."

"Okay." I closed them.

Dianda's hands closed on my shoulders. "Breathe in," she said, the smell of water lilies and amber rising around us. "Think about walking. Think about the mechanics and the structure of walking. The feet, ankles, and calves. The knees, thighs, and hips. Think about how nice it would be to stand. How strange, to see the world from such a different angle . . ."

I furrowed my brow, trying to do as I was told. I remembered walking. I also remembered running for my life—something that seems to happen more frequently than is necessarily good for me. I remembered May tickling my

feet to get me to move when she wanted the couch, and the feeling of getting dressed in the morning, jeans and socks and shoes. I remembered being the right shape, rather than the wrong one. My own magic rose, sharp, sweet, and familiar.

“You can open your eyes now.” Dianda pulled her hands away. “Also, you may want to get out of the water.”

“Huh?” The spell broke as I twisted to look at myself. It was easier than I expected; I’ve had years to practice rolling over in my natural form, and that’s what I was looking at. Complete with absolutely soaked jeans and running shoes. I blinked, once, and pulled myself out of the pool as fast as I could, just in case the Luidaeg’s charm decided to reassert itself in the presence of water.

I had to fight the urge to shake myself like a wet dog as I stood. The webbing was still stretched between my fingers—the Luidaeg’s charm was apparently designed to let me do all the normal Merrow things for the duration, including acquiring feet. That was convenient.

Dianda finished her own transformation and stood, the smell of amber and water lilies fading. She had also acquired clothes when she transformed, adding a short blue skirt to the blouse she was already wearing. Her feet were bare, and her clothes were dry. I guess that’s one of the perks of being a real Merrow, rather than a Merrow-wannabe on a day pass: you’re dry whenever you want to be.

“We can get you some dry clothes,” said Dianda, frowning at the puddle rapidly forming under me. Even her hair was dry. That was just *not* fair. Splashes in the pool behind us signaled the arrival of our Selkie honor guard. “Welcome to Saltmist.”

“Love what you’ve done with the place,” I said, looking unabashedly around the room as I peeled off my waterlogged leather jacket. “I admit, this isn’t exactly what I pictured when I thought ‘underwater Duchy.’ ”

“We’ve always had some air-filled areas, for the sake of the Selkies and other air-breathers among us. It’s a necessary part of our culture.” Dianda began walking, gesturing for me to follow. I glanced behind me, scanning the emerging Selkies for Connor. He smiled when he saw me looking. I smiled back before turning and walking quickly after Dianda.

The sound of my wet shoes slapping against the coral floor made us both grimace. I looked at Dianda apologetically. “Sorry.”

“Oddly, water damage isn’t a big issue down here.”

“No, I guess it wouldn’t be.” I looked around again. “It makes sense that you’d need some areas with air. I mean, we have freshwater fae on the land who need to spend a certain amount of their time in the water, or else they’d just dry up.”

“Exactly. No part of Faerie is ever completely independent from any other.” Dianda slanted a smile my way as Connor half-walked, half-trotted up to pull even with us. He was trying to look nonchalant about it. He was failing, rather spectacularly. “But I don’t think that’s a bad thing, do you?”

“No. Not really.” The water dripping from my hair was running into my eyes. I wiped it away with one hand. “Can I get a towel to go with those clean clothes?”

“Absolutely. Connor?” Dianda looked past me to him. “Would you go tell Helmi that we have a guest in need of towels and clothing? Tell her the guest is female, and approximately my size, but should not be dressed in Ducal colors.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” said Connor, expression telegraphing exactly how much he did *not* want to run off and leave me alone with a bunch of unfamiliar sea fae. He made no move to go.

Disobeying your liege is a bad idea, even when you only do it by moving too slowly. I flashed him a smile, and said, “It’ll be so nice to be dry again. I’m seriously over this whole ‘wet’ thing.”

“I’ll be back as soon as I can,” he said, with utter sincerity, before turning and trotting toward a door to the left of the pool.

“This way,” said Dianda. She started walking faster, setting a pace that was hard for me to match in my dripping jeans and squelching shoes. “I assume you’d like to change before I show you their rooms?”

“You assume correctly. I mean, I probably can’t compromise anything by dripping on it, but . . .”

“But it’s better not to risk it,” said Patrick, emerging from an adjoining hall. “Hello, October. I’m pleased to see that you were able to arrange a visit.”

“Yeah, well. We can blame the Luidaeg for that one. Hello, Your Grace. I’d bow, but I think I’d fall on my ass if I tried it before I get some dry shoes on.”

“Entirely fair.” Patrick fell into step on Dianda’s other side. Neither of them broke stride as he laced his fingers with hers. “What do you think of our humble home so far?”

“It’s very . . . pink,” I said carefully.

Dianda laughed. “Why is that the first reaction of every lander that comes here?”

“Because it’s very pink,” said Patrick. He kissed her cheek before releasing her hand and moving to open the door ahead of us. “Ladies first.”

“So kind.” Dianda smiled at him fondly and stepped into the darkened chamber beyond. Lights flared to life in the chandelier overhead as soon as her foot crossed the threshold, and continued to spread around the edges of the room. By the time Patrick stepped through, closing the door behind him, the entire room was lit, and I was staring.

The walls were glass, broken only by coral doorframes, making the circular room feel like the world’s largest aquarium. Even the ceiling was transparent, a fact that was reinforced when a manta ray the size of a minivan floated serenely by above us. The ray was one of the more normal sea creatures in evidence. Impossible fish swam everywhere I looked. Sea dragons three times the size of the one in the Luidaeg’s room chased each other through a patch of kelp, while a herd of hippocampi grazed on a nearby reef under the watchful eye of a black-and-white mermaid who appeared to be the result of crossing a Tuatha de Dannan with a killer whale.

Dianda followed my gaze and said mildly, “That’s Anceline, one of our herders.”

“What is she?” I asked, before realizing how rude the question really was. I blanched. “I mean—”

“I asked the same thing when I first came here,” said Patrick. “She’s a Cetace. They rarely come to the surface. They prefer to stay deep, where there’s less chance they’ll encounter human whaling ships.”

That led to horrifying mental images I didn’t want to explore further. I nodded. “I understand. She’s beautiful.”

“I’m sure she’d be pleased to hear you say so,” said Dianda.

I was trying to figure out whether she was serious or not when one of the coral-rimmed doors opened and one of the octopus-people slipped through. This one’s lower body was the shocking red of a maraschino cherry, and her upper body was pure Irish, with pale, freckled skin, and corkscrew curls the color of her octopus half. She moved with remarkable efficiency, her tentacles seeming to find and discard purchase independently. She stopped and bowed when she was roughly six feet away. That was also a fascinating process, since it involved twining her tentacles into an elaborate knot while

she bent forward.

“Your Graces,” she said. The curtain of her hair almost concealed the bundle of fabric she was clutching against her chest.

“Cephali,” murmured Patrick. I flashed him a relieved smile.

“Rise, Helmi,” said Dianda. “Helmi, this is Countess October Daye, our guest from the land. She’s here to help us find Dean and Peter.”

Helmi’s eyes widened, and she stared at me as she straightened. “Truly?”

“Truly,” said Patrick. “Can you take her to change, and then bring her to us?”

“Yes, Your Grace. Absolutely.” One of Helmi’s tentacles whipped out and wrapped itself around my wrist. I barely managed to keep from yanking away. She didn’t hold tightly; it was more like the tugging of a toddler. “Come with me, Your Excellency?”

It took me a moment to remember that “Your Excellency” meant me. “Sure. And you can call me Toby.”

“As you wish, Your Excellency.” Helmi began moving back the way she’d come, pulling me along in her wake.

“We’ll see you shortly,” called Dianda.

“Right!” I answered. Then Helmi opened the door and pulled me into a small, cluttered room that looked reassuringly familiar, despite the pink coral walls. I guess a changing room is a changing room, no matter where you go.

Helmi’s bearing changed dramatically in the absence of her lieges. She released my wrist and straightened, tapping her tentacles against the floor as she studied me. “It will do,” she said finally, and extended her bundle in my direction. “If they’d given me the name of your fiefdom, I might have found you visitor’s motley in the appropriate colors, but it will do.”

“Honestly, right now, *anything* will do, as long as it’s dry,” I said. I hung my leather jacket on what I presumed was a drying rack before taking the bundle of fabric and rolling it out atop a nearby chest. The outer two layers were towels. Inside was a short green dress that looked suitable for spending a day at the beach, dry underclothes, and a matching green headband for my hair. No shoes. I suppose shoes never became a high priority in the Undersea, since half the population didn’t need them.

“Is it suitable, Your—Toby?”

“It’s perfect.” I peeled off a towel and began vigorously rubbing my hair. “Just give me a minute to dry off before I go changing. Do you need to be somewhere?”

“Not at the moment.”

“Good. Mind if I ask you a few questions?”

Helmi’s tentacles beat a complex pattern against the floor before she asked, “Is this in service of returning the young masters to us?”

“Yeah. It is.”

“Then you may ask me to cut the very limbs from my body, and I will do it. Only promise me it serves toward their return, and it is yours.”

That was . . . dramatic. I stopped rubbing and blinked at her. Judging by her expression, she was serious. “Okay.” I resumed drying my hair. “What do you know about the wards here? How are they configured?”

“They’re mastered and maintained by the Asrai. Clever things, the wards are.”

In my experience, “clever” is never a good thing where wards are concerned. Clear, concise instructions are the key to not waking up with something nasty under your bed. “Clever how, exactly?”

“Well, Your—Toby, I don’t know how it is on land, but in the sea, most of us are migratory. The Cetacea follow the herds, and the Sirens follow their kraken. The Asrai don’t move much, but then, they wouldn’t, would they?” She rattled off the names of unfamiliar fae races with easy familiarity; to her, they were as normal as Cait Sidhe and the Tuatha de Dannan were to me.

I, on the other hand, was starting to feel like I needed some sort of field guide. “So you move around a lot. Have these, uh, Asrai come up with a way to shortcut adding people to the permanent wards?” Casual wards like the ones on my apartment are constructed and taken down daily. They’re generally not set when either May or I are home, since we don’t see the point in wasting the magic. Places like Shadowed Hills tend to have more permanent wards, at least on certain areas, ones set to allow people who have permission to pass, and stop the people who don’t. Modifying them is a long, laborious process, which is why I don’t bother trying to construct that kind of protection.

“Oh, yes. The wards are set to allow those of us who live here to come and go as we please, and to admit anyone who carries an appropriate token.”

“Okay. So could someone have stolen one of these tokens?”

“Oh, no. They’re enchanted to break at once if taken from their rightful owners.”

There went one theory. I put down my towel. “And everyone migratory has one of these tokens?”

“All but the messengers.”

I picked up the green dress, stepping behind a screen of what looked like woven kelp. “Messengers?”

“The seal-kin.”

“Do you mean the Selkies?” I pulled my shirt off over my head, a slow certainty blossoming in my chest.

“Aye,” she confirmed. “They’re easier and more difficult at the same time, because they’re skins, not souls.”

“Right.” I unbuckled my knife belt. Peeling off my jeans took a bit more effort. “So the wards are keyed to Selkie skins, not individual Selkies?”

“Yes, Your Excellency!” said Helmi, sounding surprised and delighted by this strange display of logic from one of the land fae. “The skins pass hands with such frequency, it seemed best to allow their bearers to come and go easily. No one would want to present the Selkies an unfair barrier, given their limitations—and besides, they’re needed all along the coast. It would be quite a bundle to ask them to carry, if they needed a token for each of the knowes.”

“Uh-huh.” Selkie skins “pass hands” every few decades at the most—Connor is older than I am. That must make them almost as transitory as humans to a true immortal. “How many Selkies pass through in a given week?”

“Five, eight, maybe, if there’s news to be passed along.”

“And how many of them do the guards stop for questioning?” The green dress was made of a soft, cottony material. I shrugged it on, pushing my salt-matted hair back with the headband, and belted my knife around the outside of my hips. It might spoil the line of my borrowed attire, but at least I wasn’t hiding the fact that I was armed.

“None. Why would they? The Selkies travel on legitimate business. Or do you not have messengers where you dwell?”

I stepped out from behind the screen. Helmi’s expression was one of honest curiosity, like this was exactly the sort of barbarism she expected from land-dwellers.

“We do, but they’re not quite as . . . standardized.” I smoothed my skirt with the heels of my hands. It was definitely a step up from my usual Old Navy couture. And I just had to go to the bottom of the sea to get it. “I think I’m ready to go back.”

“Surely.” Helmi rotated her entire body, tentacles slapping the floor as she turned, and then made her way back to the door we’d entered through. She

knocked three times before opening it, revealing a room that was absolutely *not* the one we'd been in before. For one thing, this one had walls—wooden ones, no less, making them seem strange and exotic after all the coral.

Dianda and Patrick were standing near one wall, arguing quietly with Connor. All three looked up when Helmi and I approached. My bare feet were silent against the floor. Her tentacles weren't. Connor's eyes lit up when he saw me, and he took a half-step forward before he remembered that he was in the presence of his liege and stopped, standing at sudden attention.

"You clean up well," said Dianda, giving me a once-over.

"Helmi was a great help." Another careful two-step in the dance of avoided thanks, complete. "Your Graces, Connor, I wanted to verify something Helmi told me. Is that possible?"

Dianda nodded. "Certainly. What did you want to know?"

"Is it true that the wards on this place are set to admit Selkies with no verification of identity or allegiance?"

"Yes." Dianda frowned quizzically. "All the Undersea Duchies set their wards this way. Selkies act as messengers, and messengers are honor-bound to do no mischief in fiefdoms other than their own. Even in times of war, Selkies are safe guests."

"Right." I turned to Connor. "Am I a Merrow?"

"What? No!"

"But if I asked the wards right now, would they say I was a Merrow?"

"I . . ." He paused, looking confused.

Patrick, on the other hand, looked horrified; Patrick, who was born in the land Courts, and knew how they operated. He'd been in the Undersea for a few hundred years, but there are some things you never forget.

"Please tell me you're not saying what I think you're saying," he said.

"I can't. Because I think someone used a stolen Selkie skin to get past your wards." I met Dianda's eyes. It was harder than I expected it to be. "I'm afraid your sons weren't the first ones taken in this war."



SIXTEEN

TO HER CREDIT, DIANDA didn't flinch. Eyes narrowing, she asked, "Who could have done this?"

"Moving past the part where I say 'someone who was willing to steal your children to provoke a war,' it would have to be someone who understood the way the Undersea operates. Someone who understood the way *Selkies* operate." I let my eyes drift to Connor. He was staring at me, an expression of terrified understanding on his face. "Somebody who understood that a Selkie is the skin, and not the one who wears it."

"Oh, Oberon," he whispered.

Patrick frowned, following my gaze. "Connor?"

"Well?" I asked.

"It . . ." Connor took an unsteady breath. "She knows how the skins work. I told her. Showed her, even. I was trying to make her understand me a little better. I thought if we were going to be stuck with each other for a few hundred years, we should at least find a way to be friends."

"Showed who?" asked Patrick.

Connor didn't say anything. So I said it for him.

"Rayseline Torquill," I said. "His ex-wife."

"Connor, what have you done?" Dianda's question was raw, aching, a mother yearning for impossible answers.

"What you told me to do!" he said. I barely recognized the desperation in his voice. "I married her because you told me to. I tried! I tried to court her, to woo her, but she couldn't be courted—she was too far gone, and I . . . I tried!"

"It's not his fault," I said, bringing Patrick and Dianda's eyes back to me. That wasn't comfortable, but it was better than having them fixed on Connor. "She was more broken than anyone knew, even her parents. He couldn't

know what he was doing when he tried to make the marriage work. If you're going to blame anyone, blame whoever broke her in the first place. And maybe it wasn't Raysel. There are other options."

"Who?" asked Dianda.

I didn't have an answer for that.

Patrick broke the silence. Indicating the nearest door with a sweep of one hand, he said, "This is Dean's room. Is there anything you'll need?"

"Let's find out." I reached for the knob, pausing just before I grasped it. "Is there anything I need to know about the wards?"

"There aren't any."

I turned to blink at Dianda, surprised enough by her reply that I allowed my hand to complete its descent to the doorknob. Nothing shocked me. She was telling the truth; there were no wards on the private quarters. "What? Why not?"

"We're inside the knowe. Wards have never been needed here."

"Things are different on the land," I said, and opened the door.

Dean's room was surprisingly normal, and could have passed for Quentin's or Raj's with a few alterations. A dark blue rug softened the polished wood floor, matching the curtains around the single window, which was shaped like—and possibly made from—a ship's porthole. A tall wardrobe was shoved against one wall, and the bed was beneath the window. The rest of the available wall space was devoted to bookshelves, most of them groaning under the weight of the books stacked there.

"Stay here," I said, starting to step inside. Dianda's eyes widened. I raised my hand to stop her protest. "Please. I know a lot of people have been through here, but I need to at least try."

"Let her, Di," said Patrick, putting a hand on her arm.

"All right." She subsided, leaning against her husband. "Proceed."

I nodded before turning and walking slowly into the room. No blood had been shed here. That was a small problem—I work best when I work with blood—but not an insurmountable one.

Most people assume an unfamiliar scene is harder to work than a familiar one, since you won't be able to tell what's out of place. Those people are both right and wrong. I couldn't tell what was out of place, and I definitely couldn't tell you if anything was missing, but at the same time, I didn't have any preconceptions about what was supposed to be where. A familiar scene can become overwhelmingly strange when it's disturbed in some way, while

unfamiliar scenes are strange to begin with. More importantly, people fill in the blanks when they look at a familiar room, inserting objects where they think they belong. Their eyes can just skip over things. That's dangerous—more dangerous than not knowing what it's safe to disregard. Given a choice, I'll take the unfamiliar every time.

The covers on Dean's bed were smooth. I indicated the bed, continuing to study the rest of the room. "Was Dean in the habit of making his bed that well?"

"Helmi made it for him," said Dianda. "It was unmade when he disappeared."

I bit back my usual lecture on preserving the scene of a crime. At least most land fae have heard of police detective shows, and sort of understand what I'm talking about. I didn't even know if the Undersea knew what television was. "Was there anything strange about it?"

"No."

"Right." The books were shelved in alphabetical order, and even the ones that were wedged in tightly enough to dent their covers were where they belonged. Dean had a space problem, but not an organization problem. "Where do the books come from?"

"Bookstores and Amazon," replied Patrick. He smiled at my startled expression. "The land doesn't have a monopoly on adopting mortal technology, you know. There's something to be said for the anonymity of online shopping."

"On the Internet, nobody knows you're a mermaid." I shook my head. "Did Helmi clean those up, too?"

"Dean's very careful with his library," said Dianda. "He was asking . . . he's *been* asking about a fosterage for a while now." She glanced at Patrick, a tangled mixture of affection and regret in her expression. "He wants to know what life is like on the land."

"I can recommend some good fiefdoms when the time comes," I said staunchly ignoring her slip into the past tense.

"Let's hope you get the chance," said Patrick.

There was nothing I could say to that. I gave the room one more long look before moving toward the bed. It was hard to resist the urge to muss the covers, just a little bit; just enough to make it look like a teenage boy still lived here. As it was, the mixture of tidiness and carefully shelved disorder made it all too easy to imagine this as Quentin's room. I would have willingly

started a war to get my squire back. I didn't even want to think about what I'd do if Gilly's life were the one on the line.

A nightstand sat just under the porthole window, holding the standard assortment of odds and ends: an oil lamp, a tattered Stephen King paperback with a bookmark about halfway through, and a ceramic dish filled with the sort of things that collect in an active teenager's pockets. Small stones, salt-corroded coins, dice . . . and several slips of paper. Most looked like they'd been torn from court documents or larger pieces of parchment, which just made the scrap of blue-lined binder paper look all the more out of place.

I crouched next to the nightstand, breathing deeply as I strained to find any trace of lingering magic to confirm my suspicions. The air smelled clean, with a strong undercurrent of saltwater and wood polish. I closed my eyes, forcing myself to focus. My own magic started to rise, the cut-grass-and-copper smell of it somehow forcing the other scents to separate, rather than obscuring them.

And there, buried under the stronger, more recent scents, was the thing I'd been hoping and fearing I'd find: mustard flowers and hot wax. The signature of Raysel's magic.

I opened my eyes and reached for the scrap of binder paper. It was water-damaged, and most of the list of items had blurred beyond reading, but Raysel's childish scrawl was still legible in a few spots. " 'Knock three times,' " I read aloud. "What does that mean?"

"All servants are required to knock three times before entering," said Dianda. She was frowning as I stood and turned to face her. "That gives the inhabitants time to prepare, so they won't be surprised. A servant who didn't knock might find themselves facing a rather unpleasant welcome."

"Unpleasant how?"

Dianda's frown became a thin smile, showing more teeth than I was strictly comfortable with. "Painfully so. Even in our quarters, we are never unarmed."

"Charming. Do the Selkies know about the knocking?"

"Yes," said Connor. "But . . . I never told Raysel that. There was no reason to."

There was no reason to tell her about the wards, either, but I decided to keep that to myself. "Someone did." I held up the slip of paper. "Rayseline was here, and she had written instructions to help her get inside." It was easy to picture Helmi finding the scrap of paper in the process of cleaning the

room and simply putting it with the rest, not realizing it was from a different source.

“Where is she now?” demanded Dianda. “Where are my *sons*?”

“I don’t know. But I’m going to find out.” I dropped the scrap of paper back into the dish, straightening.

Dean’s room yielded nothing else of interest, although I’m pretty sure he wouldn’t have been happy to see me rooting through his underwear drawer. Eventually, even Dianda had to admit that we were done, and we moved across the hall to Peter’s room.

If Dean was a budding scholar dreaming of the land, Peter was a normal twelve year old, and even Helmi’s valiant efforts to tame his room had failed. I knew as soon as I crossed the threshold that he was a collector of shells, a lover of strange stones, and an explorer of sunken ships—unless he’d managed to acquire his impressive assortment of coins, cannonballs, and other shipwreck souvenirs online, which I doubted. He didn’t have a bed; instead, a deep saltwater pool about the size of a hotel hot tub sat at the center of the room, with handgrips around the edges to make it easier to get in and out of.

And none of that mattered, because the smell of blood punched me in the nose as soon as the door was opened. I grabbed the doorframe, half-staggering. Connor caught my shoulder, lending a bit of extra stability.

“What is it?” Dianda demanded. “What’s wrong?”

“Blood,” I said, trying to make my eyes focus. “Someone’s been using blood magic here.”

“That’s impossible. If someone had, we’d know.”

“Maybe not,” said Patrick. “Amandine could find a single drop of blood in a field of love-lies-bleeding. I saw her do it once, at a summer festival. It was a party trick for her.”

“She was a pureblood. October is a changeling.”

“Not where blood is concerned,” said Connor staunchly.

I barely heard them. I was too busy trying to sort through the conflicting information I was receiving from the room, which smelled like blood that wasn’t blood, and magic that wasn’t magic. I shrugged off Connor’s hand and started forward, not allowing myself to look where I was going. The trail was too tenuous for me to get distracted by silly things like what was actually around me.

One step. Two. On the third step, I stumbled, nearly tripping over the edge

of the pool, and had to dare a glance down in order to recover my balance. I almost lost the trail after that, and had to stop again, closing my eyes and breathing as deeply as I could. The smell of blood had been impossible to miss when we opened the door because it had been trapped. Now, with the air circulating in from the hall, it was getting fainter. I needed to keep moving, or I was never going to find it at all.

Three more steps carried me to the wall. It was covered by a complex tapestry of interwoven fishnets, ropes, and sea-stained lengths of fabric, all studded with shells and interesting pieces of driftwood. There was blood trapped in the fiber, places where the weaver's fingers had bled in the process of tying knots or securing shells; the image of a dark-haired Merrow boy formed behind my eyes, and was just as quickly filed away. I'd know Peter if I saw him now, but that wasn't the blood I'd followed into the room.

Shutting out the traces of blood in the tapestry only took a few seconds. My own magic was rising around me again. I borrowed strength from its familiarity, letting it wash away everything but the blood before I knelt and pulled the base of the tapestry away from the wall.

A silver needle glittered among the bottom loops of fishnet, obviously snagged there by mistake. It was practically invisible among all the things woven into the netting. If there hadn't been time for a full search of the room, Rayseline wouldn't even have realized that it was missing.

"Here," I said. The bottom inch of the needle was darker than the rest. I didn't need magic to tell me it was covered with dried blood. Gingerly, I grasped the opposite end and began working it free of the tapestry. "I found something."

"What is it?" This time, no amount of restraining was going to keep Dianda out of the room. She strode toward me, practically vibrating with the need to know what I'd found. "How did my people miss it?"

"They didn't smell the blood." I held up the needle. "I wouldn't touch this if I were you. This is a blood magic charm."

"Intended to do what?"

"I'm not sure." I brought the needle to my nose, sniffing cautiously. "It smells a little bit like elf-shot, but it's not quite elf-shot. I'm going to need to take this to an alchemist friend of mine; he'll be able to tell us more."

Dianda's expression darkened. "If you think I'm going to let you swim out of here with that—"

"I'm exactly right," I finished. "Dianda, I'm trying to save your sons. We

know Rayseline was involved, and we know this is blood magic. There's no way she brewed this on her own. That means we need to find out who *did* brew it, and the best way to do that is to learn exactly what it is. Walther will be able to do that. You've trusted me this far. Is there anything to gain in taking that trust away from me now?"

Dianda's eyes flicked from my face to the needle and back. Finally, she said, "Helmi will fetch you a water-tight bottle to transport it back to the surface. You have until the morning tide rolls in twice to tell me who took my children. Do you understand?"

"Yes," I said. I wanted more than that—I wanted her to promise we wouldn't be going to war—but I knew better than to demand. Her children were missing. I was lucky she was still being as reasonable as she was.

"Good." Dianda's shoulders drooped. "I . . . is there anything else we can show you? Anything at all?"

I took a deep breath. "Honestly, I don't know. I'm not familiar enough with the way your knowes are constructed. How about you take me on a tour of the boys' favorite spots, and we'll see if anything else jumps out at me?" I glanced at the needle. "After Helmi brings the bottle, that is. I've already jabbed one dubiously enchanted pin into my leg tonight, and since that ended with me growing fins, I'd rather not do it again."

"All right," said Dianda. She rubbed her face with one hand, looking overwhelmingly tired. "A tour it is."

"And an escort to the surface afterward, if you don't mind. I don't think I can find the way back on my own, and this," I waved a still-webbed hand, indicating my body, "isn't going to last forever. I won't be very much use to you if I drown when the Luidaeg's spell wears off."

"You'll be escorted," said Patrick.

Silence fell. I looked around, wishing I had better news for them—wishing I had some idea of where Raysel might have taken the missing boys. I didn't have either of those things.

Having nothing useful to contribute has never been enough to keep my mouth shut. "So," I asked, "anybody know how to get saltwater out of leather?"



SEVENTEEN

I COULD HAVE SPENT DAYS, if not weeks, exploring Saltmist. It was labyrinthine on a level even Shadowed Hills couldn't match, since Shadowed Hills has to at least pretend to believe in gravity. Saltmist had ballrooms where every wall was a dance floor, dining halls where the tables hung suspended on ropes of kelp that also served as a living salad bar, and passageways set in what I couldn't help regarding as "the floor" or "the ceiling." Even the air-filled areas were built with little regard for mundane architecture, following plans that seemed as much borrowed from sailing ships and Viking feast halls as they were from the medieval castles I'm used to seeing.

The fae were as strange as their surroundings. Merfolk with sea horse tails stuck close to the floor in the underwater areas. They seemed to fill a role similar to the Hobs back home, since they were almost all engaged in some form of housework or repair, and most didn't look up when we swam past them. Cephali were in evidence in both the wet and dry areas, usually armed and hanging from the ceiling. According to Dianda, they served as the Ducal guard, save for a few, like Helmi, who had gone into private service.

"She's upset about the boys because she loves them, but also because they represent her failure," said Dianda. "She's supposed to guard them. Someone hurt them while she was watching. That isn't acceptable to the Cephali."

"So her honor is at stake?"

"Her life." Dianda's lips thinned. "If they aren't found, her family will kill her as a form of apology to our household."

I stared at her. "And you'll *let* them?"

"This is the Undersea," she said. "We do things differently here."

I was starting to figure out just how differently.

After the third time I'd made the transition between air and water, it started

to feel almost natural. I didn't really have to think about going from legs to tail, or back again; it just happened, my body changing to suit the environment it was in. The green dress didn't change with me, and clung to my skin like seaweed whenever we had to get out of the water and walk. It didn't drip as much as my jeans had. I didn't worry about it.

We eventually wound up back in the round aquarium-room, surrounded by that impossible Summerlands sea. The whale-mermaid and her hippocampi charges were gone, replaced by three of the sea horse-fae and a whole school of undersea children. They were a wild assortment of fins, tails, and tentacles as they chased each other around and through the kelp and coral. Dianda and Patrick looked at them with undisguised longing, not seeming to care that I was still there, still watching them.

Connor put a hand on my shoulder. I tilted my head back, asking, "Can you get me to the surface?"

"If you think you can follow." He glanced to the webbing between my fingers. "How much longer is this supposed to last?"

"Not long enough for me to be comfortable staying here. I don't want to drown on my way back to the surface."

"Anceline and her brothers will escort you," said Dianda, abruptly turning away from the wall. "Connor, your services are needed here for the time being."

"What?" His eyes widened. "Your Grace, I—"

"I would be honored to be escorted by Anceline and her brothers," I said, cutting him off. If Dianda was keeping Connor with her, it was because she wanted to grill him on Rayseline. That was something that needed to happen as soon as possible, for everybody's sake. "There's just one thing."

Dianda blinked. Apparently, she wasn't expecting me to make requests. "What?"

"Can I please have my clothes back?"

"Of course." Dianda's expression softened. "You may keep the dress. Consider it a souvenir."

"Sort of an 'I went to the lost city of Atlantis, and all I got was this lousy T-shirt' thing, right?" I asked.

Dianda looked at me blankly. "Atlantis isn't lost. It's about an eight-day swim from here."

Right. "If Connor is staying here, how would you like me to send word of my findings? I won't be able to come back after the spell wears off, and I

don't know if the Luidaeg will mix me another one."

"I'll release him before the deadline. Failing that . . ." She dug a hand into the pocket of her skirt, producing three tiny glass bottles with cork stoppers and bits of rolled-up parchment inside. They looked like the sort of "genuine pirate treasures" you can buy six for a dollar in the shops along Fisherman's Wharf. "If you throw one of these into the water, it will find me."

"Handy." I tucked the bottles under my knife belt, which held them fast. "I promise, we're going to work on this as fast as we can."

"You'd best."

Patrick put a hand on her shoulder, almost mirroring the way Connor was standing next to me. "Connor, why don't you show October to the exit pool? Helmi will meet you there, and can lead October out to meet Anceline and the others."

"Of course, Your Grace," said Connor. He stepped away from me and bowed to the Lordens. "Where can I find you once she's gone?"

"Meet us in the receiving hall," said Dianda.

"I appreciate your hospitality," I said, and curtsied, directing the gesture to both of them. As I straightened, I added, "I'll bring your sons home."

"Please," said Dianda. Nothing more than that; everything else had already been said. She and Patrick turned and walked away, leaving me alone with Connor.

I sighed. "I can't wait to be back on dry land."

"I can't wait to be there with you." Connor touched my cheek. "Come on. Let's get you home."

He led me along the above-water path through the knowe. We passed Merrow in their human forms, Cephali making their way along floor, walls, and ceiling with equal ease, and Selkie after Selkie. I even glimpsed a few of the ward-weaving Asrai—tiny, silver-haired people who could have passed for children, if not for the decades I could see reflected in their eyes. None of them gave us a second glance. I was in the company of a Selkie, I looked like a Merrow, and clearly I belonged.

It was becoming more and more apparent how Rayseline had been able to do what she did. For all Patrick's comments about the Undersea adopting mortal technology, they were still living in a time when Faerie was simpler. Back when humans didn't encroach on our land, and when our halls were full, because we had the bodies to fill them. These days, people know everyone who lives in their fiefdom, because there just aren't that many of us

left. The Undersea didn't have that problem. Instead, they got its opposite.

When there are too many people to know them all on sight, you can have strangers. And strangers can do bad things.

Helmi was waiting by the entrance pool. She had my clothes, shoes, and leather jacket—all still dripping—held primly at arm's length. "These are yours," she said, as soon as I was close enough to take them from her. "I'm to take you to meet Anceline outside the hall. If you'll come with me?"

"Just a second." I dug the bottles from Dianda out of my knife belt before unzipping the jacket's breast pocket and dropping them inside, along with the bottle containing the needle from Peter's room. It wasn't a perfect solution, but it would prevent me from losing them during the trip back to the surface.

After a pause, I put the cold, wet jacket back on, shivering as the heavy leather hit my shoulders. I could buy new jeans if I had to. My jacket was something I couldn't replace.

Connor watched me pull the cuffs of my jacket tight around my wrists before leaning in to kiss me, pinning my sopping-wet clothes between us. I didn't care. Kissing him was worth a little chill.

Pulling back, he asked, "You good?"

"I'm good." I hugged my dripping clothing. "Call the apartment if you need anything. One of us will be there. I may not be, but—"

"I love you. Now go. And be safe."

"I'll try," I said. Then I turned, and jumped feet-first into the water.

Helmi was waiting for me in the mouth of the tunnel connecting the entrance pool to the rest of the palace by the time I had my fins back on. Her tentacles were wound around an anchor-post to hold her in place. When I swam toward her, she let go, and beckoned for me to follow her.

Cephali move more slowly in water than Merrow—then again, so do most speedboats. Keeping up with Helmi was easy. Not even the green dress slowed me down, although it probably looked pretty silly, especially with the leather jacket. Mermaids in skirts are not likely to be the next big fashion trend.

The question of why Anceline didn't come into the knowe to meet me was answered when Helmi led me out one of the palace windows and into open water. A pod of Cetacea was waiting there, causing me to stop and simply stare. Anceline was reasonably normal-sized, as the fae measure such things; her human half was bigger than any human, but still smaller than a Bridge Troll, and even with her tail, she was no more than twelve feet long. Two of

the other Cetacea matched her in coloring and size. The other four were almost twice as large, and resembled gray whales, not orcas.

Helmi gave me an amused look, hooking my wrist with a tentacle as she swam past. I let myself be towed, beginning to swim under my own power once it became clear she was planning to pull me all the way over to the pod of waiting Cetacea.

Anceline swam forward to meet us, executing an odd rolling curtsy before gesturing for me to grab her dorsal fin. I blinked. She repeated the gesture with more urgency. Time was ticking past, and while I didn't think I was quite to the point where the Luidaeg's spell would break, I didn't want to risk it. Besides, it wasn't like I could argue with her while we were underwater. I motioned for Helmi to release my wrist before swimming the last few feet to where Anceline waited and grabbing the indicated dorsal fin with my right hand, holding my clothes against my chest with my left. My tail stretched down the length of her body, my own gauzy flukes lying over the top of her powerful black-and-white ones.

I should probably have expected her to take off like, I don't know, a killer whale with a mermaid hanging onto her back end. For some reason, I didn't expect it to be that *fast*. Merrow move at a speed that seems unrealistic. Cetacea make them seem slow.

Anceline and the others cut through the water like they were running a race with themselves, hauling me in their wake. I would never have been able to keep up on my own. I doubt *Dianda* would have been able to keep up. As it was, I held on as hard as I could and kept my head down, praying I wouldn't inhale a fish or something while we were on the way up.

We passed through the changes in temperature almost too fast to feel them. The water around us darkened as we moved back into the mortal seas, then started growing rapidly lighter as we approached the surface. The Cetacea weren't slowing down. That probably should have worried me, but I was too busy hanging on for dear life to really think about it.

More things I didn't expect to do first thing in the morning: get hauled out of the water by a breaching Cetace who felt like translating her momentum into a wave-shattering leap. I had just enough time to realize that the sun being up would mean humans on the docks before we fell back to the water, Anceline laughing all the while. The other Cetacea were breaking the surface all around us, laughing with her. At least some of us were having a good time.

I let go of Anceline, popping back up to the surface and swimming a few feet away to avoid being hit by falling Cetacea. I turned to look toward the docks as soon as I was clear, fully expecting a throng of humans to be pointing in our direction, shouting about mermaids.

No one was even glancing in our direction. Oh, the dockworkers and passing tourists were *there*. They just didn't seem to realize that we were there, too.

Anceline laughed again as she swam over to me. "They do not see us," she said. I didn't recognize her accent, something sweet and lilting and entirely foreign. "We cast our look-away as we rose."

It took me a moment to realize that she meant a don't-look-here spell. I must have been too distracted by being hauled through the water to notice the casting. "Nice trick," I said.

The rest of the pod finished their leaps and swam over to surround me in a wide circle, their faces still contorted with mirth. Anceline smiled and gestured for me to follow her as she began swimming toward the shore.

The other Cetacea swam after us, although the larger members of the pod stopped when the water began getting shallower. Anceline continued farther than any of the others, but even she stopped well before we reached the dock. "This is as close as I can go," she said. "Can you finish the journey on your own?"

"I think so, yes," I said. "I appreciate the escort."

She waved a webbed black-and-white hand. "An excuse to visit the surface is rare and should be seized. We swim in blessed seas."

"Um, sure."

"Open waters and sweet tides, little land creature." Anceline smiled, not unkindly. "If we see you again, we shall go swimming *fast*."

"Right. I'll look forward to that." In my nightmares, I'd be looking forward to that. Probably every night for the foreseeable future.

Anceline turned and whistled. The other Cetacea nodded, and waved to me before ducking beneath the waves. In a matter of seconds, I was alone, bobbing in the water a few hundred yards off the San Francisco shore.

Never let it be said that I don't know how to live an interesting life.

I swam for the shore as fast as I could, fighting the waves as I tried to keep my head above the water. The weight of my leather jacket and the bundle of clothing I was still holding didn't help matters, but I wasn't letting them go after hauling them this far. None of the dockworkers looked my way as I

swam by, but I wasn't pushing my luck. I chose a deserted pier as my destination, one that seemed to have the least amount of human activity.

I had reached the dock and was trying to figure out how to climb out of the water when I realized what my next problem was going to be: with Connor in Saltmist, I didn't have a ride home, and with Quentin back at the apartment, I didn't have a phone.

"Oh, Titania's *ass*," I grumbled.

"You kiss your momma with that mouth?" asked a rumbling voice. Something I'd taken for a stack of fishing crates unfolded, resolving into the craggy, familiar form of Danny McReady, cab driver. Even wearing a human disguise, he was big enough to block me mostly from view. "I mean, not recently, I guess."

"Danny!" I waved with my free hand. "Thank Oberon you're here. I *really* didn't want to steal a car today."

"That's my favorite paragon of law an' order," said Danny fondly. He walked to the edge of the dock, squatting to peer down at me. "You want some help getting out of there? Never took you for a distance swimmer, you know."

"Believe me, I'm really, *really* not." I heaved my clothes onto the dock, where they landed with a wet "splat." I held my hands up toward him. "Pull me out. Don't make a scene, and *don't* drop me."

"Oh, see, now you're hurtin' my feelings. Why would I drop—Titania's tiny titties, girl, you're a fucking fish!"

I hit the water hard. That shouldn't have been a surprise. "Dammit, Danny, I told you not to drop me!" A few dockworkers looked our way. I scowled. "And could you yell a little louder? I don't think the reporters from the *Weekly World News* heard you."

"You didn't tell me you were a fucking *fish*!"

"How else was I supposed to visit the Undersea? Rent a submarine?" I was going to shake Quentin for letting Danny come to pick me up without a warning. Literally *shake* him.

"Oh, 'cause growing some fins was a *much* more obvious solution." Danny bent to offer me his hands again, grumbling all the while. "Warn a fella next time you're going to do something crazy-ass like that."

"Next time, I'll make sure you get a written note. Hang on." I grabbed his hands, focusing on trading fins and scales for legs and functional feet. "Now pull me up."

“If you’re sure . . .” he said, and pulled me, legs and all, up to the dock. “Much better.”

“I thought so, too,” I said. I barely had my feet under me when a sharp pain pierced my upper thigh. I dropped to my hands and knees, clamping my right hand over the source of the pain. The Luidaeg’s pin was sticking out of my flesh, the metal slick with blood. I barely managed to keep from driving it farther in. “Ow, dammit!”

“What’s wrong?” Danny demanded.

“Spell’s over.” I pulled the pin loose, holding it up for him to see before pushing it through the strap of my dress. “I’m done playing little mermaid.”

“Good. That was too weird, even for you.” Danny took my hand again, pulling me to my feet. He didn’t have to work very hard to do it. I’m not tiny, but when you’re as big as Danny is, tiny is a relative term.

His cab was illegally parked at the bus stop with the hazard lights blinking. He opened the passenger-side door, waving grandly for me to get in. “Ladies first.”

“What, so I can trigger any booby traps that might be waiting?”

“Exactly!”

The interior of Danny’s cab smelled like artificial pine, not-so-artificial herbs from the Gremlin charms he used to confuse police sensors, and something that was almost, but not quite, dog. That would be the Barghests. At least there weren’t any of them currently in residence. I’m not sure I could have handled being enthusiastically licked by a venomous horror when I was sopping wet and uncaffeinated.

Danny must have seen how tired I was, because he didn’t talk after we pulled away from the curb. He just drove, racing through the city at speeds ranging from “unsafe” to “insane.” Danny’s a good enough driver that it wasn’t a problem. It was just part of riding with him—and at least this time, he wasn’t likely to drive the cab into the Summerlands. Instead, he was providing a valuable educational service to the tourists visiting our fair city: namely, San Francisco drivers are nuts.

I was the one to break the silence, asking, “Have you been able to learn anything from the rocks?”

“Some. Not much as makes any sense.” Danny’s sigh was like gravel rattling in a trash can. “See, the thing about rocks is they pay attention, but they do it slow. Once you upset them, it takes ’em a while to calm down. I’m still trying to get them to tell me their names an’ where they’re all from.”

Knowing where the rocks were from would be a start. “What do you have so far?”

“Gardens, rivers, sidewalks.” Danny gave me a sidelong look, taking a worrisome amount of attention off the road. “Some of the older ones—the calmer ones—remember you. One of ’em says it came from your yard. Says it used to live under a eucalyptus tree.”

A lump formed in my throat. Sylvester only brought Raysel to visit the apartment I shared with Cliff once; it was too dangerous to take a noble child in the open often, and there was too much risk that Raysel would say something she shouldn’t. But Sylvester wanted to meet my daughter, who was too close to human to enter the knowe, and he wanted Raysel to start getting accustomed to the human world. We sat in the postage stamp yard behind the building for hours, drinking lemonade, talking, and watching Raysel chase pixies around the three stunted eucalyptus growing by the back fence.

Before they left, she asked me if she and Gilly were going to be friends. Maeve help me, I told her they would. Six months later, Raysel was gone. Not long after that, so was I. Cliff moved out of that apartment while I was missing, and I’d never been back.

“Yeah,” I said. “That sounds about right.”

We pulled up in front of my apartment complex only a few minutes later. Danny stopped at the curb, saying apologetically, “I’d come in an’ be social, but I gotta get home and feed the kids. You gonna be okay?”

“As okay as I can be,” I said, and got out of the cab.

“I’ll call as soon as I know anything,” said Danny. Then he was gone, merging swiftly back into passing traffic.

I hugged my waterlogged clothes to my chest as I walked up the sidewalk to the gate. Walther’s car was parked in one of the visitor’s spots, jammed in at an angle that made it clear how fast he’d been going when he arrived. I walked a little faster. If he was here during school hours, it was because he had something he needed to share.

The wards on the door were open. That was a relief. Maybe it’s unkind of me to expect May to sit around playing secretary, but I don’t trust answering machines anymore, and people needed to be able to reach me. I undid the locks, calling, “I’m home,” as I stepped inside.

“Oh, thank Oberon!” May came flying out of the kitchen, throwing her arms around my shoulders before she fully registered how wet I was. She

squawked and pushed me away from her. “Toby, you’re soaked!”

“Didn’t Quentin tell you where I was going?” Sudden fear lanced through me. Danny hadn’t mentioned driving Quentin home; I’d just assumed he must’ve, that Quentin would have sent him to wait for me. If he hadn’t—

“Quentin’s asleep in my room,” said May. “He wasn’t making sense when he got here. He said you ran away with the mermaids. I put him to bed when the sun came up.”

“That’s pretty much exactly what happened.” I shook my head. “I went to Saltmist with Dianda, to look for clues about what happened to the boys.”

May’s pale eyes went wide. “Did you find anything?”

“It was Rayseline. Any doubts I may have had . . . is Walther here? I saw his car.”

“He’s in the kitchen. We were showing Raj how to use the cappuccino setting on the coffee maker.” Something clattered in the kitchen, illustrating her point.

My relationship with the coffee maker is very dear to my heart. I grimaced, picturing my overenthusiastic Fetch taking it apart. “Okay. Tell him I’m going to go change into something dry, and then I’ll come in to review what we know. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Back in a minute,” I said, and started for my room.

Getting out of my wet clothes was the first order of business, to be followed by figuring out how to dry my leather jacket without destroying it. They were comfortably mundane problems, and the fact that they’d come about for distinctly nonmundane reasons was secondary at best.

I peeled my leather jacket off as soon as my bedroom door was closed, hanging it from the doorknob to keep it from dripping—much—on the rest of the room. Everything else went into the hamper. I dried my hair with the discarded towel from last night—oak and ash, had that really only been last *night*?—and shrugged on my bathrobe. Walther and Raj could deal with me being in a state of mild undress. I wasn’t going to try putting on dry clothes until I had dry skin to go under them.

I was emptying my jacket pockets when there was a knock at the door. “You all right in there?” called May.

“Just soaked,” I called back. “Something up?”

“Raj did something to the coffee machine. It’s making foam, and Walther won’t stop laughing. You should come take a look.”

“Coming.” I checked the knot on my bathrobe, giving my rat’s-nest hair an irritated glance before grabbing my jacket. If anyone could get the salt off without ruining the leather, it was Walther.

The coffee party was in full swing in the kitchen. May had managed to divert the promised flood of foam, probably through means I didn’t want to hear about. She and Raj swabbed the floor with dish towels while Walther sat at the kitchen table, holding a mug and grinning. Spike was perched on Walther’s shoulder.

“Today we’re learning why it’s bad to use hearth magic to accelerate brewing,” May said, turning to wring her towel out over the sink.

“It was educational,” said Walther.

Raj beamed. “May said I couldn’t possibly mess up the new coffee maker.”

“I’m proud of you. Once again, you’ve managed to exceed all expectations. Never hex my coffee maker again.” I held up my jacket. “Walther, any chance you can get the saltwater out of this?”

Walther turned to face me, and blinked. “I can try,” he said, standing. Spike jumped down to the table. “Did you really visit the Undersea?”

“Well, first I rode a pissed-off mermaid down Leavenworth,” I said, handing him the jacket. “After that, yeah, I went to visit the Undersea. It was a weird night, and it’s already shaping up to be a weird day.”

“More and more, you convince me that taking a job in a nice, safe classroom was the smartest thing I ever did.”

“Yeah, well, it probably was,” I replied. “Why aren’t you there now?”

“I took the day off. The threat of war seemed slightly more important than keeping my freshman chemistry students from burning down the building.” Walther squinted at the leather. “What did you *do*? ❖❖

“Again, I visited the Undersea.”

“I don’t know why I bother asking.” He removed his glasses, tucking them into his coat pocket. He doesn’t need them—the only pureblood I’ve ever met who needed glasses was January O’Leary, and her eyes were actually damaged. Walther’s glasses are part of his whole Clark-Kent-isn’t-Superman routine, since no human disguise can hide the piercing Tylwyth Teg blue of his eyes. He doesn’t look *at* people as much as he looks *through* them. The glasses are intended to dampen the effect, since a little window dressing is better than having his students flee screaming on a regular basis.

Raj brought me a cup of coffee, casting a sheepish look at the towels on

the floor. “Sorry about the mess.”

“It’s fine. Just clean it up, and all will be forgiven. Unless you broke the coffee maker.” I paused. “You didn’t break the coffee maker, did you?”

Raj and May shook their heads in mute unison.

I relaxed marginally. “In that case, we’re cool.”

“Good,” said May. “Now, what did you find?”

“Nothing good,” I said, and sipped my coffee before launching into an explanation of what I’d seen in Saltmist. Silence fell over the kitchen, broken only by the sound of Walther rummaging through the cabinets and filling the sink with water. Raj looked like he couldn’t decide whether to be revolted by the idea of that much wet, or fascinated by the thought of a part of Faerie he’d never seen.

When I was done, May sat heavily in the other chair and said, “Raysel killed someone.”

“That, or she elf-shot a Selkie, stole the skin, and managed to hide the sleeping body somewhere.” I didn’t have to point out that something like that would be a lot of work—and Raysel was never a fan of work. “She couldn’t have made it past the wards without the skin.”

Walther looked up. “If she elf-shot a Selkie and removed his or her skin, the Selkie is dead.”

I blinked. “What?”

“A Selkie without a skin is essentially human. Elf-shot is fatal to humans.” He shrugged. “If she used elf-shot, the Selkie is dead.”

A cold knot was forming in my stomach. I’d been trying to tell myself that maybe—just maybe—Raysel had been smart, and left the Selkie alive. And there was no way that could have happened. She would have needed the Selkie to stay asleep indefinitely in order to be sure her plan wouldn’t be discovered; elf-shot would be the easiest, surest way to accomplish her goal. There was no way she would have used anything else.

May’s expression was horrified as she turned to me. “Toby, Oberon’s Law —”

“I know.” Murder is the only unforgivable crime in Faerie. Kidnapping, treason, and theft can be forgiven. Take a life, and your own life is forfeit. This wasn’t the first time Raysel had killed someone, but no one was going to take her to trial over Oleander. Dianda *would* take her to trial over this, and she would win, and Raysel would burn. “I don’t know how I’m going to tell her parents.”

“Yeah.”

Silence fell, lasting until Walther cleared his throat and asked, “Did you want to hear what I found out about the things you sent me?”

“Please.” I sipped my coffee, trying to relax. I was in my bathrobe, I needed to rinse the salt out of my hair, the whole Kingdom was teetering on the brink of war, and I had to tell Sylvester his daughter might have broken Oberon’s Law—but for now, I had to focus. If we had a chance to stop things from getting worse, it began right here.

“Well, for a start, your elf-shot is, and isn’t, normal. The recipe works like your basic elf-shot. Get hit, go to sleep for a hundred years.” Walther poured vinegar into the sink, stirring the water with his hand. “Sort of.”

“I love ‘sort of,’ ” I said dryly. “It’s such a beautifully useless phrase. What else does this super-special elf-shot do?”

“I’ve heard of this mixture but never seen it used, so I can’t be completely sure without sticking somebody with the arrow and watching them for a few decades. But I think it would eventually be fatal.” Walther picked up a dish sponge, dunking it in the sink before starting to wipe down my jacket. “There are some herbal compounds in the mix that aren’t used for elf-shot, but *are* used for slow-acting poison.”

“Slow assassination,” I whispered. Most purebloods view elf-shot as more of an inconvenience than anything else. Get shot, fall down, and take a nice long nap. If you could make elf-shot that actually killed, it might be decades before anyone realized what you’d done. Plenty of time to get away.

“Exactly,” said Walther. “Now, this mix takes a lot of mercury, and buying mercury is tricky. I’m hoping I can use that to find out who made the charm, but it’ll take time. And before you ask, no, I don’t think Raysel could have done it. She’s never studied alchemy. She would have poisoned herself trying to mix the tincture.”

So Raysel wasn’t working alone. Swell. “Don’t take too much time,” I cautioned. “We don’t have it.”

“I know.” Walther put down the sponge, giving my jacket a good shake before submerging it in the vinegar-and-water mixture filling the sink.

“I thought you were supposed to keep leather dry,” said Raj dubiously.

I gave him a sidelong look. “Why do you know how you’re supposed to take care of leather?”

“Lots of knights wear leather armor.” He shrugged. “You do. I never see you without your jacket.”

I decided not to argue. He was right, in a sideways sort of way. “Normally, you keep leather dry. In this case, I’m going to trust that Walther knows what he’s doing.”

At the moment, what he was doing involved chanting to himself in Welsh. The air in the kitchen chilled, the smell of frozen yarrow wafting around us. Everyone quieted, looking toward Walther with varying degrees of interest.

He chuckled, pulling my clean, dry jacket from the sink and giving it a final shake before lobbing it in my direction. I caught it easily, and blinked at him. “Hearth magic?”

“It’s a form of alchemy,” he said, looking unconscionably pleased with himself. “I’ve learned a few tricks. Anyway, can I keep the arrow a little longer? I want to run some further tests, and see if I can get you a more precise origin.”

“Please do,” I replied, slipping the jacket on over my bathrobe. The leather smelled like yarrow and salt and, very faintly, vinegar. “What did you learn about the other things we found? The needles, and whatever was in that vial?”

“The needles are just needles. As for the contents of the vial—it’s a sleeping charm, with enough of a memory eraser worked in that if you drank it, you’d probably forget the last hour or so of your life. Not fatal, but not friendly.” He shook his head, expression turning almost admiring. “Whoever mixed it knew their stuff. This would put a person out for about a day.”

“Oleander?” I asked—almost hopefully. Oleander was dead. At least if this were her work, we didn’t have to worry about Rayseline having any more of it.

“I don’t think so. It’s herbal, not floral.”

Damn. “Okay.”

“I’m going to get an hour or so of sleep, and then get back to work. You should consider doing the same.” Walther flashed me a tired smile. “I’ll call when I know anything. Please, I know you’re not good at it, but can you try to be careful? Just until I can let you know what it is you’re up against?”

“It’s a little late, but I can give it a try,” I said. I wasn’t willing to let myself hope yet—the odds were stacked too strongly against us for that—but maybe we were making headway. I had my jacket back. That was a start.

My jacket . . . and the contents of its pockets. “Wait here a second,” I said, and turned to run for my room, not waiting for his response.

Walther was standing there, looking confused, when I returned. “What is

it?”

“Here.” I held out the vial containing the needle from Dean’s room. “I found this in Saltmist. Can you check it out?”

“I’ll add it to the list.” He plucked the vial from my hand. “I’ll let you know what I find.”

“You do that,” I said. “Open roads, Walther.”

“Open roads,” he echoed. “May, I appreciate your hospitality.”

“Kind fires, Walther,” she said, and hugged him. “Now you get out of here, and take care of yourself, okay?”

He smiled. “I’ll do my best. Good-bye, Raj.”

“Good-bye,” Raj replied. Then Walther was out the door, leaving the rest of us in the kitchen, not sure what to say.

As usual, May broke the silence. “Toby needs pants. Raj, go wake Quentin up.”

“Why?” he asked blankly.

She smiled. “It’s time for pancakes.”

I laughed all the way to my room.



EIGHTEEN

I EMERGED FROM MY ROOM wearing dry jeans, a black cotton shirt, and a gray wool sweater. The smell of pancakes greeted me, awakening my appetite. Dianda's bottles and the Luidaeg's shell were in my pocket, and the pin was in the lining of my jacket. Maybe its magic was spent and maybe not; I couldn't afford to throw it away if there was still a chance it might be useful.

I was starting to feel like a fairy-tale James Bond, only my version of Q was as likely to kill me as she was to kill the bad guys.

May met me at the kitchen door, shoving a plate of pancakes into my hand. "Eat," she commanded. Raj and Quentin were already at the table, eating with a speed that almost disguised their total lack of table manners.

"Yes, Mother," I said. The pancakes were fixed the way I like them, with grape jelly and powdered sugar instead of syrup. My stomach roared, reminding me how long it had been since the last time I actually sat down to eat.

I was halfway through my second serving—and most of the way through my second explanation of what happened in Saltmist, this time for Quentin's benefit—when someone started hammering on the door. I dropped my plate onto the table and half-walked, half-ran to answer. No one would knock that way if it wasn't an emergency. Wrenching the door open, I demanded, "What do you—"

The rest of the sentence died on my tongue as I saw the haggard, almost haunted look on Tybalt's face. For a moment, we both stood frozen. Then he grabbed my wrist, jerking me forward. "We have to go."

"What the hell are you talking about?" I demanded, trying to pull my arm away. He didn't let go. "What are you doing here? Did the cats tell you something?"

“For once in your life, be quiet and come *on*.”

“Tybalt?” May walked up behind me, sounding bemused. “What’s going on?”

Tybalt’s eyes stayed focused on me. “I’ve had Gabriel watching your daughter’s house. You didn’t ask for it, but it seemed like the best idea, given the circumstances. He just contacted me. Something’s happened. They’ve called the police.”

I’d considered a lot of horrible scenarios for this war. None of them included my almost-human daughter. I went cold. “Gillian?”

“She’s gone, October. She’s missing. Now please. Come.”

“I . . .” I turned. “Call Sylvester. Tell him Gillian’s missing, and that he needs to put the knights on alert. Keep Quentin here with you.”

“Yes,” she said numbly. She’s not Gillian’s mother. Some of her memories were probably telling her she was. Her fingers flashed in the air, accompanied by the scent of cotton candy and ashes, and the veil of a human disguise settled over me. “Go.”

I nodded my thanks. I was going to need all the magic I could muster if I was going to make it through the day ahead. “Raj . . .” I began.

“I’m staying here. If my Uncle needs me, he’ll call.”

If Tybalt had a problem with Raj choosing his own orders, he didn’t say anything. He just nodded, fingers tightening around my wrist. “Hold your breath,” he said, and yanked me across the threshold, into the gathering shadows on the other side.

Repeated exposure to the Shadow Roads has made them a little easier to handle, but this trip was worse than any in years. The cold bit my skin, seeming to worm its way all the way down to the bone. Every time my feet hit the unseen ground, it felt like I was running on knives. I have my limits, and I’d been going nonstop for hours. I was wearing out. Fear for my daughter drove me on.

I played fairy bride over eighteen years ago, and I had a child with a human man. His name was Cliff. Hers was Gillian. She grew up without me, thanks to Simon Torquill, and when I came back, she didn’t want anything to do with me. I was something out of a bad after-school special; there was no room for me in her life. But I loved her. I always will. She’s my darling girl, and even when she was screaming for me to leave her alone, I loved her.

And now I was afraid she was already lost. Rayseline knew how to find my weak spots. Gillian was the biggest—and the most easily-targeted—of them

all. Why didn't I think to protect her? Why did I need Tybalt, of all people, to do it for me?

I knew it didn't make sense to be angry at myself for this. In a war between land and sea, Gillian wasn't even a factor. There hadn't been time to set a guard, or reason to expect that Raysel would go for my little girl. That didn't stop the anger.

We fell out of the shadows and into the narrow alley between two tall brownstone houses. The flashing lights of the police cars across the street told me where we were before I recognized our surroundings: Cliff and Gillian's. I scrambled to my feet and ran for the house, not pausing to see whether Tybalt was following. Dragging a person through the shadows can hurt the Cait Sidhe. I knew that, and in that moment, I couldn't care. Only Gillian mattered.

I vaulted up the porch steps and pounded on the door until it opened. A human woman stared out at me, eyes wide behind the yellow fringe of her hair. Miranda. My replacement, Gillian's stepmother, and—since we were never married—Cliff's first wife. Miranda and I don't get along, maybe because I view her as a usurper, while she views me as an irresponsible bitch who thinks it's okay to walk out for fourteen years and then stroll back in like nothing happened. In our own ways, we're both right.

"October," she said, sounding as surprised as she looked. "How did you —"

"A friend saw the police cars and called me," I said, trying to see past her into the house. "What's going on? Is Cliff here?"

"October, this isn't a good time—"

"She's my daughter, too, Miranda. If something's happened, I need to know."

"She's gone," said a gruff voice. I looked up, meeting the eyes of the man behind her. Clifford Marks, my ex-fiancé. It was the first time I'd seen him in over a year. I was surprised to realize I hadn't missed him. I missed our daughter, but not her father. Not anymore.

"Cliff," I said. "What happened?"

"Someone broke her bedroom window," he said, gaze steady on mine. "Miranda went up to wake her for school, and she was gone."

"Can I—"

"I don't think that's a good idea, Toby. The police will handle things."

"Cliff . . ." Tybalt stepped onto the porch behind me. Cliff's attention

flicked briefly to him before returning to me. I raked my fingers through my tangled hair, looking pleadingly at my ex-lover. "Please."

He hesitated before shaking his head. "No. My daughter is missing. I'm not going to risk you interfering with finding her."

Something inside me snapped. "She's my daughter too, damn you!"

"Maybe you should have thought of that sixteen years ago."

That stopped me cold. How could I tell him that he and Gillian were all I'd been thinking of back then? What words were there to make him understand? I realized I was shaking just as I felt the solid, comforting weight of Tybalt's hand on my shoulder.

"The mother has a right to help," he said.

Cliff looked past me to Tybalt for the second time, and I found myself considering how the King of Cats must look to him. Even covered by a human disguise, Tybalt is impressive. "Who are you?" asked Cliff.

"A friend of October's," was Tybalt's imperturbable reply.

"Please," I repeated. "I have to help."

"What if I don't want you to?" Miranda asked abruptly. I blinked. I'd almost forgotten she was there. "How do we know you didn't have some of your freak friends grab her so you could play detective and ride in to save the day? You were never a mother to her. You threw her away. Why should I trust you to bring her home?"

"That's enough." Cliff put a hand on her shoulder in an almost ironic mirror of the way Tybalt's hand rested on mine. "If you can find her, Toby, do it. Bring her home. But if you come here again, I'll tell the police they should be questioning you."

I studied him for a long moment before nodding. He was giving me what his pride and panic allowed: he was giving me a chance. "Can I see where she was taken? Just to see if there's anything that might give me a clue?"

"The police are handling that," said Cliff.

"Mr. and Mrs. Marks?" called a voice from inside. "Is everything all right?"

Cliff's look didn't waver. I sighed. "We'll be going now," I said.

"Good," he said, and closed the door. He didn't say good-bye.

I stared at the doorframe, trying to calm the frantic hammering of my heart. Gilly was missing. Gilly was *gone*. She hadn't been part of my life for a long time, but when she was in danger I reacted like any other mother—with fury and with fear. I looked up at Tybalt once I was finally calm enough to speak,

asking, "What did you find?"

He shook his head, pulling his hand away as he stepped off the porch. I followed. Once we were on the sidewalk, too far away for the inhabitants of the house to hear us, he said, "I walked the bounds and spoke to my subjects. They say the girl was in her room when the window exploded. They led me there. There was blood on the carpet." He paused, looking away. "It was hers."

"How can you tell?"

"I know your scent, and her father's. That's enough to tell me whose she is."

"Is she alive?" He didn't answer. I grabbed his shoulder, nails digging into his skin. "Tybalt, is my daughter alive?"

"Yes," he said reluctantly, looking back to me. "That may not be for the best."

I stared at him. "What in Oberon's name do you mean by that?"

"I smelled more than blood in her room. The air smelled of mustard flowers, and of wax."

"Rayseline," I said numbly.

He nodded.

"Can you follow the trail?" Normally, I would have demanded to see the room myself, so Gilly's blood could tell me her story itself, but there wasn't time. Cliff would never let us in, and Tybalt knew the scent of Rayseline's magic. His cats had been there; if there were any other clues, they would have given them to their King. All I could do by trying to get inside was waste time that we didn't have.

Tybalt looked mildly surprised by the question. "I can."

"Do it. Please."

He nodded again and closed his eyes, nostrils flaring. The Cait Sidhe are some of the best trackers in Faerie, no matter what shape they're in. The cat never entirely leaves them. A moment later, he opened his eyes, and pointed west. "There," he said, and started trotting toward the corner. I followed, pacing half a step behind and scanning the street for signs that Rayseline had been here.

It was late enough in the morning that the residential streets around Cliff and Gilly's house were practically deserted. A man with a pit bull jogged past us, and a few cars drove by, but that was it, at least for the first two blocks. In the middle of the third, Tybalt stopped, his face knotting in concentration as

he tilted his head and sniffed the air.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, stopping beside him.

“The trail is . . . fuzzy,” he said, picking his words with obvious care. He probably didn’t want to upset me. I appreciated the effort, even as I wanted to shake him until he told me what the hell he was talking about. “I haven’t lost it, but something is obscuring it from me.”

My heart dropped. “What are you talking about?”

“Just give me a moment. I can find my bearings.” There was a note of uncertainty in his voice that made me want to tear my hair out and scream. Instead, I paced around him in a circle, head down, trying not to think about Gillian and what Rayseline might be doing to her. My poor little girl . . .

The sound of a knife being drawn brought my head up in a second. I turned toward it, seeing Tybalt out of the corner of my eye as he did the same. All I saw in that direction was an empty lot, all dried brown weeds and broken bottles. I frowned, starting to unlock my shoulders, and stopped, a sudden, horrible thought occurring to me.

“Tybalt?” I asked. “Why would there be a vacant lot in the middle of all these houses?”

Tybalt frowned, sniffing the air. “It smells . . . wrong,” he said slowly.

I can weigh the balance of a person’s blood by breathing deep and rolling some intangible part of their fae heritage across my tongue. I hadn’t tried it at a distance before. I opened my mouth, tasting the air, and felt myself go cold.

“We have to run.”

Tybalt looked at me, questioning but not doubtful. “What is it?”

“Goblins.” As if that were some sort of sign, the veil of illusion that had been concealing the alley across from us shattered, revealing a cluster of Goblins. For an instant, we could only stand and stare.

Goblins are the shock troops of Faerie, and they represent the worst of what our world can be. I’ve met representatives of almost half the races in our world, and none of them have ever had a good thing to say about the Goblins. Most go into mercenary work, selling their services to the highest bidder, and they have little respect for the sanctity of Oberon’s Law. Goblins kill the immortal without looking back.

Twenty of them charged toward us, cloaked in a blurry haze that hid them from human eyes; if they caught us, no one would see us die. They were armored in uneven patches of beaten metal and leather that looked suspiciously like human—or fae—skin. Their ranks bristled with swords and

spears, and they screamed at the tops of their lungs as they charged. It was meant to intimidate. It was working.

Tybalt's lips drew back from his teeth, and he snarled, a low, guttural challenge that cut through the howls of the Goblins. Their front ranks faltered, perhaps rethinking the wisdom of charging a Cait Sidhe.

"There's too many of them!" I shouted, drawing my knife.

"I know!"

Then the Goblins were upon us, and talking ceased to be a priority.

Goblins are cheap labor; that was the one thing we had going for us. They had the advantage in terms of numbers and weaponry, but most of them were young and too inexperienced to have faced many real fights. An old Goblin is a retired Goblin. These were all young Goblins, and they didn't realize what they were in for when they faced a cornered Cait Sidhe and a changeling knight with nothing left to lose.

Tybalt fought like an animal, all teeth and claws and tearing fury. My own efforts were more restrained; I blocked and slashed with careful precision, aiming for throats and eyes. The Goblins laughed at my lack of armor until they felt the bite of silver across their faces or knuckles. They learned fast. They started coming at me with spears and longer swords, forcing me back.

A spear slipped past my guard, stabbing into the scar tissue on my shoulder. I screamed, slashing harder, and my attacker fell back, another immediately stepping up to take his place. It wasn't until the first crossbow bolt whizzed past my head that I realized they were equipped for more than just hand-to-hand combat.

"Tybalt!" I shouted. "Elf-shot!"

He glanced over his shoulder at me, eyes wide and startled in a surprisingly pale face. Then he lunged, grabbing me around the middle and hauling us both backward, away from the closest tier of Goblins. An arrow zipped through the spot where I'd been standing only seconds before.

"What are you—" I began.

"Save your breath," he hissed. "I'll come for you." Then his mouth was covering mine in a kiss as heated as the battle cries of the Goblins rushing up behind us. Everything seemed to slow for that one brief second, and I was all too aware of the heat from his skin, the press of his chest against mine, the faint pennyroyal scent of him. I started to kiss him back—

—and then he was shoving me, hard, into the shadows. As I fell, I saw Tybalt wheel to launch himself at the Goblins, already snarling. Then the

shadows closed around me, and I found myself in the endless dark and crushing cold of the Shadow Roads . . . alone.

“Tybalt!” I shouted, before I could catch myself. The cold filled my mouth and flowed down my throat, making me feel like winter was devouring me from within. All the air seemed to rush out of my lungs, leaving me breathless and freezing.

I dropped to my knees, unable to see what was under me, and unable to entirely care. The cold was making me dizzy, and I had no idea how I could find my way out of the shadows alone. I barely even noticed when my eyes closed, trading the endless dark of the Shadow Roads for the endless dark inside my own eyes, and the world fell away.



NINETEEN

I GASPED FOR AIR, clutching the blankets to my chest as I sat bolt upright in the bed. Wait—blankets? Bed? I looked frantically around, taking in my surroundings. I was in a large, white-painted room. The furniture was simple and sturdy, and the single window looked out on a gold-and-purple Summerlands sky. I blinked. We must have crossed the boundary into Faerie while I was unconscious, leaving the mortal world behind.

We?

“Tybalt?” I said uncertainly. The room didn’t answer. I was alone. Alone, and—I looked down at myself to confirm my first impression—wearing a cotton nightgown with the crest of Shadowed Hills embroidered on the bodice. I touched the embroidery with one finger, sighing in relief. I was in Shadowed Hills. That was something good, at least. The film of May’s magic that had covered me was gone; whatever happened after Tybalt threw me into the dark must have stripped away my human disguise.

I stood slowly, keeping my hand on the carved oak bedpost to help my balance. My legs were wobbly, and my head felt like I was coming off a three-day bender.

“When I find that cat, I am going to kill him dead,” I muttered, and stalked to the door, yanking it open.

Jin was sitting in a wicker chair just outside, flipping through a large leather-bound book. She looked up when the door opened, and smiled. “You’re up,” she said. “How do you feel?”

“Naked,” I snapped, before I could think better of it. “Where’s Tybalt? How did I get here?”

“Are you having any muscle pain? Any difficulty breathing?”

“Now I’m feeling annoyed. Where’s Tybalt?”

Jin's smile faded into a look of aggravated amusement. "It's always good to see that severe injury doesn't do anything to improve your manners. Tybalt's in the Garden of Glass Roses. He's been there since I kicked him out of your room, which I only did because I was afraid he was going to wake you."

"Why didn't you let him?" I demanded. "What did he *do*?" The last thing I remembered was blacking out alone in the shadows—and if that wasn't the sort of thing that nightmares are made of, I didn't want to know what was.

"He pushed you through to the Shadow Roads to save your life." Jin shook her head. "He told me what was happening at the time. Do you have any idea how close you came to being elf-shot?"

"I survived it once," I said defensively.

"Yes, because your mother rebalanced your blood and weakened the enchantment," Jin shot back. "That sort of thing is a little bigger than elf-shot. If you'd been hit on the street, you would have died."

"He left me in the dark," I said, more quietly than I'd intended to.

Jin sighed. "Toby . . . he didn't mean to. As to why I didn't let him wake you, you needed the sleep more than he needed the reassurance. Healing as fast as you do doesn't mean you need to find new and exciting ways to get hurt. Healing is hard on the body, and doing it all at once doesn't make it any easier."

That statement gave me something new to worry about. "How long was I out?"

"About five hours. It's late afternoon." Jin looked into my face, studying my pupils. "You were suffering from hypothermia, and had a minor concussion, as well as an impressive number of scratches and bruises. I sang away the worst of it; you healed the rest on your own. You'll live, especially now that you've had some sleep."

"Good. Where are my clothes?"

"Wouldn't you like a sandwich? Maybe some coffee?"

"That depends. Do you want me to go storming through the knowe in my nightgown while you're making snacks?"

Jin glared, shaking her head. "There's nothing I can say that's going to make you go back to bed and take it easy, is there?"

"Jin, even under normal circumstances, getting me to 'go back to bed and take it easy' is borderline impossible. Right now, I need to go and yell at Tybalt until my throat bleeds, I'm working under contract for the Luidaeg,

and we're technically at war with the Undersea. If there's ever been a time when I was inclined to 'take it easy,' this isn't it."

"I could *make* you go back to bed," she said.

I paused. She probably could. I've seen Jin knock Sylvester out when he was in the middle of a full-blown panic attack, and he's a pureblood. I could argue . . . or I could tell her the truth about why Tybalt and I were outside, alone, when the Goblins came.

"Rayseline has Gilly," I said quietly. Jin stared at me. I kept talking. "She broke into my daughter's bedroom, and she took her. Gilly's mortal parents are hysterical; I'm not much better. I think she's probably with the sons of the Duchess of Saltmist, which means that if I want to find my daughter, I have to find them. If anyone's going to stop this war, it's going to be *me*." I balled my hands into fists, wishing desperately for something I could hit. "Now, please, Jin. Where are my clothes?"

She sighed, wings vibrating and sending a gust of glittering dust into the air. "They're in the middle drawer of the dresser, along with your knife and the jacket you were wearing. You're carrying some pretty potent magical items, you know."

"A girl likes to be prepared." I was already moving toward the dresser. If Jin didn't want to see me naked, she could leave.

Jin sighed again, sounding defeated. "Just be sure to see His Grace before you leave. He's worried about you." With this dire statement hanging between us, she closed the door, leaving me alone.

Jin wasn't exactly telling the truth when she said "my" clothes were in the dresser. My jacket was there, along with my knife belt, but everything else was new, courtesy of the wardrobes at Shadowed Hills. At least whoever picked them out wasn't trying to dress me like a girl this time, or an escapee from the Renaissance Faire—it was just a fresh pair of jeans and a dark green sweater too soft to be anything but cashmere.

"I am *not* paying to have this dry-cleaned," I muttered, yanking it on. Ignoring the door, I shrugged into my leather jacket and pressed my hand against a small, decoratively-carved panel set into the wall.

A door opened under my hand, and I stepped through.

Like any large knowe, Shadowed Hills is riddled with back routes and servants' halls, all tucked out of sight of the casual visitor. They provide the most direct routes through the knowe. Quentin uses the back routes through the knowe as much as he uses the main halls, and I've learned a lot about

navigating quickly since I started paying attention to where he goes. Getting from the guest rooms to the Garden of Glass Roses would normally be a ten- or fifteen-minute walk. By cutting behind the bulk of the walls and major thoroughfares, I got there in less than five.

The Garden of Glass Roses has always been one of my favorite parts of Shadowed Hills. Luna is a supernaturally skilled gardener, and nothing displays her skills as well as her living glass rosebushes. Not everything in the garden is glass—just the rosebushes and the butterflies—but the light that filters through them throws stained-glass shadows over everything, making the whole place seem like a cathedral. Few people go there; it’s a place for introspection more than casual strolls. Normal roses have thorns, but they don’t cut deep enough to leave you needing stitches. Glass roses are another story.

The door from the servants’ halls was concealed behind a stand of love-lies-bleeding. I stepped through and eased the door closed before moving into the open. “Tybalt?”

He whirled, eyes going wide. Then he smiled so broadly that it was like a second sunrise, starting toward me at a pace just shy of a jog. “October,” he said, relief naked in his tone. “You’re awake.”

“It had to happen eventually,” I said. He reached for my hands. I pulled them away, crossing my arms until I was practically hugging myself, like somehow that would defend me. From what, I didn’t entirely know. “What happened back there?”

“I—you were—I saw—” Tybalt stopped, and sighed, something unendurably weary in his eyes. “They almost shot you. I had to remove you from the line of fire.”

“So you *pushed* me into the *Shadow Roads*? Maeve’s teeth, Tybalt, did you not pause to think that maybe something could go wrong with *that* particular stroke of genius?”

He shook his head. “No. I did not pause. I did not hesitate. Your life was in danger, and while I knew the Shadow Roads would be less than hospitable, I also knew they wouldn’t kill you. I’m sorry to have harmed you. I’m sorry to have caused you distress. But what I did, I did to save you, and I would do it again, were the same moment to be set before me.”

I glared at him. He glared back. Finally, I said, “I’m supposed to be at the Queen’s Court at dusk. I should really get moving if I’m going to be on time.”

“Then we should go.”

I raised an eyebrow. “We?”

“We,” he said, firmly. “Be as angry with me as you like, October; the fact remains that you need me, at least for now. As I have already said, I’m sorry to have harmed you. I’m not sorry, in the slightest, to have saved you.”

I sighed. “You’re right. Come on.” The question of how we’d get from Pleasant Hill to San Francisco without my car or a trip down the Shadow Roads could be answered once we started moving. If all else failed, I could always call Danny.

“October . . .”

“Not now.” I shook my head. “We need to have this conversation, but we need to do it at a time that isn’t now. After Gilly’s back. After we stop this war. After I’ve had time to finish being mad at you.”

Tybalt smiled, very slightly, and nodded. “I suppose I can accept that.”

“Good,” I said. “Now come on.”

We walked to the garden door. The hall outside was deserted. That made sense. It was afternoon; most of Shadowed Hills would be asleep for a few more hours at least.

“Where do we begin?” Tybalt asked.

Now that I was past the initial rush of fury, every inch of me was screaming that I needed to go, go, find my daughter, and let the rest of Faerie hang. I couldn’t do that. Thankfully, I didn’t have to; finding Gillian would mean finding Rayseline, and the missing Lorden boys. I could do everything at once—assuming I could accomplish anything at all.

“First, we need to see Sylvester,” I said. “I have to tell him what we’ve learned. He needs to understand what’s been going on.”

“This isn’t likely to be something he’ll want to hear.”

I sighed. “It never is, is it?”

I could hear voices up ahead; some people were already awake and moving around. I picked up my pace, and was rewarded with the sight of two pages in the hall just around the corner, both of them sagging in that “up way too early” way. I vaguely recognized them as Quentin’s contemporaries and members of his general social circle within the knowe. Somehow, they looked like they were at most half his age. He’d been doing a lot of growing up lately, and doing it fast.

The Glastig spotted us first. His eyes went huge, and he poked his Cornish Pixie companion in the side, fast, before jerking his head in our direction. Her

eyes got even bigger. By the time we reached their position, both of them were standing at attention, spines locked like they'd been replaced with iron bars.

"Countess Daye—" began one, in perfect synch with the "Sir Daye—" from the other.

I smiled a little. "You should really get your titles straight before you try that again," I said. "Is Sylvester available?"

The Cornish Pixie swallowed hard. "He's waiting for you," she said. "In the throne room. He said to say if we saw you."

Sylvester had to know I'd go looking for Tybalt as soon as I woke up, and there are dozens of routes we could have taken from there. I raised an eyebrow. "How many of you does he have stationed around the knowe, waiting for me?"

"All of us, sir," said the Glastig.

"That's my liege." I sighed. "Do me a favor? If you see any of the other pages, let them know that I've been found, and they should get some sleep already."

"Yes, sir," said the Cornish Pixie.

Neither of them moved. They couldn't. Until Tybalt and I passed them, propriety demanded they stay exactly where they were. I offered them a shallow bow and started walking again, Tybalt walking along with me.

He waited until they were out of earshot before murmuring, "You do seem to enjoy making things difficult for yourselves in the Divided Courts. A Cait Sidhe page would have tracked us down, delivered the message, and gone off to chase rats until his mother called him home."

"Yeah, well, we get to skip the rat-chasing part, so I'm going to call us even."

Tybalt smirked. We walked on.

The throne room doors were standing open. I expected to find Sylvester and Luna alone, since everyone sane would be getting some sleep while they still could. Instead, we walked in on an earnest conference of knights, all of them assembled around the dais while Sylvester talked to them in a hushed voice. Luna was absent. Maybe that was for the best, given what I was about to tell her husband.

Grianne's Merry Dancers were the first to spot us. They abandoned their position near the ceiling to swoop down and weave a quick pattern around our heads before sailing onward to circle Grianne. She turned. The other two

knights in attendance—Etienne and Garm—did the same. Sylvester straightened, a look of naked relief sweeping across his face. The others stepped aside as he moved from the dais to the floor, and started toward us.

Tybalt and I kept walking. We were halfway across the floor when Sylvester reached us. He swept me into a fierce hug, whispering against my hair, “Tybalt told us. Oberon’s bones, October, I’m so sorry. All my resources are at your disposal.”

That was the best thing he could possibly have said. It was also the worst. Up until that moment, it was like I’d been moving in some sort of protective bubble, a thin layer of numbness that kept me from really thinking about the horror of what had happened. I’ve dealt with a lot of missing children—more than I care to think about. This was the first time the missing child had been my own.

“Sylvester, it was Rayseline,” I said, pulling away from him. I needed to see his eyes while I was telling him this. “There were traces of her magic in Gillian’s room.”

Sylvester froze. It was like watching him transform from a living man into a statue carved from ice. “Ah,” he said, very softly.

“She took the Lorden boys, too. Someone’s helping her—I don’t know who, but they’ve been brewing her charms that let her do these things. She’s already killed at least one person.” A single tear escaped, running down my cheek. I couldn’t let myself break down. Not yet. “That’s how she got into Saltmist. She killed a Selkie. The skin let her get inside.”

“You’re sure the Selkie is dead?” It was a small question. It was the biggest question in the world.

I nodded. “Yes. I am. She had to knock the Selkie out before she could take the skin, and she’s been using elf-shot. A Selkie without a skin is essentially human.”

“Oberon’s Law is broken, then. There’s nothing else I can do.” Sylvester stepped back. “Tell us what to do, and we’ll do it. Anything you need from me, or from my holdings, is yours.” He paused, and added, again, “I am so sorry.”

“So am I.” We’d both lost a daughter today—mine to kidnapping, his to the cold reality of Faerie justice. Rayseline had taken a life. There was nothing he could do to save her, not after that.

Tybalt cleared his throat. “If I may make a suggestion?”

“Please,” said Sylvester.

“Send the Lady Candela,” a nod toward Grianne, “out to search your lands, and the bounding lands as well. Her Merry Dancers see better than the majority of us, and she’s quite familiar with the magical traces left by the individual in question. Should she find anything, she can report back, and your Tuatha can easily investigate further.”

“That sounds like an excellent idea,” said Sylvester.

“I’m not quite done, if you would humor me.” Tybalt’s smile was anything but humorous. “October has an unpleasant tendency to leave herself without means of contacting those who might come to her aid. Is it possible she might be provided with one of the phones modified for use in the Summerlands? It would doubtless be useful in what’s to come.”

“Of course. Etienne!”

“Sire?” Etienne was abruptly next to Sylvester, despite not seeming to transverse the space between us and the dais. He probably hadn’t. Tuatha de Dannan are teleporters, and they’re way too casual about it for my taste.

“Please fetch Sir Daye a phone from the supply closet. Make sure it has one of those—what are they called again?”

“Chargers,” supplied Etienne.

“Yes. One of those.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” Etienne was just as abruptly gone, leaving the scent of limes and cedar smoke hanging in the air.

Sylvester turned his attention back to the pair of us. “Is there anything else?”

The ghosts of a thousand conversations we couldn’t have hung between us as I met his eyes, going back all the way to the day he begged me to bring his little girl home. I failed Rayseline, and now that failure was poised to destroy the one part of my life I’d foolishly assumed was safe from Faerie. “I need to get to the Queen’s Court,” I said. “I said I’d be there at dusk. Do you have a car I can borrow?”

“I’ll take you.” Etienne again, behind me this time. I whirled, staring at him. He held out a slim flip-phone and a car charger, offering them to me like they were the greatest weapons in the world. “I can take you both, if you’d like.”

“That won’t be necessary,” said Tybalt. I shot him a wounded look, and he continued, “I’m going to notify October’s friends and family of the situation, and tell her squire where she can be located. After that, well . . .” A small smile creased his lips. “One Candela can search a great many shadows. My

cats can search more.”

“Tybalt—” I stopped, swallowed, and finished, “If you don’t find anything, come back to the apartment?”

“Little fish.” He reached out to tuck a lock of hair behind my ear, and smiled. “As if you could prevent it?” Looking to Sylvester, he asked, “If I may?”

“Open roads,” Sylvester replied.

Tybalt smirked. Then he turned, stalking toward a shadow at the edge of the room. The shadow spread as he drew near, folding around him like a veil, and he was gone.

I turned to Etienne. “Are you sure you can do this?” It was an indelicate question, but I needed to be sure. Some Tuatha can cross continents in the blink of an eye, while others can only handle shorter hops. In all the time I’d known him, I’d never seen Etienne move farther than one side of the knowe to the other.

He looked affronted. “I wouldn’t offer if I wasn’t sure, October. Remember yourself.”

“Hey, I’m the one they gave a County to, remember?” My sense of humor is sometimes the only defense I have—inappropriate as it often is. I looked at Sylvester. “We have to go.”

“I know.” He smiled, just a little. It didn’t reach his eyes. “I know you won’t be safe. None of us is safe. But if you can, be careful?”

“If I can be, I will. But there’s nothing I won’t give up for my daughter. You understand that, don’t you?”

Sylvester nodded. Barely. He looked like he might break if he tried to do anything more. “I do. And I also understand what that means. Now go. There’s a great deal to do, and time is so very short.”

“I know.” I turned to Etienne. “Let’s go.”

Etienne raised his hand, transcribing an arch in the air. The scent of limes and sweet cedar smoke followed the motion, gathering as he pulled his spell together. There was a pause, like the world was holding its breath, and a pale disk appeared in front of him. It was the size of a door, hanging suspended in midair. I couldn’t see through it.

“After you,” said Etienne.

I looked around the hall one more time—maybe for the last time, considering what we were up against. And then I turned to the disk, took a deep breath, and stepped through.



TWENTY

THERE WAS A MOMENT OF blinding light, like we were stepping between levels of a knowe. Then everything froze, a second turning into a dozen seconds, and finally into what felt like the better part of an hour. Nothing moved, not even me. That's how I knew we were still in transit. I was starting to wonder if it was ever going to end—

—and then we were standing on the marble floor of the entry hall leading into the Queen's knowe. Etienne looked strained but reasonably untroubled by the transition. I wasn't quite so lucky. I blundered forward until I hit the point where the wall turned misty, leaning through the phantom stone to vomit into the water just outside. And people wonder why I skip meals when I'm working.

I pulled myself back into the knowe once I was sure I had nothing left to lose. "That wasn't fun," I said, wiping my mouth as I turned to Etienne. "Let's not do that again."

"As you've just been violently ill through the only exit I'm aware of, I think we may not have a choice," said Etienne. "Unless you feel like going wading?"

The thought made my stomach do another slow flip. "Okay. We can do it one more time." I wiped my mouth again, wishing I had something to take the taste away. "Come on."

"Naturally."

We walked down the silent hall to the doors—unguarded for once, leaving the knowe open to potential attack from outside. Either that was sloppy work, or I was missing something. There were no obvious wards set. If there was anything lurking to strike at unwelcome guests, we were going to find out the hard way.

"Super fun," I muttered, and opened the doors.

The Queen's ballroom was big enough to hold an army, and at the moment, that's exactly what it was doing. I stopped on the threshold and stared, staggered by the scene in front of us. The clang of metal and the buzz of voices filled the air. The scale of it was frightening. I'd seen the ballroom filled with people on occasions ranging from casual court to a formal trial, but I'd never seen it at capacity before. I was seeing it at capacity now.

Throngs of bodies were in motion everywhere, moving things from place to place, clustering in small groups which then scattered like flocks of pigeons, and never holding still. The purpose of the fuss was instantly clear, for all that I didn't want it to be: they were preparing for war. I knew things were serious—I had no illusions about that—but the scale of it still chilled me. The Undersea was bigger than I ever dreamed. Did all these people realize that? How many people were going to die if I couldn't stop this?

That was a stupid question. Even one death was too many, and we'd already suffered the first casualty of war: a Selkie whose name I didn't know, and whose face I might never have seen.

A page rushed past, arms loaded with bundled arrows. I grabbed his elbow, bringing him to an abrupt halt. He staggered, but managed not to drop anything as he turned in our direction, expression bemused.

"What are you doing? I need to get these arrows to—"

"You need to get us to the Queen," I said flatly. I wasn't in the mood to argue. My patience has never been legendary, and Raysel stole the last of it when she stole my daughter. "She's here somewhere. She's *always* here somewhere. Tell her Countess Daye is here in the company of Sir Etienne of Shadowed Hills. Tell her we seek an audience. Immediately." I let him go. Bemusement melting into something close to panic, he clutched the arrows to his chest and scampered away, vanishing into the crowd.

I hate doing that to pages. Most of them have never seen the world outside a court setting, and they're destined to grow up to be useless fops like Dugan, unless they get lucky and find a knight willing to teach them to be something better. Quentin is the exception where junior courtiers are concerned, not the rule.

"That was unkind," said Etienne.

"Forgive me if my manners aren't at their best just now. I have a lot on my mind." I glared at him, sidelong. "You're not a parent. You wouldn't understand."

"I don't pretend to understand your pain, October, but there are better ways

to express it.”

I sighed. “I guess. I just don’t know what to d—”

The word died as a slender female arm locked around my neck. Its owner brought her other hand up, pressing the edge of a knife to the skin just below my jaw. I froze. The “fight or flight” impulse gets a little muted when either response might leave me with an open jugular. I guess I have some sense of self-preservation after all.

“So you say you’re my dearest, most esteemed Countess Daye,” said the Queen, inches from my ear. “Yet others say the Countess Daye has turned traitor. Others say she’s gone to sea with the enemies of my Kingdom. That she sent her baby-faced death in her place because she couldn’t be bothered to cater to the whims of the woman she’s sworn to serve.”

“Uh, Etienne? A little help here?” I swallowed. The blade she was holding to my neck was very sharp, and I was suddenly intensely reminded of how much she disliked me—and how tempted she might be to “slip.”

“Your Majesty, the Countess Daye was merely undertaking her commission as she understood it, seeking to find the answers to the troubles which plague your fair Kingdom’s shores,” said Etienne, in a voice as slick as buttered silk. “There has been no treason here. You have my word on that.”

“Yours, but not her own? An interesting statement in and of itself.” The Queen’s breath was warm against my ear as she leaned closer, and hissed, “Blood will tell.” Even with her voice pitched so low it was barely audible, the power native to her bloodline—Siren and Banshee both run in her veins—hummed through my bones, chilling them. She can’t command you with her voice. But she *can* kill you.

“I believe the blade in your hand is distracting her such that she is unable to speak in her own defense,” said Etienne, still sounding utterly calm. I wasn’t sure whether I wanted to hug him for keeping things under control, or slap him for not pulling her off me. “If you would release her, I’m sure she would have a great deal of interest to share.”

There was a long pause. Finally, with a snort of derision, the Queen snapped, “Very well. But if she so much as twitches toward a weapon, both your lives are forfeit, for cause of treason.”

I found myself strangely relieved that she hadn’t said “for reason of treason.” I’m pretty sure the Queen would have slit my throat if I’d started giggling. “Cool by me,” I said, trying to move my vocal cords as little as possible.

“Then we are in agreement,” said Etienne. “Your Highness?”

The Queen pushed me away, making a sound that would have been rude coming from anyone who wasn't royalty. I took advantage of the shove, using it to justify taking two long steps away from her before I turned, dropping immediately into a full formal curtsy. It was the only appropriate thing to do.

“Rise,” snarled the Queen. “I would like the explanation I have been promised.”

I straightened, keeping my expression neutral. It wasn't easy. “Yes, Your Majesty.”

The threat of coming war had sea-changed the Queen of the Mists once again. Her white-foam hair was plaited back, making the alien lines of her face seem sharper and more angular. There was a new madness in her eyes, layered thick over the old, making it almost impossible to look into them for long. I forced myself to keep looking at her. Whatever she was looking for, she wouldn't find it if I let her stare me down.

She stared into my eyes for a count of ten, a wordless curse on her snarling face. Bit by bit, the new madness broke, fading back into the old, familiar kind of crazy. It said something about my day that I viewed this as an improvement. “Well?” she demanded.

The power had gone out of her voice. She was still an angry monarch, but she was no longer an angry monarch on the verge of making my brain run out of my ears. “Whoever told you they saw me enter the Undersea was correct. I was invited by the Duchess of Saltmist, so that I could search the quarters of her missing sons for any signs of who might have taken them.” I didn't mention that she'd invited me because I asked her to. Somehow, I didn't see that helping my case.

Her eyes narrowed. “How did you survive this ‘visit’?”

“I can show you. May I get something from my pocket?”

“If you reach for a weapon, my guards will cut you down before you draw.”

“Kinda figured.” I slipped my right hand into my pocket as slowly as I could, producing the shell the Luidaeg gave me. It was warm to the touch, but I couldn't tell how much of that was from my own body heat. “Have you seen one of these before?”

The Queen gasped. The sound grated against my bones. “Where did you . . .”

“You know the Luidaeg and I have a long-standing association. She wanted me to monitor the situation between the land and sea.” The shell was nothing but a communication device, but she didn’t need to know that. I sure as hell wasn’t going to show her any of the other things I was carrying.

“And she’s siding with the land?” Was that hope I heard in her voice? Hope, or something like it. I almost hated to dash it against the cold rocks of reality.

“She’s not siding with anyone. She can’t. But she can ask me to do it.” I glanced toward Etienne, offering what I hoped was a reassuring nod. The poor guy didn’t spend enough time around me to be used to this sort of thing. “She wants this resolved as much as the rest of us do.”

“So she sent you to the seas.” The Queen’s moon-mad eyes narrowed. “What did you learn?”

“That you weren’t responsible for what happened to the Lordens, but someone from the land was.” I took a breath, and launched into my explanation once again. I was starting to feel like I needed flash cards, just to make things go faster. The Queen listened without interruption, her face giving away nothing of what she was feeling.

I told her almost everything. Almost, because I wasn’t willing to tell her my daughter was among the missing. It wasn’t because I was afraid she’d take me off the case—that sort of thing only happens in the mortal world; in Faerie, danger to family is supposed to make you better at your job, not worse—but because if she waved Gillian off as an acceptable loss, I’d have to kill her.

Finally, I finished, and fell into an uneasy silence, waiting for her to respond. After a long pause, she said, “I see. You come here only to add worse news to what I already have. Your courtesy grows with every passing day.”

“I’m here to ask you, to *beg* you, to please call off this pointless war. At least one person has already died.” I offered my hands, palms up, in a beseeching gesture. “The Lordens know you don’t have their children. Help me find them. Give me the resources I need. Apologies and restitutions can be made, and we can end this.”

Her frown was almost puzzled this time. “Call it off? But you said it yourself. People have died. There’s no calling it off once blood is shed.”

“But—”

“Oberon’s Law is very clear. You, more than anyone, should know that.

Only in a time of war is killing justified, and I'd not make criminals of my subjects. The war goes forward. There will be a reckoning."

"For what? The damages done? Won't that just do *more* damage?"

"Then we'll have a reckoning for that, until the better side stands triumphant, and the last reckoning pays for all." She looked serious, like what she was saying made perfect sense. Her knife had vanished in the frills of her skirt, leaving her the very image of the innocent, slightly puzzled Queen of Faerie—Titania in disarray. I only had to see her eyes to know that I couldn't change her mind. As long as there was an excuse to fight, they'd fight. I had to take their excuses away, and that meant proving this war had been provoked.

"What if the Undersea forgives it?" I asked, desperately.

Her innocence cracked, revealing the anger in her eyes. "Would you have me forgive their insult?"

"If they can forgive a death, yeah, I sort of would. It seems like the reasonable thing to do, you know?" Etienne shot me an alarmed look. I did my best to ignore it. Maybe baiting the Queen isn't smart, but neither is going to war to prove that you can.

The Queen took a sharp breath. Then—so marginally I almost missed it—she nodded. "*If* the Undersea will absolve us of all complicity in this matter, and *if* no subject of this Kingdom dies . . . perhaps I can see fit to standing down the troops."

It wasn't enough. It was going to have to do. "Who told you I'd gone into the water?" I asked, trusting my abrupt change of subject to get me an answer.

"A messenger," she said, eyes narrowing.

"Who spoke to the messenger?"

"Dugan."

"In that case, we'd like to speak to Dugan, if you don't mind."

She looked like she wanted to refuse me, but couldn't find a good reason. In the end, she shook her head, and grudgingly replied, "Fine. He's in the armory."

"Your Highness is gracious," I said, and bowed before turning to walk away, leaving her standing, alien and angry, surrounded by the preparations for a war we didn't need to have.

Sometimes I think the world never learns. Or changes.



TWENTY-ONE

DUGAN WAS WHERE THE QUEEN said he❖❖d be: in the armory, conducting a small army of pages in the complicated business of preparing for a war. Most of them were too occupied with their tasks to notice our arrival. I cast a glance toward Etienne, raising an eyebrow. He was frowning, his attention on the children. I shared the sentiment.

It's hard to estimate age on fae kids—differing rates of growth and standards of physical maturity mean it's possible for an adolescent to be in his thirties, although most don't slow that sharply until they hit puberty—but even so, I wouldn't have placed some of those kids at more than nine. There's a certain ungainliness that comes with the years between eight and fourteen that tends to fade away on kids who get stuck at that age for more than the customary span. These kids didn't just look young; they *were* young.

“Should I be calling child welfare, Harrow?” I asked, leaning in the doorway.

Dugan's head snapped up, eyes widening, then narrowing as he took in the sight of me. He focused on Etienne, and spat, “You bring a traitor here, unbound? Is this a joke? Or have you elected to join her in her treasons?”

“Um, hello?” I raised a hand. “Not a traitor, and the Queen told us where to find you. Or do you think we're such major badasses that we fought our way through the knowe to come and loiter at you in an imposing fashion? Because I've got to say, I'm flattered.”

I was forcing a levity I didn't feel. It had the desired effect. Several pages ducked their heads, trying to hide their amusement. Dugan's anger faded as confusion and irritation battled for dominance over his expression. As seemed to be often the case with Dugan, irritation won. “How is it that you were allowed to enter without being arrested and—one would hope—executed on the spot?”

“I’m starting to think I may be the only person in this Kingdom who doesn’t see my survival as a bad thing.” I pushed away from the wall. “Well, except for the local King of Cats, and the Duke and Duchess of Saltmist, and most of the staff at Shadowed Hills, and everyone at Goldengreen, and if we’re done with the name-dropping and being pissy part of our program, we *did* come here for a reason. Beyond annoying you, I mean. That’s just a really nice bonus.”

“October,” said Etienne. He was trying to sound chiding, but he couldn’t even manage to sound like he meant it. Turning his attention back to Dugan, he continued, “We were sent by Her Highness to speak with you. If you would have a moment?”

“Oh, of course. I always have time to drop everything for the Countess,” said Dugan, sounding disgusted.

I smiled. There’s nothing like open disdain to make me feel better about my role in this world. “And that’s how I like it. Can we get on with it?”

“Will it make you leave faster?”

“Generally.”

“Please.”

“According to the Queen, you’re the one who spoke to the messenger who saw me go into the water with the Duchess of Saltmist. Can you describe this messenger to us, please?”

Dugan frowned. “You’re here for *that*?”

“Yup. So it should be easy for you to give me what I want and get me out of your hair.” A page paused next to me, staggering under the weight of his armload of arrows. I leaned over to steady him, never taking my eyes off Dugan. “I can wait until you do.”

“She was a changeling. Brown hair. Blue eyes. I’d never seen her before in my life.” He sneered. “Just another bit of mongrel trash seeking to purchase a place in the Court.”

“I’m going to ignore the part where you’re trying to bait me,” I said. “What else? What breed was she? Did she use magic in your presence?” A nasty suspicion was taking shape at the back of my mind. Brown hair and blue eyes didn’t describe any of the changelings I knew—except, by a very generous definition of “blue,” me. But illusions are wonderful things, and if you keep them subtle, they can make a lot of details difficult to be certain of.

“Some sort of Daoine Sidhe out-breed,” he said, sniffing. “I’m surprised you don’t know her by description, Daye. I’d think you mongrels would have

a great deal in common.”

“I’ve been upgraded to mongrel? You flatter me.” Taunting him was keeping me from losing my temper, if only just. “Magic, Harrow. Did she use any?”

“She had some sort of filter around her,” he said dismissively, as if nothing a “mongrel” did could be of any concern.

Idiots like that are why I sometimes despair for the future of Faerie. “What did it *smell* like?” I asked, from between gritted teeth.

“Wax,” he said, with a wave of one hand. “Wax and some sort of flower.”

That was what I’d expected. It still hurt to hear it said. “Cold wax, or wax from a candle that’s still burning?” Oberon help me, but I had to be *sure*.

“Hot.”

“I see.” The scent and feel of a person’s magic isn’t one hundred percent unique; I’m not the only one in Faerie who smells like copper when she casts a spell, although I’ve never encountered anyone whose magic incorporates all the elements mine does. Hot wax and flowers only described the magic of one person I’d ever met.

“Do you?”

The smugness on his face was too much for me to bear. I closed the distance between us in three long steps, grabbing his collar and yanking him toward me while the gathered pages gaped in dismay. “Do I see that you took the word of a woman whose magic marked her as being *Rayseline Torquill*? A woman who was wanted for *murder* in this Kingdom the last time I checked?”

“You dare!” Dugan flailed, trying to pull away. “Release me at once!”

“*Make* me,” I snarled, pulling him closer still. “Give me one good reason not to show you what this mongrel can do.”

“October!” Etienne grabbed my arm, trying to haul me off Dugan. “That is quite enough!” Bringing his face to my ear, he hissed, “Do not give the Queen cause to arrest you again. Not now. Not over him. He’s not worth your reputation.”

My anger needed something to focus on, and Dugan was more than suited to the position. But Etienne was right—if I got myself arrested, I wouldn’t be able to find the Lorden boys, and I wouldn’t be able to find my own daughter. The thought of Gillian was all that gave me the strength to relax my fingers. I shook Dugan once, hard, before releasing him. He staggered backward, staring at me, bug-eyed.

“I never thought you were a genius, Harrow, but by Maeve’s bones, before tonight, I never knew that you were such a twice-cursed *fool*,” I spat.

“You *dare*—” he choked, clutching his throat with one hand. I hoped like hell it was going to leave a bruise.

I took a step forward, feeling a cold satisfaction when he shied back, away from me. “I outrank you, and I’m pretty sure I can outfight you, so yes, I dare,” I said flatly. Raising my voice, I called to the pages, “Be careful with this man. He’ll give you orders that get you killed, as long as they make him look good. If you have a choice? Don’t listen.”

“Time to go,” said Etienne, taking my elbow.

“Yeah, I think you’re right.” I turned on my heel and stalked out of the room, feeling the stares of the pages on my back every inch of the way.

We were well down the hall and out of sight of the armory when Etienne tightened his grip, spinning me around to face him. “Are you *insane*?” he demanded. “Taunting Dugan Harrow is not a good idea!”

“Really?” I asked, scowling at him. “Why not? What can he do, Etienne? Glare at me across the room? Tell the Queen I’m a naughty girl? Oooh, I’m shaking. I can’t lose his good opinion. I never had it.”

“It doesn’t matter that he’s not her seneschal, and it doesn’t matter that he doesn’t think well of you. Taunting him is still foolish.” He let go of me. “I taught you better than to lower yourself to his level—and he’s hungry, October. Daoine Sidhe without position are always hungry. You’d know that, if you—” He stopped, looking stricken, as as he realized what he’d been about to say.

“If I were Daoine Sidhe,” I finished, since he clearly wasn’t going to. “If I were Daoine Sidhe, I’d know about being hungry for power and position, and wanting to have something I could control. I guess we’re all lucky I’m not Daoine Sidhe, huh?”

Etienne lowered his eyes, looking ashamed. “I apologize. I should never have said that.”

“You didn’t.” I paused. If I were Daoine Sidhe—what I always believed myself to be—I would have understood being hungry for power. But I’m Dóchas Sidhe, and that means I understand something different.

I understand blood.

“Change of plans. Can you transport us again?” I asked.

“What?” Etienne raised his head. “I—yes, of course, if it’s only the two of us. Have you found everything you need? Is it time to return to Shadowed

Hills?”

“Not quite.” I pulled the borrowed phone from my pocket, holding it up for him to see. “I need to make a few phone calls. But first, we’re going to Goldengreen.”

Etienne frowned. “Are you intending to do something foolish?”

“I guess that depends on your definition.” I shrugged. “But yeah, by most definitions, probably. Come on, Etienne. Let’s go prevent a war.”



TWENTY-TWO

THE DISTANCE BETWEEN the Queen's Court and Goldengreen is shorter than the distance between Shadowed Hills and the Queen's Court. That, combined with my lack of anything that even resembled food, probably explained why I didn't feel the need to throw up after we made the crossing. I did stagger backward until my butt hit the wall, and slump forward to rest my hands on my knees, panting a little.

Etienne watched impassively. "You know, for someone who spends so much time bleeding, you have very little resistance to vertigo."

"Is that what this is? Because it feels more like I just rode a big roller coaster about eight times."

"Yes, precisely." Etienne shook his head. "Are you like this every time you travel with the King of Cats?"

"Nope." The room was mostly done spinning. I straightened cautiously. My stomach chose to stay where it was. "The Shadow Roads go in more for freezing me to death. Puking is new and exciting."

"Your way with words remains unmatched." Etienne wrinkled his nose. "Much as I appreciate a regent's desire to return to their home fiefdom, what, precisely, are we doing here?"

"Lots of things. Come on." I started down the hall. Etienne followed. "Have you been here before?"

"Not in many years."

"So you haven't seen the place since we redecorated. Gotcha." One of the resident bogeys skittered across the wall at head-height before vanishing into the rafters.

Etienne's eyes widened. "Did you see that?" he asked.

"Yeah, we've got bogeys. They're sort of in charge here. It's a long story." I stuck my head into the kitchen. Marcia was at the counter, directing a pair

of Urisks and a young Barrow Wight through the process of making bread. “Hey, Marcia?” I called. “Can I borrow you for a second?”

She looked up, smiling brilliantly. A smudge of flour was on one cheek, just under the circles of faerie ointment that ringed her eyes. “Toby!” She patted one of the Urisks on the shoulder. “You guys are doing fine. Just keep doing what you’re doing—and try not to get any more bogeys in the dough, okay? I’ll be right back.” Apparently satisfied that she’d managed to keep her apprentices from giving us all food poisoning, she walked toward us, wiping her hands on her apron. “What are you doing here? I thought you’d be at the Queen’s Court. And who’s your friend?”

“This is Sir Etienne of Shadowed Hills. Etienne, this is my seneschal, Marcia.”

If Etienne was surprised to hear that a quarter-blood changeling was my seneschal, he was well-bred enough not to show it. Instead, he offered her a shallow bow, and said, “A pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“Nice to meet you,” said Marcia, dipping a quick curtsy before turning her attention back on me. “So what’s going on? Did you stop the war?”

“Not quite. I’m still working on it.” I briefly considered telling her about Gillian, but dismissed the idea. Marcia had enough to worry about. I didn’t want to make things worse until I absolutely had to. “Do you have a pen I can borrow?”

“A pen?” She blinked before rummaging in the pocket of her apron and producing a plain ballpoint pen. There were tooth marks in the white plastic. It looked so ordinary I could have cried. “Will this work?”

“That will work just fine.” I took the pen, pulling one of Dianda’s bottles from my pocket. “I need to write a note. While I’m doing that, can you make sure the solarium is cleared out? I’m going to make a few phone calls, and then I need to invite some visitors over to talk to me.”

“Visitors?” said Etienne, frowning.

“The solarium?” said Marcia. Her frown was less concerned, and more thoughtful. “Sure. We’ve been using it for storage, but we can shift everything in there out to the hallway.”

“Do that. I’m going to need some privacy.” What I was considering was probably insane. At that moment, I didn’t care. Rayseline Torquill had my daughter, and there was one person in the world who was likely to know where she was.

The Selkie who she’d killed.

I opened the first bottle, shaking out the scrap of paper and pressing it flat against the doorframe. “Etienne, when you get back to Shadowed Hills, let Sylvester know about the disguise Raysel used in the Queen’s Court. I mean, it’s not likely she’ll try to sneak into the knowe, but you never know, right? Better safe than sorry.”

“Of course,” he said, frowning. “What do you mean, ‘visitors’? Who are you asking to come here?”

“Pretty much everyone.” I tapped the paper, and then went back to scribbling. My handwriting is nothing to brag about, but it’s legible. Usually. “This is an update for the Duchess of Saltmist, since I’d rather she didn’t get pissed off because she thinks I’m withholding information. Then I’m going to call May, and have her bring the car—”

“You’re going to let her drive?” said Marcia, sounding both horrified and amazed.

“I need the car. Can you think of a better way to get it here?” I handed Marcia her pen before rerolling the scrap of paper and tucking it back into the bottle. “Anyway, as I was saying, I’m going to call May. And then I’m going to call the Luidaeg, and ask her for a quick and dirty version of the ritual I used to summon the night-haunts.”

“*What?*” demanded Etienne.

“*What?*” echoed Marcia.

“I really don’t have time to argue about this.” I corked the bottle, checking twice to be sure the seal was tight. Dianda said it would find her. I wanted it to find her with the contents intact. “I’m going to call the night-haunts.”

“*Why?*” asked Marcia.

“Rayseline killed a Selkie in her effort to steal the Lorden boys from their home. October believes that the murder victim will be able to provide her with answers,” said Etienne, a slow mixture of revulsion and admiration in his tone. “Sir Daye, I cannot recommend this course of action.”

“Wow, I suggest something this crazy and I go back to being ‘Sir Daye’? What do I have to do to get you to call me ‘Countess’?”

“Let’s not find out,” said Etienne flatly.

“The night is young.” I whistled. One of the knowe’s seemingly countless pixies appeared from inside a cabinet—I probably didn’t want to know what it was doing in there, or how many others were in there with it—and came to hover in front of me at eye-level. I held up the bottle. “Can you throw this into the ocean, please? Don’t open it. Just throw it in the water.”

Pixies are smarter than most people give them credit for. This one planted her hands on her diminutive hips, wings buzzing like mad, and said something incomprehensible in the tinkling language of the pixies.

Fortunately, I've had enough experience with the local colony to know what she was probably asking for. "A loaf of bread and a pitcher of cream," I said, like I was agreeing to something.

The pixie darted forward and grabbed the bottle from my hand before flying out of the kitchen and down the hall. Five more pixies appeared from inside the cabinet and flew after her. The bread-makers didn't even look up. After you've been in Goldengreen for a little while, this sort of thing becomes commonplace.

Marcia looked at me quizzically. "Why did you bribe the pixies? I could have thrown your bottle in the water for free."

"Mostly because I'm about to summon the night-haunts into their knowe, and I figure that if I'm not going to ask for permission, I should try to make sure they're in a good mood."

"I wish that didn't make sense," said Marcia, and sighed. "Are you *really* going to summon the night-haunts?"

"Got a better plan?" Neither of them said anything. "Didn't think so."

"I have no desire to witness this," said Etienne. "I'll be returning to Shadowed Hills now, if you have no further need of me."

"No, I'm good," I said. "Let Sylvester know what's going on, and what I'm doing."

Etienne nodded, and offered a small bow to Marcia. Then he turned, stepping out into the hall. The smell of limes and cedar smoke wafted in his wake, and I knew, even without checking, that he was gone.

Marcia glanced after him before asking, "Is there anything I can do?"

"Make bread for the pixies?" I smiled a little. "And tell anyone who comes asking for me that I'm busy until further notice."

"Got it." She smiled back, hesitantly. "Are you sure this is safe?"

"Nope. But I need to know."

There were other things I could have done. I could have called Bucer and tried to bully him into finding me more information. I could have called Danny and begged him to drive me all over the city, looking for traces of Raysel's magic. I could have asked Tybalt for the loan of his Court, and sent them searching. There are always other options. But all of them would take time, and time was the one thing I wasn't sure Gillian had. Maybe if I hadn't

passed out after Tybalt threw me into the shadows . . .

But I had. And I needed to find Rayseline, fast.

I dialed my home number as I walked down the hall, nodding genially to the people I passed. I still didn't know all their names. That made me feel like a bit of a heel, when I thought about it.

May picked up, asking hopefully, "Toby?"

"How did you know it was me?"

"I've been answering the phone like that since Jin called to say that you'd left Shadowed Hills. Where are you? Is Tybalt with you? What *happened*? Where's Gillian?"

"I'm at Goldengreen, and I'm pretty sure you'd just freak out more if I told you what happened over the phone, so how about I tell you when you get here?"

May paused. "When I get there? What?"

"I need you to bring the car over."

"Um." May managed to pack a truly impressive amount of dubiousness into a single syllable. "Toby? Jazz doesn't drive, Quentin's too young to get a license—and I don't think he's had driver's education—and Raj is, well, Raj. How are we supposed to get the car to you?"

"You're going to get the spare key from the bowl on my dresser, and you're going to drive."

"You're not really Toby, are you? You're a Doppelganger or something. Toby would *never* tell me to drive her car to Goldengreen."

"Desperate times call for desperate measures. Besides, how bad can it be?"

"I hate you," said May balefully.

"So you'll come?"

"We're on our way." She hung up.

I had to smother a smile. My former Fetch is the worst driver I've ever met. She might, with a little effort, be the worst driver in the world. I just hoped Quentin and Raj were smart enough to wear their seat belts.

I dialed again as I walked across the courtyard, heading for the hall that connected it to the knowe's unused throne room. It was the only room in the knowe that Evening really seemed to be fond of. We've left it empty, partially in honor of her, and partially because it creeps the rest of us out. Even the bogeys stay away. I don't know exactly why . . . but Evening's fondness for using pixies as lighting fixtures may have had something to do with it.

Getting through the mortal phone system and into the limited fae exchange requires a unique approach to dialing. I hit all the keys in a clockwise spiral, then repeated the pattern in the opposite direction. I hit the “five” three more times for good measure.

“Please hold while your party is reached,” I said, singsong. “You may press the pound sign to return to this menu at any time. To be assassinated by a tribe of warrior grasshoppers, press three.”

The phone beeped twice before beginning to hiss shrilly. That was a good sign. That meant the connection was working. I punched another succession of buttons, this time running through the multiples of nine, until the hissing was replaced with the sound of cement grinders grinding away on the other end. I stopped walking, leaning up against the wall next to the dais that used to hold Evening’s throne.

The cement grinders ground for a few seconds more, then stopped abruptly, replaced by the Luidaeg demanding, “October? Is that you?”

The sound of her voice filled me with a profound sense of relief. I closed my eyes, allowing myself to sag against the wall. “Luidaeg,” I said. “Yeah. It’s me.”

“What’s going on? Did the transformation charm work? Why haven’t you checked in?”

“Yes, it worked, I haven’t checked in because I passed out after Tybalt threw me onto the Shadow Roads to keep me from getting elf-shot, and what’s going on is that Rayseline’s insane. She took my daughter, Luidaeg. She took Gillian.” My voice was verging on a panicked whine. I forced myself to pull it back. “Why would she do that?” I asked, more softly. “Why would she take Gilly?”

“To throw you off-balance,” said the Luidaeg, not missing a beat. “To hurt you.” There was something in her voice I didn’t like. Normally, the Luidaeg is so honest it hurts. She may not give complete answers, but the ones she does give are entirely true. Now . . . I didn’t get the impression that she was lying to me, but I definitely felt like there was something she wasn’t letting herself say.

I took a deep breath. “Luidaeg? What aren’t you saying?”

“Toby . . .” The Luidaeg sighed. “She’s just a quarter-blood. Maybe less, given what your mother did to you when you were a little girl. That’s protected her until now.”

“What are you talking about?”

“There are . . . rituals . . . that need certain types of blood if they’re going to work.”

The last of the light seemed to go out of the world. “What?”

“Rayseline doesn’t have a hope chest. She doesn’t need one, if she has Gillian.”

“Is she . . . Luidaeg, is she . . .”

“I don’t know whether she’s alive or not. I’m sorry.” She sounded genuinely regretful. That didn’t lessen the urge to scream.

Eyes still closed, I counted silently to five before saying, “I have one potential witness to wherever it is Raysel is taking these people. We need to talk . . . immediately.”

“And . . . ?” said the Luidaeg, suspicion creeping into her tone.

“And the person in question is dead. I need to talk to the night-haunts, and I don’t have time to screw around with waiting for midnight, or with complicated ritual circles. Tell me how to get them here fast.”

The Luidaeg sighed. “This isn’t the best idea.”

“I never expected it to be.”

“And there’s no other way?”

“You just told me the crazy girl who stole my daughter may have done it to fuel some big ritual that you can’t tell me anything else about. The Lorden boys are still missing, and the Queen is still planning to go to war. No, there’s no other way. Not now. Now tell me how to call the night-haunts.”

“Bleed for them.”

I opened my eyes. “What?”

“Go someplace private, someplace they can reach you, and draw a circle in your own blood. All you have to do is bleed for them, and call.”

Summoning the night-haunts was a lot more complicated the first time. Suspiciously, I asked, “There’s nothing else?”

“Not anymore. You’re stronger than you were, and they know you.” Her chuckle was entirely without mirth. “Better than you think they do. Just call, and they’ll come. But be careful with them. Don’t agree to anything you’re not willing to live with.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. I’ll check in with you later.”

“I hope so,” she said, and hung up.

I looked at the phone in my hand for a moment, resisting the urge to smash it against the wall. Then I tucked it into my pocket, turned, and walked through the archway behind the throne.

Connor and I were running for our lives from Devin's hired assassins the first time I used that door. We didn't know the hall would end by opening onto empty air, or that running down it without a backup plan was a good way to find ourselves trying to figure out how to fly. I can't fly. I figured that one out fast. And that's why I no longer run down blind halls when I have any choice in the matter.

I was moving more slowly this time. Marcia's assistant bakers brushed past me as I walked, both pausing long enough to bow shallowly in my direction. If they were puzzled by their orders, they weren't going to show it. Never question the nobility. It just annoys them, and irritated nobles are a dangerous thing.

It bothered me that I could be classed with the nobility now. It bothered me a lot.

The hall was narrow at first, but widened as I got closer to the solarium. It also became more cluttered, with boxes and pieces of broken furniture stacked against the walls. True to her word, Marcia had arranged to have the room emptied for my use. I smiled a little. If she'd been an employee, it would have been time to give her a raise.

The air tingled around me as I walked, crackling with excited static. The hall marked the dividing line between the Summerlands side of the knowe and the mortal world cave that served as one of the primary anchor points. That made it a liminal space, belonging simultaneously to both worlds, and to neither.

A recessed doorway was hewn out of the wall at the spot where the static was the most severe—still in the knowe, but close enough to the mortal world to be overlooked, almost hidden. A person could walk down the hall a dozen times and never find the opening. I put my hand on the flat groove worn into the door itself, pushed it open, and stepped through. It was time to do something I'd intended never to do again. It was time to call the night-haunts.



TWENTY-THREE

THE SOLARIUM WALLS WERE GRAY stone shot through with veins of quartz and studded with fossils. Careful study would show extra legs on the lizards and vestigial wings on the prehistoric mice. This was a Summer-lands mountain, and the secrets it held had no real connection to mortal evolution. The smooth gray floor was patterned with the lacy ghosts of fossil ferns.

Moonlight streamed into the room through the crystal panels set into a silver cobweb grid high overhead. I took a hook from the wall and walked carefully around the room, using the specially-designed tool to open the windows one by one. The night-haunts could have found a way inside without that small courtesy, but it never hurts to be polite, especially when asking for a favor.

Once all the windows were open, I returned the hook to its place on the wall. Then I walked to the center of the room, drawing the knife from my belt. Moonlight cast sharp, secretive glints off the silver. I didn't pause before dragging the blade across the inside of my left elbow. Bright blood welled immediately to the surface. I tilted my arm down to let the blood run down my fingers and began to turn, drawing a bloody circle on the floor around me.

"I need your help," I said, quietly. "I need your attention. I need you to come to me. Please, if anything remains between us, please, come to me now. I've never needed you more." The smell of cut grass and copper rose around me, heavy and cloying. I licked my lips, and added plaintively, "Please."

Silence fell. I returned my knife to its holster, clapping my right hand over the cut I'd made and pressing down to stop the bleeding. It was already slowing down. Just one more advantage of supernaturally efficient healing, I suppose.

Seconds ticked past, stretching into minutes. The smell of my magic didn't fade, and the night-haunts didn't come. I was on the verge of giving up when

the spell surged and burst around me, leaving my head aching and the smell of copper hanging in the air.

And then I heard the sound of wings.

A thin stream of night-haunts flowed in through the windows above me, moving with an economy that made sense, considering that half of them were little more than shadows. The more solid members of the flock—the ones that had eaten the most recently—clustered around the outside, keeping their frailer companions from being scattered by the wind. They were all about the size of Barbie dolls, with tattered dry-leaf wings that looked too frail to lift them off the ground.

As they drew closer, I started to see individuals among the flock. Too many of them were familiar. The night-haunts have no faces of their own, so they borrow the faces of fallen fae, taking on their minds and memories . . . for a while. Seeing them always hurts, but it's a good kind of pain, like having the chance to see something you thought was lost forever just one more perfect time.

The night-haunts surrounded me, their expressions giving no clue as to whether they were pleased or aggravated by my summons. Most of them stopped about six feet above the floor, hovering in place while one of the ones I recognized—the one with the face of Devin, my teacher, lover, and betrayer—barked instructions in a guttural language I didn't know.

I swallowed, fighting the first tremors of fear. All I could do was hope they were willing to listen, and that I was right about the rules governing their interactions with the living.

“We didn't think to see you alive a second time, October Daye, daughter of Amandine,” said the night-haunt with Devin's face. He landed on the floor, closing his wings with an audible snap as he looked me slowly up and down. “You aren't what you were.”

“None of us are what we were,” I said, and frowned. He hadn't been their spokesman before. I glanced around the flock, but the night-haunt with Dare's face was nowhere to be seen.

There were new faces among the night-haunts, some I knew, a few that I didn't. Oleander de Merelands was there. So was Dare's brother, Manuel, and Gordan, the only one from ALH Computing to die a “natural” death. There were more Cait Sidhe than I expected. Tybalt never told me how many of his subjects died when Oleander poisoned them. It looked like the casualties were higher than I ever guessed.

Devin's haunt followed my gaze and said, "The hunting has been good of late."

"Uh, yeah." I cleared my throat. "Look, I was hoping you'd be willing to talk with me."

"That's usually the reason for a summons." He looked at my simple circle, eyebrows raising in that old, familiar gesture of silent judgment. "No flowers? No pretty words or symbolic deaths?"

"Like you said, I'm not what I once was." I crouched to put myself on his level. "I didn't send the summons on a whim. I had no other choice. I need your help."

He smiled. The other night-haunts tittered. "My dear October," he said, in a tone that was pure Devin, oozing charm and danger in equal measure, "why would we ever deign to help you? We're not in the business of helping people. Really, darling, I don't understand."

Time to deal with the devil. I took a deep breath, and said, "Rayseline Torquill has stolen the children of the Duke and Duchess of Saltmist. I don't know why—not yet—but I need to find out, or a lot of people are going to get hurt."

Devin's haunt cocked his head, smile twisting into a familiar expression of amused contempt. "And what makes you think we don't *want* 'a lot of people' getting hurt? We need to eat if we're to live."

"You remember being us," I said, quietly. "You remember what it was like to live. I know you need to eat. But I can't imagine you'd wish for war."

The night-haunts whispered among themselves, the sound like wind rattling through the branches of skeletal trees. I shivered as I listened to them, and part of me noted, analytically, that the Luidaeg never actually said my circle would protect me. If they decided they just wanted to kill me and be done, I might be in for the fight of a lifetime.

I was getting tired of being in an endless succession of things called "the fight of a lifetime." Just once, I'd like to have the fight of a Tuesday afternoon. "Please," I said.

The haunt with Devin's face looked at me solemnly. "You aren't what you once were," he repeated, and the words were all the more unnerving because they were spoken in the voice of my old mentor. "You're becoming what I always thought you'd be. Who are you looking for?"

"A Selkie. I don't have a name, and I don't know whether they're male or female, but they would have died recently, and without their skin."

“She didn’t expect to kill me,” said a voice behind me. I turned, and found myself looking at a diminutive figure—diminutive even by night-haunt standards—with ruddy brown hair and freckles spattered across her heart-shaped face. I recognized her vaguely. We’d probably been at the same formal events.

I’d never asked her name.

“Are you the one I’m looking for?” I asked.

She nodded, stepping forward. She stopped with her bare toes just shy of my circle’s edge. “My name is—my name was—Margie. I was in service to Her Grace, the Duchess of Saltmist, these last fifty years.”

What do you say to someone who’s dead? “I’m sorry for your loss,” I said, the words sounding idiotic even as they left my lips.

“So am I,” she said, smiling very slightly. “Mistress Torquill approached me at the Farmer’s Market, of all mad places, and said she wished to speak with me—said she needed a Selkie’s perspective on some matter of great importance. I spoke with her because I thought she wished to make peace with Connor. I began to hope she might have found it in herself to come home to her husband, to begin to make amends.”

That was a more charitable view of Rayseline Torquill than I’d been able to maintain in a long time. I tried not to let that show on my face as I asked, “So you went with her?”

“Not right away, but I went to meet with her that night, yes,” said the night-haunt who’d once been Margie. Regret danced behind her eyes. “She asked me if I would be willing to meet with her near the docks behind the ballpark. I saw no harm in it. I went. And while she was standing in front of me, and us all alone, someone struck me from behind, and everything went black.”

I felt my brief sense of hope wither and die. There was no way Raysel was keeping the children at the docks. They’re big, but they have a high fae population, and the Lordens had been sending people out looking for the kids for days now. If the boys were alive and at the docks, they would have already been found.

“Is that where you died?” I asked.

The Margie haunt blinked, looking surprised. “No, it’s not. I woke again in a room with walls of stone and straw strewn on the floor. The air smelled of spices, like we were near some sort of a kitchen, or maybe a restaurant. I was bound, hand and foot.” Her expression darkened. “Mistress Torquill was

there. She had an arrow in her hands. A black arrow, barely the length of a knitter's needle."

"Elf-shot," I guessed aloud.

"Yes. She said she was going to make me sleep for a while—a long, long while—and that while I slept, my skin would be out, making mischief in the world. Then she stabbed the arrow into my shoulder, and everything went away again." The night-haunt's face crumpled like she was going to cry. "I don't think she meant to kill me. She merely meant for me to be blamed for her crimes until the day I woke."

Selkies without their skins are basically humans with a strange fondness for the beach. "You died when she took your skin," I said.

Margie's haunt nodded. "I did."

"Did you see anything that might help me find the place where you were being held—anything at all? Did you hear something, smell something . . . ?"

"There were the spices . . . redwoods. I smelled redwood trees, and old earth, earth that had been let to decay without disturbance for a long, long time. The place I was in, it was underground, and it felt like a knowe, but not like a knowe."

"Could you have been in a shallowing?" A proper knowe is built entirely in the Summerlands, where the laws of Faerie reign supreme. Sometimes, these days, that isn't possible. There's not enough land for that. So knowes get built in the shallow space between the worlds, dug out of ground that's neither here nor there. They can scramble things, just because the words don't exist to properly describe them.

The night-haunt looked thoughtful. "I rather think it could have been, yes."

A shallowing in a place with redwood trees and old earth. There was one more thing: "Did you smell the sea?"

"No."

That meant it was somewhere inland. Maybe Dean Lorden was still alive after all. "I will do my best to avenge you, Margie. I'm sorry you died."

"I'm not," she said sweetly. I was still staring at her when she continued, "I may look like the Selkie lass whose death I wear, but without that death, I'd look like nothing at all. Don't forget that we are two things at once, and never only the thing you can see."

"This can't be the only reason you called us." The night-haunt with Devin's face flew around the circle to land next to Margie. "You take your work seriously—in part, I think, because you have so little skill for some of it

—but this is too big a danger for this stage in the game, over something as small as two children that you’ve never met. What else is going on, October? What else is wrong?”

“It’s my daughter, Devin.” The name slipped out before I could stop it. I blinked back sudden tears and kept going, saying, “She’s missing. Rayseline took her, and she’s probably holding her with the Lorden boys. I have to get her back. I *have* to.”

“Oh, October.” He looked at me gravely. “Keep hope. She is not among our number. Her blood is thin, but her death would call us all the same.”

My eyes widened. “I . . . really?”

“Really.” I felt his hand brush my knee. The gesture was so much something Devin would have done when he was alive, before he went crazy, that I stopped being able to keep my tears from falling. “Keep hope.”

“I’ll try.” I wiped my eyes with my left hand, remembering the blood too late. Oh, well. I’ve had worse things on my face. “I don’t know how free you are to go where nothing has died, but . . . if one of them dies . . . can you find me? Can you tell me?”

I didn’t want to think of any of the three missing children as expendable. Two of them would start a war, and one of them was my only daughter. But if it happened, if one of them died . . . maybe I could get to the other two in time.

The night-haunt with Devin’s face turned to the others. Buzzing and rattling filled the room, like a thousand dead branches scraping against each other. Finally, the susurrus faded, and he turned back to me. “We will,” he said. “This one time, we will.”

“I . . .” Biting back the urge to thank him was almost impossible. I swallowed hard, and said, “This is very kind of you. I know you don’t have to do this.”

“So return the kindness,” he said. “Answer a question for us.”

I blinked. “Of course. What do you want to know?”

“Why aren’t you dead?”

I hadn’t expected the question, or the naked confusion in his voice. I stared at him for a moment before managing to say, “I’m alive because . . . well, because I haven’t died. I don’t know why. How the hell am I supposed to know?”

“A Fetch was called for you,” he said. “We sent her off with weeping and all proper ceremony. But here you are, and your Fetch is still alive.”

“The natural order of things is not preserved,” said the night-haunt with Margie’s face, punctuating the statement with a snap of her wings. “You can’t exist like this.”

“Since when does the natural order of things have anything to do with Faerie?” A soft grumbling swept through the night-haunts. I sighed. “The natural order of things is going to have to cope, because I need May to keep paying her share of the rent.”

“This isn’t right.” The night-haunt with Oleander’s face muscled her way forward, glaring at me. We didn’t part on the best terms. I killed her, after all. “You should be dust and memory. Your Fetch should be a rattle on the wind, a warning to our children.”

“She’s not, and neither am I,” I snapped, tucking my hair back to display the recently sharpened point of one ear. “See? I died. Mom just refused to let it stick.”

“Must your line forever be so cavalier with death?” asked the Devin-haunt. The others sighed, like dry leaves brushing together. “We’ll come to you if we learn anything, but you can’t do this again, Toby. The courtesy we can afford for the sake of the life you saved can only extend so far. We’ll be going now.” The flock began to rise.

“Wait!” I said. “What are you—”

I was too late. The night-haunts left as quickly as they’d come, leaving me standing alone in my rough circle of blood.

“—talking about?” I finished, to the silence.

The silence didn’t answer.



TWENTY-FOUR

MARCIA WAS WAITING in the throne room when I emerged. Her easy pose against the wall must have taken some serious thought—she could only have looked more casual if she'd been wearing a bikini and sipping a cocktail. I stopped where I was, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes?” I asked.

“How did it go?” Marcia abandoned her faux relaxation in favor of standing up straight, turning the full focus of her attention on me. “Did they tell you anything good?”

“The night-haunts were obscure and unnerving, but they told me some things I needed to know,” I said, walking past her. She fell into step behind me. “The Selkie Raysel killed was named Margie, and the Lorden kids aren't dead.”

“That's good—the boys, I mean, not the dead woman.” She walked a little faster as she pulled up alongside me, and frowned, studying my face. “That is good, right? Because you look like it's really bad.”

There was no point in trying to conceal the truth forever. I've never been any good at that sort of thing, anyway. “My daughter's missing.”

“Wait—what? You have a daughter?”

“Yeah. Gillian. She lives with her human father. Rayseline took her, and I need to find her, fast, before there's time for her to suffer any permanent damage.”

Marcia took a short, sharp breath, like she was biting off an exclamation. Then she went quiet, walking with me across the courtyard and down the hall to the kitchen without saying a word.

It wasn't until I was reaching for the pot of coffee that simmered gently on the stove that she said, very softly, “What makes you think she hasn't already?”

I paused for a moment, my hand just shy of the handle. Then I finished the motion, trying to let the familiarity of it soothe me. It wasn't working. Sometimes, even ritual has no comfort left to give. "What do you mean?" I asked.

"I mean . . . Toby, if she lives with her *human* father, that means she's a quarter-blood."

"If that," I muttered darkly. "What's your point?"

"Does she even know Faerie exists? How do you know she hasn't already been hurt, just by finding out how much she doesn't know?" Marcia shook her head. "I've known a lot of changelings who couldn't cope with learning that their parents—" She stopped mid-sentence, looking stricken.

I sighed, and finished, "With learning that their parents lied to them. Because that's what we do when we play faerie bride. We lie. We lie to our lovers, and we lie to ourselves, and if we're really lucky, when our children find out that we're liars, they forgive us, and grow up to become liars in their own right."

"Yeah." Marcia bit her lip, looking at me. "You lied to her, Toby. For her whole life. And now she's in a situation she never had a reason to prepare for, and she's probably scared to death, and I mean, you're right, we need to get her back, but I don't think we can say she hasn't already been hurt."

Her words hurt more than I could have imagined. I closed my eyes for a moment, counting slowly to ten before I opened them again, and said, "That doesn't matter. All that matters now is that I'm going to get her back. I'm going to find a way to save her."

"And you're going to stop the war at the same time, right?"

"I . . ." I paused. I was starting to feel overwhelmed. Too much was happening. I just wanted to crawl into a cup of coffee and wait until it all went away. "I'm going to do the best I can."

Marcia nodded. "I guess that's all I can ask for. What are you going to do now?"

Every inch of me ached to be moving, to be making some progress toward finding my daughter. At the same time, I knew that I needed to stop and breathe before I did that, or I was just going to get myself killed.

I realized, without much surprise, that I wished Connor were there. Maybe we were about to be on different sides of a war and maybe we weren't, and either way, I didn't care. Everything I loved was in danger. I wanted him to put his arms around me and tell me it was going to be okay.

I sighed, and asked, “Could you make me a sandwich?”

Marcia smiled, motioning for me to sit down before she moved toward the icebox. “How do you feel about strawberry-and-chicken sandwiches?”

“I think I speak with complete honesty when I say that I have no opinion on strawberry-and-chicken sandwiches,” I said, abandoning my reach for the coffee and settling on the bench. “Just make it something I can take in the car with me. As soon as May gets here, I’m gone.”

“You’ve got it,” said Marcia, and got to work.

I propped my elbow on the table and cradled my chin in my hand, watching her. It was weirdly soothing. Making a sandwich was a simple domestic activity, and the fact that we were on the verge of war did nothing to change that. If Marcia were asked to make sandwiches in the middle of a battlefield, she’d probably do it the exact same way.

Doing things the exact same way wasn’t an option for me—not now. I’d dealt with big issues in the past, but this one was more personal than anything had ever been before. Gillian. Oak and ash, Gillian. She was the one thing that was never supposed to be touched by Faerie and its troubles; after she shut me out of her life, she should have been home free. Instead, she was lost, and completely unprepared for what was happening to her. And it was all my fault. If I’d been there for her, if I’d forced her to let me come back, this might not have happened. As it was . . .

I needed to focus. I pinched the skin between my left thumb and forefinger until it turned white and I had to bite my lip to keep from exclaiming at the pain. It was enough to snap me out of my growing despondence. According to the night-haunts, the children were probably being held in an underground room with stone walls, one where the air smelled like redwoods, old earth, and spices. None of those things were as much of a lead as I wanted them to be. Redwoods aren’t as common in the Bay Area as they used to be—the humans cut down most of the old forests when they moved in—but there are still enough of them around that I couldn’t go: “A-ha, they must be in this one specific place.” If they were in a shallowing, they wouldn’t need to worry about earthquakes, which meant the room could have been dug almost anywhere, even right above an earthquake fault. As for the spices . . .

I sat upright, eyes widening. I was still sitting that way, frozen, when Marcia walked over and set a mug in front of me. “Here,” she said. “Coffee, two sugars, no cream. I’ll have your sandwich in a few minutes.”

I reached for the cup without thinking about it, raised it to my lips, and

took a large gulp. The near-boiling coffee hit the back of my throat. I immediately started coughing.

Marcia looked alarmed. "Toby? Are you okay?"

No. "Yeah, I'm fine. The coffee's just a little hot." I put the cup down gingerly. "I'll let that sit for a minute. Marcia, have you ever met a man named Dugan Harrow? He serves in the Queen's Court."

"Um . . . he's Daoine Sidhe, right? Blue hair, sort of snooty?"

"That's the one."

"I've met him a few times." She didn't try to hide her disdain. "He came around the Tea Gardens once."

That was news to me. "Really? What for?"

"He was trying to convince Lily to swear to the Queen of the Mists. He promised her anything she wanted, if she would just be the one to crack open the door keeping the Queen out of Golden Gate Park."

"I hope Lily told him to shove it up his ass."

"Not in those words, exactly, but that was the sentiment." Marcia walked back to the counter, picking up my sandwich. "I don't think he even realized I was there. He never looked at me."

"That doesn't surprise me." As a quarter-blood, Marcia was too close to human to really be protected by the rules of fae etiquette. If Dugan wanted to ignore her, no one was going to get angry at him for it. No one but Marcia, anyway, and maybe Lily, when she was alive. "Did he use any magic in your presence?"

"Yeah." Marcia walked back over, handing me the plate with my sandwich. The strawberry juice leaking around the edges looked uncomfortably like blood. "He removed his human illusion as a courtesy when he came into the knowe. He had to put it back on before he could leave."

"Do you remember what his magic smelled like?"

Her cheeks reddened. "You know I'm not very sensitive to that sort of thing."

"I know. I just want to know what his magic smelled like to you." I'm good with magical signatures, but I'd only been around once or twice when Dugan was actually casting spells. I wanted outside confirmation.

"It was . . . I don't know. Spicy, I guess. Like cinnamon."

"Cinnamon and cardamom?" I asked.

Marcia blinked, once, before she smiled brightly. "That's exactly it!"

Cinnamon and cardamom. He smelled like Finnish sweet bread.”

“Uh, I guess so. I’ve never smelled Finnish bread. What he does smell like, definitely, is spices.” I took a bite of strawberry-and-chicken sandwich—a surprisingly tasty combination, despite the fact that the bread still looked like it was bleeding—and swallowed before glancing to the door. “Where *are* they?”

“Knowing May? Possibly at the bottom of the Pacific by now. You have to give them time to get here.”

“Time is something we don’t have enough of at this point.” Rayseline wasn’t working alone. Rayseline *couldn’t* be working alone, because she didn’t have the skill for it—and someone hit Margie from behind. I put my sandwich down, pulling out the phone.

“Who are you calling?”

“Walther.” I raised the phone to my ear, and waited.

I didn’t have to wait for long. “Professor Davies speaking. How can I help you?”

“Hey, Walther. You alone?”

“Toby? What’s going on?” He sounded surprised and tired. I felt a small pang of guilt. I wasn’t just running myself ragged—I was doing the same thing to my allies.

I’d apologize later. When we weren’t dead. “Have you had a chance to look at that needle I gave you yet?”

“Not in any detail. I’ve been trying to figure out the base for that sleeping potion you found. I think I’m almost—”

“Was it brewed by a Daoine Sidhe?”

He paused. Then, slowly, he said, “It could be. What makes you ask?”

“I don’t want to say until I’m sure. Can you check?”

“Normally, I’d say no—if it were one of the standard apprentice recipes, it could have been anyone with a little skill for alchemy. But it’s unusual enough that I may be able to deduce the nature of the brewer from the compounds that were used. How soon do you need to know?”

“As soon as possible. It’s important.”

“‘Life and death’ important, or ‘it would be nice’ important?”

Dugan had access to all the Queen’s resources. To her dungeons, her guardsmen, anything he could take control of while her back was turned. “Life and death,” I said, without hesitation. “I think I know who Rayseline is working with. But I have to be sure.”

“I’ll get right on it,” Walther said. “Call if you need me.”

“Don’t worry. I will.” I closed the phone, sliding it back into my pocket before meeting Marcia’s wide-eyed stare. “What?”

“You think Dugan is working with Rayseline?” she asked.

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t need to.” She shook her head, looking profoundly uncomfortable. “If he is . . . Toby, he’s got a *lot* of pull at Court.”

“Yeah, he does, as long as he stays on the Queen’s good side. How happy do you think she’s going to be when I tell her he’s been trying to instigate a war she can’t possibly win?” The “can’t possibly win” part was really the important thing. I was pretty sure the Queen of the Mists would be more than happy to get involved with a war if she thought she’d be leading the winning side.

“Not very,” admitted Marcia.

“Exactly my thought. All I have to do is prove that he’s the one who’s been providing Raysel with magical support. She can take things from there.”

“So why not tell her now?”

“Because if I’m right, and he’s behind all this, he could lead her to the children. I don’t want that to happen.” I shook my head, reaching for the coffee. “I’m supposed to stop this war, not give the Queen a bargaining chip she can use to force Saltmist to surrender. I don’t want *anyone* to surrender. I just want this whole thing to be over.”

“You and me both,” said May. I turned to see her standing in the kitchen doorway. Quentin was behind her, looking a little green around the edges, like he’d just taken the worst roller coaster ride of his life. “Your car’s out front. You should probably get your brakes checked.”

“The brakes would be fine if you ever drove under seventy,” muttered Quentin.

“What was that?” asked May.

“Nothing,” he said quickly, and pushed past her into the kitchen, staggering over to collapse on the bench next to me.

I gave him a comforting pat on the back with my free hand, asking, “Where are Jazz and Raj?”

“Jazz had to go to work, and Raj decided to take the shadows,” said May. “He didn’t want to ride with me for some reason.”

“Lucky jerk,” said Quentin.

“I’m not *that* bad of a driver,” said May. She lobbed my keys to me,

underhand.

I caught them and stood. “Yes, you are. But that’s okay, because you won’t have to drive again any time soon. Call Danny when you want to go home. He can come and pick you up.” I glanced toward Quentin. “You want to come with me?”

“Yes,” he said fervently, scrambling to his feet. “Please.”

“No,” said May, just as fervently. I raised an eyebrow. She glared. “You’re not going anywhere until you tell me what happened. Where’s Gillian? Is she here? Is she . . .” She stopped, no more capable of finishing her sentence than I would have been.

“I don’t know where she is, but I know who has her,” I said. “Raysel took her. Just went right into the house, and took her. I have to get her back.”

“So what, you’re going to drive all over the city?”

“Not quite. There was a Selkie named Margie. Raysel took her captive down at the docks. I’m hoping there might still be a blood trail for me to follow.” And while I was down there, I could pay Bucer a visit—there was no way he’d skipped town already. Maybe he’d be able to tell me about a stone room in a shallowing where redwood trees grew. He might not *want* to tell me, but I can be very convincing, when I have to be.

“Was a Selkie?” asked May, slowly.

“She’s dead. Raysel killed her. It was an accident.”

“The Law doesn’t care about accidents,” said Quentin.

May, on the other hand, was staring at me with a new type of fear in her wide gray eyes. “If you haven’t already found the blood trail, how do you know about the Selkie?”

“I called the night-haunts.”

She stiffened. Only a bit. I probably wouldn’t have noticed, if I didn’t know her so well. “What did they say?”

“That Gillian isn’t with them. Neither are the Lorden boys. There’s still time, but that doesn’t mean that we should be wasting it.”

“That’s a relief,” said May.

“Yeah. It is.”

May was trying to keep her expression steady. It wasn’t working. She’s at a disadvantage when it comes to hiding her emotions from me—I grew up with her face, after all, and I know it better than I currently know my own. Her face held an odd mixture of fear and resignation, like she expected me to start yelling at any second. That look hadn’t been there before I told her I was

meeting with the night-haunts.

Her apprehension put some of the things they'd said to me into a new context, one that almost made sense. Maybe we'd talk about it later, and maybe we wouldn't. It was only going to matter if we made it through alive.

"We—" I began . . . and stopped as Raj came running into the room. He wasn't wearing a human disguise, and his pupils were thin slits against the glass-green of his eyes, broadcasting his fear.

"Raj?" I took a step forward, hand instinctively moving to my knife. "What's wrong?"

"There are people coming up the beach!" he said, stumbling to a halt a few feet in front of me. "I came out of the shadows down near the cliff, where nobody would see, and they were there, coming out of the water! They're on their way here."

"Undersea?" I asked.

Raj blinked, briefly looking at me like I was an idiot. I guess asking if they were from the Undersea when he'd seen them coming out of the water qualified me. "Yeah," he said. "And they have Connor with them. He doesn't look happy."

"Well, then, he can join the club." I grabbed my coffee off the table, downing its contents in one long, fortifying gulp. "Looks like we're going to have guests before anything else gets done. Anyone who doesn't want to meet with the Undersea, this is your cue to exit. Everyone else, come with me."

"Where are we going?" asked Raj.

"The throne room. If we're going to be receiving guests, we're going to do it like civilized people, not like, well, us." I put down my mug. "Come on. It'll be fun."

May looked at me dubiously. "Fun?" she echoed.

"Isn't everything?" I shrugged, starting for the kitchen door. To my relief, the others followed. I'd been happy to let them duck out if that was what they really wanted, but I had to admit, I hadn't been quite as enthused about the idea of facing the Undersea delegation—whoever it included—by myself.

Our footsteps echoed as we entered the throne room. I frowned a little, looking at the empty dais. "I should probably get a chair," I said.

"Wait right here," said Marcia. Gesturing for Raj and Quentin to follow, she started down the hall toward the solarium.

I folded my arms across my chest as I watched them go. "Do I want to

know what they're doing back there?"

"Probably not," said May. "Do you have anything you need me to do?"

"Yeah." I glanced her way, quirking a faint smile. "Get the door."

May raised an eyebrow before looking down at her knee-less jeans and glittery, rainbow-striped T-shirt. "Because what, I have 'impressive' written all over me now?"

"Because you're who's available to do it. Now go." I pointed to the door. "See if you can stall them long enough for us to get some sort of seating in here."

"I'll juggle," she deadpanned.

"That's a start."

May rolled her eyes, and went.

Marcia came back out of the hall with Raj and Quentin behind her, the boys struggling to hold up a big oak chair that I didn't remember seeing when we were first cleaning out the knowe. "Put it on the dais," she said, waving helpfully in the indicated direction. "And *try* not to drop it again."

Raj muttered something. I couldn't quite make out the words, but from the tone, I was comfortable assuming that they weren't complimentary. Quentin did his furniture moving in stoic silence, as befits a squire. At least one of us was taking his training really seriously.

"Where did you find that?" I asked.

"It was jammed into the corner of the kitchen before we moved it to storage," she said. Giving me a sidelong look, she added, "I figured you'd be happier with a nice-looking kitchen chair than you'd be sitting in Evening's old throne."

The idea was enough to make my stomach do a slow flip. "You figured right," I said, and walked over to help Quentin and Raj position the thing. Purebloods seem to build things according to two mutually exclusive camps of design aesthetic. Everything is either so fragile it can be destroyed by a stiff wind, or so sturdy that it could probably survive being hit repeatedly with a Buick. The chair fell into the second category. It felt like it had been carved so long ago that it had forgotten what it was to be a tree. All it knew now was being a chair, and it was good at what it knew.

"This works," I said. I pushed it a few inches to the side, centering it on the dais, and sat down. The chair had no back, but it did have sturdy arms, positioned at exactly the right level. I rested my elbows on them, looking toward the boys. "You good?"

“We’re good,” said Quentin, taking a position slightly behind me, to the right. Raj mirrored him, taking up the same position on the left. I briefly considered shooing Raj off the dais—Quentin was my squire, while Raj was technically violating protocol by staying—and decided against it. Connor wouldn’t tell on us, and the rest of the Undersea wouldn’t realize there was anything wrong.

Marcia moved to stand on the floor to the right of the dais, putting her on the same axis as Quentin, just lower. That was exactly right. Standing there marked her as my seneschal, and meant she’d be allowed to speak for me in matters regarding the land itself. It would also make it clear that she was under my protection. Just in case that mattered.

There’s a reason that pureblood manners make my head hurt the way they do. I was saved from further contemplation of our placement as hinges creaked in the distance, and low, murmuring voices drifted down the hall. I sat up straight, composing my expression, and waited.

May looked every inch the obedient courtier as she stepped into the room with her shoulders squared and her face grim. Even her glittery T-shirt couldn’t spoil the effect. The group trailing behind her was a mixture of Merrow and Selkies, save for Patrick and a golden-haired woman with the uniformly blue eyes characteristic of the Roane. That made me sit up a little straighter. The Roane are practically extinct, and have been for centuries. I’d never seen a Roane pureblood before.

The main group fell into a line halfway down the length of the throne room, leaving May to guard the door. Patrick and Connor continued toward me, stopping just short of the dais. I stood.

“Your Grace,” I said.

“Countess Daye,” replied Patrick, and bowed deeply, showing the proper degree of respect from a visiting noble. I returned the bow in kind before straightening and reclaiming my seat. “We received your message.”

“Good. It seemed like a clever enchantment. It’s still always nice to know that things are actually showing up where they’re supposed to.” I frowned. “Forgive me for asking, but . . . why are you here? If you got the bottle, you know everything I do. I was planning to send another update as soon as I had something more substantial.”

A murmur swept through the sea fae. They were keeping their voices too low for me to pick out individual words, but the overall tone wasn’t good. They sounded angry—and some of their whispers sounded almost like

accusations.

Patrick took a deep breath. “Someone took it upon themselves to remind us what was at stake in this conflict,” he said, voice measured, like he was trying not to scream. “In case we had somehow forgotten.”

I blinked. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, someone slunk into our knowe and left this outside our bedroom door.” Patrick produced a salt-crusted wooden box from his pocket. An unbroken golden ring was looped through the latch, connected to the corners of the box by thin gold chains. I had to admire the construction. Breaking the ring would snap the chains, making it impossible for someone to steal the contents without getting caught.

Still, there had to be something I was missing. Good craftsmanship alone wouldn’t account for the bleakness in Patrick’s eyes.

“What is it?” I asked.

The Roane woman stepped forward, reaching out to touch Patrick’s elbow. “Her confusion is sincere,” she said. Her voice was low and melodic, her accent half-Irish, half-something sharper. “She doesn’t know.”

“I told you she didn’t know,” muttered Connor, a little too loudly.

Patrick shot Connor a sharp look before returning his attention to me. “I didn’t want to risk opening it—not when we didn’t know what it was. We took it to the Asrai, who scried for the contents.”

“And?”

“It’s Dean’s finger.” Patrick’s voice broke as he continued, “They cut off his *finger*, October. What else are they doing to him? Why haven’t you found him yet? You were supposed to be bringing him *home*.”

Oh, oak and ash. I stared at Patrick, who looked back at me with the wounded expression of a parent betrayed, and in that moment—that single, horrible moment—I knew that it wouldn’t matter if I stopped the war. We were all of us already losing.



TWENTY-FIVE

“THE ASRAI SAY THEY CAN FEEL pain when they look into the box,” said Patrick, dull misery surrounding every word. “They say it’s likely he was still alive when it was removed.”

Quentin made a small, dismayed sound. I didn’t blame him. A gnawing anger was uncurling in the pit of my stomach. How dare they? Whoever was helping Raysel with this—Dugan or someone else—how *dare* they? Children are the most precious thing Faerie has. Cutting pieces off of them to make a point is beyond wrong. As far as I’m concerned, it’s actively evil.

“I . . . Oberon’s bones, Patrick, I’m sorry. I’m doing everything I can to find your sons, I swear.” I shook my head, trying to shake away the idea of someone doing something like that to a child. “Why did you bring it *here*?”

“I asked him to,” said Connor. I turned to stare at him. “I reminded him of who your mother is, and what you can do. You can do it, can’t you?”

“Why can’t he?” asked Raj.

“Raj!” I said. “I’m so sorry. He doesn’t understand—”

To my surprise, Patrick actually laughed. It was a short, sharp sound, and there was no humor behind it, but it was laughter. “He’s Cait Sidhe. He doesn’t need to understand, now, does he? That’s been the rule since time immemorial. I can’t do it myself, young squire, because my blood magic was never that strong, and I’ve spent too long in the water. What power I had has been long since diluted, and all that’s left for me is illusions.”

“Oh,” said Raj. Then: “So you really want her to . . . ?”

“They want me to ride Dean’s blood,” I said.

Raj made a disgusted face. “Ew. Isn’t that dangerous? And icky?”

I took a shaky breath. “I’m not sure that matters.”

Connor was right. Daoine Sidhe can use even a small amount of blood to ride the memories and experiences of the person it was drawn from. My

mother and I—the Dóchas Sidhe—make them look like amateurs. Blood clings to flesh, no matter how carefully it's been drained; even the fae who drink the stuff can't completely remove it from a body. More importantly, I could confirm that Dean was alive when his finger was cut off.

Maybe I could even use it to find the underground room that smelled of spices. The one where a Selkie died, and a war truly began. Raj was right, too—blood magic is dangerous for me. I have power, but very little training, and the only woman who could train me is insane. And none of that mattered anymore. This might be the only way to stop the war.

This might be the only way to bring Gillian home.

"I said I'd do whatever I could," I said. I stood again, stepping down from the dais. Quentin and Raj moved to follow me. I gestured for them to stay where they were. There were things they didn't need to see.

Patrick stared at me for a moment, like he still wasn't quite willing to let himself believe. Then his composure slipped, just enough to let me see the rawness beneath it. "They have my *children*," he said. "I don't care about war. I don't care what we have to do to get them back. They could be hurt worse next time, they could be—"

"Whoever it is has my daughter, too, and they're alive." The certainty in my voice stunned the entire room into silence. I kept my eyes on Patrick. "I called the night-haunts to me. They hadn't seen your sons. *The night-haunts hadn't seen them*. Wherever your boys are, they're alive."

A new quality crept into Patrick's expression: hope. It was painful to see, because it illustrated how bleak he'd looked, and how bleak I knew I still looked. He had hope for his sons, and I was running out of hope for my daughter. Rayseline had reason to keep Dean and Peter alive, at least for now. I couldn't come up with any good reasons for her to spare Gillian.

"Could they . . ." He licked his lips. "Could the night-haunts have lied?"

"Night-haunts don't lie," said May, her voice loud in the hush. We all turned to look at her. She tipped her chin up, very slightly, and looked me in the eyes as she said, "The night-haunts never lie. They could, if they wanted to, but they don't really see the point. The truth is so much more dangerous than a lie."

I blinked at her for a moment before shaking my head and looking back to Patrick. "There you go," I said. "The night-haunts didn't lie."

"They're alive," said Patrick, sounding stunned. One of the Merrow burst into tears, burying his face against the shoulder of the Selkie next to him. It

was a moment of private elation. I should have looked away. There wasn't time.

"Now we just need to make sure they stay that way," I said. The room's air of relief faded, cold reality intruding on their momentary joy. They didn't like it. That was okay, because neither did I.

Patrick nodded, glancing at Connor. "Connor was right to bring us to you. He has my thanks."

Connor stared at him, visibly trying to frame a response.

Patrick ignored him, turning his attention to the box, instead. He tapped all four corners with his thumb before kissing his forefinger and touching the latch. The gold ring dissolved into mist, leaving the air smelling of steel as the chains fell to dangle uselessly. Patrick held the box out to me. "I was raised in the land Courts. I remember your mother."

"I'm just a changeling," I cautioned. "I'm not in her league."

"I've heard the stories—Connor alone tells enough to give your skills away, and you invoke the Luidaeg when you give your references. Even my wife likes you, as much as she likes anyone." He smiled slightly. "You're a lot of things, but 'just a changeling' isn't one of them."

"I'll do what I can," I said, and reached for the box, only to jerk my hands away as soon as I touched it. I could feel Dean's blood through the wood, still as connected to Faerie as when it was running through his veins. There was a time when I could have held the finger in my hand and not felt anything, and now I could hear the blood calling me through sealed, enchanted wood. Just one more thing to thank my mother for.

Slowly, more prepared this time, I grasped the box again. For a moment, I thought Patrick wasn't going to let me take it from him. Then he sighed, unlocking his fingers. "Find them?" It was closer to a plea than a request, filled with a parent's need to have his heart returned. I've heard that tone in a lot of voices, including my own.

"I'll do what I can," I repeated. I wanted to make wild promises and swear that it would all be okay, but I couldn't do that to him.

"Thank you," he said, voice solemn. "Thank you so much."

"Thank you" is a binding contract in Faerie. For once, I didn't flinch when I heard it. "You're welcome," I said, and glanced around the Undersea delegation. Connor knew what came next. He blanched. None of the others seemed to have a clue. Shaking my head, I turned back to Patrick.

"You know what it takes for me to get answers from this," I said.

Patrick nodded. “Yes, I do.”

“I can do it here, or I can leave you here while I take care of things. It’s up to you. I won’t make you watch.”

“I need to see,” said Patrick. “I appreciate you trying to spare me, but—”

“I understand. I’d feel the same. But do your people need to see this?” He paled. I continued, “Let’s take the third option. They stay here, and you come with me.”

He hesitated before nodding, slowly. The Roane woman gave his arm another reassuring pat.

“There, there, my lovely one. She’ll steer you sure enough. Just never let her near the silver. Line of thieves, hers is, and they’d rob even royalty blind.” She turned a mad, serene smile on me. “I know you’ve not stolen half a heartbeat from a stolen child as yet, but you will, given time. You will.”

I frowned. “May?”

“Yes?”

“Take care of the delegation. Quentin and Raj can help with the refreshments. Your Grace, if you’ll come with me?” I didn’t wait for an answer before turning on my heel and walking toward the hall. The box was starting to vibrate in my hands. The blood knew I was there; it wanted to be heard.

Patrick followed me down the hall to the room where I’d gone to summon the night-haunts. It was the only space I could be sure we’d have entirely to ourselves, and there was something fitting, somehow, in going there to ride the blood of someone I desperately hoped was still alive.

He didn’t say anything about the furniture cluttering the hall. That was a definite point in his favor. He did, however, look deeply discomforted when I led him into the solarium and closed the door. Maybe he was just now realizing the reality of what I was about to do.

I walked to the center of the room and sat, cross-legged, in the circle of blood I’d drawn there earlier. If Patrick wondered why I had a circle of blood ready and waiting, he had the good manners not to ask. The vibrations from the box were getting stronger. The blood wanted my attention, and I had to either give in or get it away from me. I glanced back to Patrick, watching him sit across from me. He winced when he bent his knees. Then, meeting my eyes, he nodded.

I opened the box.

The interior was cushioned in dark blue velvet, with Dean’s severed finger

resting in the middle like a macabre parody of a woman's finest jewels. I looked up at Patrick one last time.

"You really don't have to be here for this," I said quietly.

"Yes, I do," he said.

I hesitated before reaching into the box, scooping up the finger. It was almost obscenely light, and the blood was nearly screaming now that it was so close to me. I gave Patrick a final glance, and turned my attention to the task at hand.

Dean's finger had been severed at the joint without splintering the bone. I could analytically respect that—it would have made it easier to stop the bleeding—even as I wanted to kill the people responsible. Closing my eyes, I raised the finger's severed end to my lips, and drank.



TWENTY-SIX

THE RED VEIL OF DEAN'S memories crashed down on me almost instantly, stronger than I expected. I struggled against them automatically before I realized they weren't trying to overwhelm me; they were just there, open, welcoming me in. Blood magic had never been this easy.

I took a breath, and let myself fall into someone else's skin.

Everything hurts. Moving hurts. Breathing hurts. Nothing is supposed to hurt like this. Even dying shouldn't hurt like this. I raise my head, squinting through the tears I won't let them see me shed. It's dark. The floor is cold, and the straw that covers it isn't enough to fight the chill. It smells like something died here a long time ago, the stink barely disguised by the distant scents of spices I don't know the names of.

"He's alive," I said, pulling myself far enough out of the memories to speak. "They're not keeping him in the water." If Patrick responded, I didn't hear it. The blood surged over me again, and I was gone.

"Are you scared now, little prince of the sea?" It's a woman's voice, sweet as honey and toxic as cyanide.

I knew who belonged to that voice. Dean didn't, but I did.

I tuck my head down, feigning sleep. Anything would be better than facing her again. "Oh, sleeping? Lost in pretty dreams of home, of freedom, and of family?" A hand grabs my hair and jerks my head up. "Don't be stupid."

Her hair is red, like blood coral, and her eyes are gold. Her ears rise to tapered points under the twined braids on the sides of her head, blunter than they'd be if she were pure Daoine Sidhe, but still as sharp as mine. There's a sharpened sickle in the hand not snarled through my hair.

I gritted my teeth. The red film of memory broke slightly, cleared away by my anger. No matter how much I knew Raysel was involved, it still hurt like hell to see her there, torturing an innocent. How could she have fallen this

far? Then the red haze closed over me again, and nothing mattered but Dean's borrowed fear.

I go rigid, trying not to look at the sickle. I will not cry is the thought the blood remembers. "Let me go before my parents find you," I say, forcing a bravado that isn't really there.

She smiles. "Oh, you silly little thing, don't you know? Your parents will find you. We'll leave you for them a piece at a time, like bread crumbs leading children out of the woods. We don't need you both alive. One will do nicely for what's needed."

"Where's my brother?"

"That's up to you. Behave, do as I tell you, die like the little nobleman you are, and your brother will be fine. You'll be a hero for keeping him alive. Make too much fuss, and . . ." She draws the blunt side of the sickle across her throat in a gesture both graphic and direct. "He's the one fit to inherit, isn't he? The golden child. Such a pity when the more valuable son has to die."

I love my brother. That only fuels my fear. "I won't fight you."

"I hoped you'd say that." Her smile grows wider, until it shows the sharp tips of her incisors. "Such a brave little boy. So noble." She raises the sickle, and I look away. I know what comes next, I know I can't escape it, but oh, Maeve, I don't want to see, I don't want to feel that blade come down—

The pain of the sickle biting into Dean's hand was enough to snap me out of the spell. I slammed back into my own skin so hard that it was like hitting the water after a badly-botched dive. It didn't hurt. "Hurt" was too small a word. It burned.

The fragments of my shattered spell hung in the air around us, reeking of cut grass and copper. The finger dropped from my hand, rolling away. It wasn't just a bit of discarded meat and bone anymore—I remembered it as part of my body. It would take time for the memory of being Dean to fade, and until then, it was my finger on the floor.

Turning my head, I bent as far to the side as I could, and threw up.

Patrick didn't move. His eyes were saucer-wide in his pale face, and his hands were clenched in his lap, knuckles gone white from the pressure. "Did it work?" he asked.

I wiped my mouth with one shaking hand as I turned back to him, barely managing to keep from snapping, *No, I threw up because I realized what I was putting in my mouth.* Dean's love for his parents had been almost as

prominent in his mind as his love for his brother. Patrick didn't deserve to hear something like that.

"It worked." I wiped my mouth again, only spreading the sticky taste of blood. My head was pounding. I hadn't had a headache this bad since Amandine shifted the balance of my blood. Apparently, I still had limits. That wasn't as reassuring as I'd expected.

"Is he . . ." Patrick stopped mid-sentence, and just looked at me.

"He was alive when the finger was taken. They're keeping him in a stone room, above water. There's straw on the floor, but the stone is rough, like it wasn't milled or worked at all." I shook my head. "There was no iron in the air. Whoever has him, it's not the Queen. I've been in her dungeon, and the iron is *everywhere* down there."

Patrick nodded. I could see the hunger in his eyes, the burning need to know everything there was to know about the place his son was being held. I didn't blame him. I just wished that Dean had been held in the same room as Gillian, so that I could have some reassurance of my own. "Is he hurt?"

"Other than the missing finger? I think they used at least one knock-down spell on him. He's in a lot of pain, but there are no other serious injuries."

"Was Peter there?"

"No. I'm sorry. He was alone."

"Did you see who was holding him?"

I lowered my hand, looking up. He stared back with eyes that were suddenly cold and implacable, filled with a deep fury that I was glad wasn't directed at me.

"It was Rayseline," I said. Picking up the finger, I put it gently back into the box. That made me feel a little better. "She can't be working alone, but she's the one who . . ." Somehow, I couldn't bring myself to say "cut off your son's finger." ". . . hurt him," I finished lamely.

Patrick's expression darkened further, something I hadn't been sure was possible. "That little bitch will regret the day of her birth by the time I'm finished with her," he growled, in a voice like waves crashing against the shore.

"You're not the only one who's lost a child here, Patrick," I said, as calmly as I could. "Rayseline has my daughter, too. So you'll forgive me if I don't agree to go in swinging. I'd like half a chance in hell of getting Gillian back alive."

The darkness parted, replaced by a grimace of apology. "I'm sorry. I

forgot.”

“Most people do.” I handed him the box before I stood, wiping my hands against my jeans. It wasn’t enough to wipe away the feel of phantom blood. Very little ever is. “I’m scared as hell about what they might be doing to her. Her father was human.”

“Ah,” said Patrick, sympathetically. “I’m sorry.”

“She doesn’t know how to defend herself. I never had the chance to teach her.” Something about that bothered me. Patrick wouldn’t have known Gillian existed if I hadn’t told him. She was never a part of my life in Faerie. Rayseline knew that she existed, had even met her before, but . . . how did she know where to find her?

“If anyone can find her, I believe that you will,” said Patrick.

“Somehow, that’s not comforting,” I muttered. More loudly, I asked, “Shall we go reassure your subjects that I haven’t shoved you off a balcony?”

“You have balconies?”

“Not in this room. But we have a few.”

“In that case, we should definitely reassure them.” Patrick looked at me gravely as he stood. “We are in your debt for this.”

“No.” I shook my head. “You’re not in my debt until they’re home.”

“Still. At least you’re willing to try. That’s more than I can say for anyone else in this benighted Kingdom.”

“The Queen’s not all bad.”

He lifted his eyebrows and looked at me.

“Okay, maybe she is,” I admitted. “But I’m going to bring your sons home.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” Patrick said, and smiled. He still looked exhausted and afraid, but there was hope in his expression. I considered him a moment before smiling back. There might be a way out of this madman’s game after all. That was worth smiling over.

Neither of us spoke as we walked down the hall. We both had too much to think about. He was probably dwelling on his missing sons and the impending war, while I thought about my own missing daughter, and the chances that captivity in a shallowing had already driven her insane.

Even more, I thought about who, out of everyone I knew, could have told Rayseline where to find my little girl. There weren’t many options. I was pretty sure I knew which one was the winner.

The delegation from Saltmist was waiting in the throne room. About half

of them had chicken-and-strawberry sandwiches and glasses of lemonade. Marcia and May were circulating through the crowd with more refreshments. Quentin and Raj stood guard on either side of the door, watching the crowd with narrowed, suspicious eyes. Connor sat on the edge of the dais, his head in his hands, looking exhausted. The Roane woman was sitting next to him, patting him comfortingly on the back.

Raj straightened when Patrick and I entered, pointing us out to Quentin. Having both of them looking in our direction was enough to tip off the rest of the room, all of whom turned, one by one, to look at us.

I raised one hand in a small wave. "Hi. Miss us?"

"Done more than she thought she would, but not as much as she'll do, once she's given cause to eat the fruit of the Judas tree." The Roane woman stood. Connor started to follow, and she patted his shoulder, motioning for him to stay. "Now, now, my little soldier boy, stay as you are, and rest. Your place in this tale is nearly severed through, and the time for roving's done. Rest a while, before the end begins."

Connor sat again, looking as perplexed as I felt. The Roane smiled like she was giving a benediction and walked over to us, seizing Patrick's free hand in both of her own. "She's seen him in the halls of stone?"

"She has," Patrick replied. Pitching his voice to carry to the rest of the courtyard, he said, "Dean is alive."

The resulting cheer was loud enough to rouse a swarm of pixies from the rafters. They swirled around us in a great wave, buzzing their irritation before zipping out into the hall. A single spider-form bogey dropped from the ceiling and ran after them, drawing startled shrieks from a few of the Undersea fae.

Patrick turned to me. "What can we do?" he asked. "Anything you need, anything you want, the Undersea will gladly provide."

For a brief, dizzying moment, I wanted to ask for a pony. Except for the part where I'd probably wind up with a Kelpie. "Just let me take care of this for now. My methods, my results. Please."

"Will you call on us for assistance if needed?" asked Patrick.

"Only if your guards can promise not to shoot anyone who doesn't absolutely need to be shot," I said. "If you kill someone . . ."

"This war becomes entirely unavoidable. I know." Patrick sighed deeply, weariness settling across him like a blanket. "I *need* to help, October, as does Dianda. They're our *sons*."

“I know. But for right now, I need you to trust me. If you can’t trust me, trust the Luidaeg. She’s the one who first got me involved.” I shook my head. “Truth be told, she sometimes has more faith in me than I have in myself, but I won’t let her down if I can help it. I’m going to find them, and I promise, I will call you if there’s anything you can do to help me bring them home.”

“She’ll bring them home to us,” said the Roane woman. Smiling, she continued, “What she has to pay is dearer than salt, but she’ll bring them home.”

I blinked at her. “I’m sorry. I don’t think I caught your name.”

“I don’t believe I freed it,” she said. “Mary does me well enough.”

That couldn’t be her real name. The fae avoid duplicating names when they can, and “Mary” would have been taken centuries ago. Still, there’s a long, proud tradition of pseudonyms in Faerie. I bowed, saying, “October Daye, Countess—”

“Countess of Goldengreen, the land that falls to rise and falls again, daughter of Amandine the liar, mother of Gillian with the eyes half-open but so soon to close, she who’ll stand by the burning tree with a brand bare in her hand and a song upon her lips, yes, yes, we know you,” she said, waving a hand. “Trust her, my Pat. She believes her words, and if she lies, she doesn’t know it.”

I stared, first at her, then at Patrick. He flashed me a small, strained smile.

“Mary holds the Roane gift of prophecy a bit more directly than most,” he said. “You learn to filter what she says until you find the useful parts.”

“So you understand her?” I asked, fighting the urge to shake Mary until she told me what she knew about my daughter in words I could understand. It wouldn’t help. It wouldn’t be diplomatic. That didn’t do a thing to stop my wanting to do it.

“I’ve had years of practice.”

The Undersea fae were finally calming. Mary looked up at me, smiling distantly. “You’ve done but the start of what’s to do, and still you have our gratitude, daughter of Amandine. You’ll understand soon enough.” She paused, tilting her head to the side, and added, “She waits. They’ve not hurt her. Ask no more, for I don’t know it.”

I stiffened. “You’re talking about Gillian. Where is she?”

She raised a hand. “I’ve said what I know.”

“She’s telling the truth,” said Patrick. I glanced at him, frowning. “Mary never sees everything. If she did . . .”

“You wouldn’t need me,” I finished wearily. “Is there anything else you need right now? I need to get back to work.”

“What you’ll do, you’ll do. Come, my Pat. My mother’s soon to be involved, and it’s best if we not be standing in whatever path she comes by. She favors solitude. I try to do well by her when I can.” Mary smiled again, more sadly, and turned to the others. “Up, then, all of you lot, and away! We’ve news of all the world and more to carry to our lady.” Again, her gaze went to Connor. “Not you, soldier boy. Your place is by your lighthouse keeper’s daughter.”

Patrick looked briefly concerned before inclining his head, saying, “Connor, stay here. It’s a good idea for us to keep the channels of communication open, especially now.” Turning to me, he bowed as deeply as if he were bowing to the Queen herself. “The sea will not forget what you’ve done for us, or what we’ve done to you.”

“I appreciate that.” I returned the bow, putting every ounce of courtly grace that I possessed into the gesture. “I’ll throw you another bottle if I learn anything else. Until then, please try to keep Dianda from doing anything rash?”

“You credit me with a great deal more power than I possess, but I’ll try,” said Patrick wryly, and turned to go. The delegation from Saltmist parted to let him take the lead before following him out the door. Patrick’s shoulders were higher than they’d been when he arrived; he was walking like a man, and not like someone who’d been beaten. That was good. He was going to need his strength.

Connor waited until they were gone before standing up, saying, “He must like you,” and walking over to put his arms around me. “Are you all right?”

“No,” I said, and buried my face against his shoulder, breathing in the reassuring sea-salt smell of him. For a moment, I just let him hold me, trying to pretend that everything could ever be all right again. Voice muffled by his skin, I whispered, “She took Gillian, Connor.”

“I know.” He stroked my hair with one hand, holding me closer. “We’re going to get her back. I swear to you, we’re going to get her back.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because I refuse to let this end any other way.” He pulled back, just enough to press a kiss against the side of my jaw, and said, “Besides, she’s your daughter. She’s probably too damn stubborn to do anything but survive.”

I laughed a little as I pulled away, wiping my eyes with the back of one hand. “I hope you’re right. For right now, we need to find Raysel.” I took a breath, trying to clear my head. “Did she ever say anything about redwood trees? Maybe a park she liked visiting, or a place that she remembered from her childhood?”

“Raysel never talked about ‘liking’ anything,” he said, a trace of bitterness creeping into his voice. “Mostly, she just talked about how everyone was letting her down, including—and sometimes, especially—me.”

“Right.” I pinched the bridge of my nose. “I need to call Danny. Maybe one of Rayseline’s rocks remembers redwood trees.” Statements like that are just one of the many reasons mortal police work and Faerie will never mix.

“What can we do?” asked Quentin.

My attention snapped back to the doorway, where Quentin and Raj stood like mismatched chess pieces waiting for their next moves. I blinked as I realize how accurate that was; they were *both* waiting for me to tell them what to do. Oak and ash, had I acquired a Cait Sidhe Prince to go with my Daoine Sidhe knight-in-training?

I could worry about that later. “I’m going to go meet with Bucer after I call Danny. You can come, if you want to.” Seeing me shake answers out of the little weasel would be educational for them, right? And maybe showing up with a couple of unfamiliar teenagers in tow would make him more willing to talk to me.

I flinched from the thought as quickly as it crossed my mind. That was Devin’s tactic: bring the kids along, throw your opposition off-balance. Was I really resorting to his techniques? And so what if I was? If it got Gillian back, it was worth doing.

“We’ll hold down the fort,” May said. “I already called Jazz.”

“Good thinking.” I glanced at Connor, asking hopefully, “Do you want to come with us? It’s probably not going to be fun.”

“Like anything has been, this week?” Connor shook his head. “You’re crazy if you think I’m going to let you out of my sight before I have to. I’m coming.”

“Great. I’ll meet you all at the car after I call Danny.” I turned and walked out to the hall, heading for the kitchen. I needed coffee for the drive, or I was going to get a lot less useful, very soon.

Connor followed me. I gave him a questioning look. He shook his head, saying, “I’ll get your coffee. I need to talk to you before we go.”

“Okay,” I said uncertainly, and dialed Danny’s number.

Danny’s voice boomed through the speaker after the first ring, declaring, “Danny here. Where’s the fire?”

“Hopefully, not under my frying pan,” I replied. “Hey, Danny. You get any answers out of those rocks yet?”

“Toby! You ain’t dead!” I couldn’t decide whether it was amusing or disturbing that he sounded so surprised by my continued survival.

I settled on amusing. I needed more amusement. “Not for lack of trying. The rocks, Danny. Have they said anything?”

“Not too much that’s useful, but I’m still tryin’.”

“Do you think you might have better luck with direct questions?”

“Hey, yeah—that’d probably help. Why, you got one?”

“I do. I want you to go to the nearest florist and get some decorative redwood branches. Put the branches with the rocks, and ask them if they’ve ever seen or smelled anything like that before. If any of the rocks says ‘yes,’ see if you can get them to tell you more about where they were before Raysel picked them up.”

Danny hesitated. When he spoke again, it was slowly, with the sort of tone one might use when talking to a crazy person. “Uh, Tobes? Are you really askin’ me to make a rock your star witness?”

“Yeah. You have a problem with that?”

“Fuck, no.” He laughed merrily. “This is the best thing I’ve done all month. I’ll getcha your answers. Count on me.” The line went dead.

I sighed, looking at the phone for a long moment before tucking it away in my pocket. “I sort of think I am counting on you,” I said, to no one in particular.

“Toby?”

“Huh?” I looked up, meeting Connor’s eyes. He held my long-neglected Thermos out to me.

“Coffee,” he said. “For the road.”

“Oh.” I took it, smiling a little. “Good thinking.”

“Yeah. I guess I know you pretty well.” He took a deep breath. “I need to tell you something.”

“Connor, this really isn’t the best time. Gilly’s missing, and we need to—”

“I’ve asked Duchess Lorden to release me from my service to Saltmist. After what you did today, I’m pretty sure the Duke will support my request.”

That got my attention. “Wait—what?”

“I said, I’m leaving Saltmist. I’m leaving the protection of the Undersea. Patrick left one Kingdom for another in order to be with the woman he loved, and so can I.” He smiled uncertainly, looking through his eyelashes at me. “I know I said I didn’t want to be banished, and I still don’t, but I’m staying with you, October. If you’ll have me, I’m yours. I won’t fight against you, and I won’t let them take me away from you again.”

“Connor . . .” I stopped mid-sentence, too stunned to know how to continue. The world was falling down around us, my daughter was missing, and now Connor was giving up the Undersea to stay with me . . . and that didn’t even begin to touch the topic of Tybalt, and the kiss he’d given me before he threw me into the shadows. It was all too much to process.

A look of deep uncertainty flickered across Connor’s face. “Don’t you want me to stay?”

That, at least, was something I could answer. “With all my heart,” I said, stepping forward, and then I was kissing him, and he was kissing me, and for a few beautiful seconds, everything else fell away. Maybe everything else was a mess, but here, finally, was something I could hold onto. Connor was staying.

Unfortunately, like most good things, the moment couldn’t last. I pulled away from him, reluctantly. “Come on,” I said. “It’s time to get to work.” Oberon preserve us all.



TWENTY-SEVEN

I DROVE THE LENGTH OF the docks with my windows down, letting the wind blow through the car. It carried the scent of a hundred deaths—mostly fish and pigeons, although the city’s human police were going to have at least one homicide case on their hands by the end of the night—but none of them was our Selkie. I snarled something wordless under my breath, earning a concerned glance from Connor, and rolled the windows up. Time to head for Bucer’s.

Having a full car kept me from needing to talk much, which was a relief, since my head was pounding and I couldn’t stop coming up with nightmare scenarios, all of them ending with Gillian’s death. Connor sat next to me in the front, while the back was filled with over-excited teenage boys. Raj was better at riding in cars than his uncle was, which wasn’t saying much, and Quentin was grumpy because he couldn’t get to the radio when he was sitting behind me.

“Can you *please* change the station?” he begged. “I think my eardrums are melting.”

“I would very much like to see that,” said Raj. He sounded sincere enough to make Quentin stop complaining for a moment. Then Raj started to snicker, Quentin smacked him, and the cycle started up again.

“I swear to Oberon, I will turn this car around and nobody will get to talk to the creepy underworld jerk,” I said, turning off the nice, ostensibly well-maintained main road and starting to make my way into one of the city’s less reputable neighborhoods.

“You can’t do that,” said Quentin, reasonably. “You need to talk to Bucer, remember?”

I muttered something nasty under my breath, and tried again: “Don’t make me duct tape your wrists and ankles together and shove you in the trunk

while I deal with Bucer on my own.”

The silence that followed my statement lasted twice as long as the one that followed Raj’s joke about melting eardrums. Finally, Raj said, “I honestly believe she’d do that.” His voice was hushed, like he thought I’d courteously fail to hear if I thought he was whispering.

“So do I,” said Quentin.

My teenage passengers were silent for the rest of the drive. Quentin didn’t question my taste in music even when the DJ announced a thirty-minute block of Bruce Springsteen songs without commercials. Connor was also silent, but for different reasons; anyone who looked at him could see that he was as tired as I was, and he wasn’t nearly as accustomed to running on empty.

Bucer’s neighborhood was on the line where “shabby” gave way to “slum.” Perfectly reasonable single-family homes that needed nothing but a coat of paint and some new windows sat side by side with decrepit apartment buildings whose inhabitants might well view fire as a viable means of home improvement. I parked between a rusted Volvo and a pickup truck that seemed held together with bungee cords.

“The ground rules,” I announced, twisting to eye my passengers sternly. “First, whatever I say goes. If I say we’re leaving, we’re leaving, and you’re not arguing with me. Got it?”

Quentin and Raj nodded enthusiastically. Connor frowned.

“I’m taking silence to mean ‘yes’ right now. Second, none of you raises a hand unless it’s in self-defense—with the stress here on *self*. The odds are pretty good that he’ll swing at me if he’s holding something back. I need to deal with him myself.”

Connor’s frown became a scowl. “Are you saying I’m supposed to sit back and let you get beaten up by a thug?” he asked.

“No, you’re supposed to sit back and let me mop the floor with a thug stupid enough to throw down with me. I can take Bucer O’Malley. What I can’t take is the hit my reputation will take if it looks like someone else is fighting my battles for me.” I smiled, trying to look comforting. “I know it’s hard, but trust me; I didn’t learn to fight from people like Sylvester and Etienne. They fight fair. I learned to fight from Devin and his lieutenants, and none of them ever started a fair fight in their lives.”

Devin’s biggest advice about fighting always involved the proverbial “bringing a gun to a knife fight.” That was sort of what I was doing. Bucer

remembered me as an untried changeling with a lot of dumb luck that she could use to maneuver herself into the positions she needed to be in. I'm not quite that girl anymore. Oh, I still do my share of relying on luck—why mess with a good thing?—but these days, I back it up with a lot more actual skill.

And I still don't fight fair.

Connor didn't look happy. Quentin seemed confused but willing to go along with it. Raj, on the other hand, looked delighted.

"Is that all?" he asked. "Because if it is, can we get on to the part where you kick this guy's butt all the way back to Market Street?"

"There's one more thing." I unbuckled my seat belt, reaching for the door. "Dealing with Bucer isn't like dealing with the Luidaeg. He doesn't just cheat when he fights. So don't make any bets with him, don't take anything he offers you, and for the love of Maeve, don't eat or drink until we're out of his apartment."

"He enchants the food he serves his guests?" Quentin sounded mortally affronted.

"No. I just don't want you getting salmonella."

My ragged little parade made its way up the walkway to a gate that was probably state-of-the-art, once upon a time. These days, it offered no more than the illusion of security. Someone had long since broken off a key in the keyhole lock, and the deadbolt was open. The only thing the gate did right was creak when I pushed it open, rusty hinges wailing our arrival to anyone and everyone in earshot.

No one came to investigate as we stepped into the narrow, cabbage-scented entry hall. There was barely room for the four of us, and there wouldn't have been any room at all if one of us had been bigger. According to Bucer, he was living in Apartment #4 on the second floor. I looked at the rickety stairs, frowned, and turned to push my way past Raj and Connor as I moved back toward the door.

"What now?" asked Connor.

"Hang on a second."

The names of all the current occupants were written in faded, painfully neat ballpoint pen on little slips of off-white paper that had been taped next to their respective doorbells. According to this primitive directory, the person in Apartment 4 was actually named "K. Lyons." Apartment 7, on the other hand

...

"B. O'Malley," I said, mostly to myself. I turned around again, facing my

confused escorts. “We go up.”

“Up?” echoed Quentin.

“The stairs. We’re heading for the fourth floor.”

He groaned. “I was afraid you were going to say that.”

The stairs creaked with every step, and the banister was basically a haven for wayward splinters that would just love to go home lodged in our flesh. The original color of the threadbare runner was obscured by decades of ground-in mud, and the wallpaper wasn’t much better off. “I don’t think even the Luidaeg would willingly live here,” I muttered.

“What?” asked Connor.

“Nothing.” I grabbed the banister, getting two splinters in my palm for my troubles, and kept climbing.

Rickety and filthy as the stairs were, they didn’t collapse under our feet. That was about all I felt I had the right to ask, given the overall condition of the building. We reached the fourth floor without encountering anything nastier than a few exposed nails at the base of the banister.

Half the lights were out, casting the whole hallway into a deep shadow. “Follow me, and watch your step,” I said, mostly for Connor’s benefit. Out of the four of us, he had the worst night vision. He muttered something under his breath. I didn’t ask him to repeat it, and he didn’t volunteer.

Bucer’s apartment was the one closest to the outside wall. I clapped a hand over the peephole and knocked briskly, picking up more splinters from the half-shredded wood of the door in the process.

Footsteps—or something like them—approached the door from inside the apartment, followed by a scuffling sound as whoever was inside tried to get a look through the blocked-off peephole. After a few seconds of this, the sound stopped, and the steps retreated a few feet.

I knocked again.

This time, no one moved. Seconds stretched out in the silence, sliding into each other until they threatened to become minutes. I knocked a third time, pausing longer between each thud of my knuckles. There was more scuffling from inside, followed by silence.

That was probably long enough. “Open up and let us in, Bucer,” I called, loudly enough that he’d have to hear me, given his proximity to the door. “This isn’t the way Devin taught us to treat members of the family, now, is it?”

A few more seconds ticked by. The steps approached the door again, and

Bucer said, “Devin’s dead.”

“True,” I agreed. “But I’m not, and you’re not, and we can either be family, or we can be enemies. Don’t you have a preference?”

This time, the answer was immediate: “Friends is better. But you said I should let ‘us’ in. Like people, plural. I’m not . . . ah. I’m not decent right now.”

I smiled almost despite myself. If there’s one thing Bucer O’Malley has never been in his life, it’s decent. “None of us is human, Bucer,” I said, pitching my voice lower to keep his neighbors—if he had any in this pit—from hearing me. “Now open the door, or I’ll start to think you don’t love me anymore.”

I heard the sound of locks being unfastened. After the third deadbolt was undone, the door creaked cautiously open, Bucer’s narrow face peeking through the gap. He wasn’t wearing a human disguise, and I could see the hairy edge of one goatlike ear curving upward from the side of his head.

More importantly, I saw that there was no chain holding the door in place. “Hi,” I said, brightly. “You going to let us in?”

Bucer hesitated. I could see him playing out the situation in his head: first he’d slam the door, and then he’d run for the nearest window, planning to escape to the street. Under normal circumstances, that might have been amusing enough for me to let him get away with it, at least until I chased him down and knocked his head against the pavement a few times. Sadly, I really didn’t have time to play around. I stuck my foot in the door before he could finish his thought.

“We’re coming in, Bucer,” I said, all brightness leeching from my tone. “We can do it as your guests, or we can do it as your interrogators. You want to pick one? Because I’m low on time, I’m low on patience, and I haven’t had nearly enough coffee.”

Amusingly, it was the last item on the list that made his eyes go wide. “Oh, uh, hey, October! Sorry, I didn’t realize it was you—sorry.” The door was pulled fully open, revealing Bucer in all his scrawny, unwashed glory. He was wearing cut-off shorts, revealing the point where his human thighs gave way to goat legs. Julie and I used to call him a bargain basement Satyr when we were all still living at Home. I’d never say anything like that now, but we were only half-kidding then. Satyrs are half-goat, half-man. Glastigs are three-quarters man, one-quarter goat—and, in Bucer’s case, one hundred percent craven scum.

“Good call,” I said, gesturing for the others to follow me as I stepped past Bucer into the apartment. Quentin and Raj were right behind me, surveying the condition of the hall with imperial disdain. Connor brought up the rear.

There was a moment, right after Connor passed the threshold, where Bucer visibly considered making a run for it. I raised an eyebrow, staring at him. Bucer’s shoulders slumped, and he shut the door.

“To what do I owe the pleasure?” he asked. The cheap carpet was thick enough to muffle the sound of his hooves, which probably kept his neighbors from reporting him for keeping livestock. These are the concerns of coexisting with humanity.

“I had a few questions for you, and this seemed more efficient than calling.” I let my gaze sweep lazily through the living room, taking in the half-filled boxes and the hasty piles of personal belongings. “Going somewhere?”

“Actually, yeah, so if you don’t mind—”

“How much did she pay you, Bucer?”

The question seemed to stop him cold. His ears trembled, giving more away than his face did; his expression was more quizzical than anything else, a man trying to find the answer to a question he didn’t fully understand. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“How much did Rayseline pay you for your help? Hell, how did she even *find* you?” I turned to face him, meeting his eyes with my own. “Don’t fuck around with me. I’m not in the mood to waste time kicking your ass tonight.”

“I really don’t know what you mean, October,” he said, and took a step toward me, holding his hands out in supplication. “Ain’t nobody paid me nothing since you paid me for that information on the kidnappings. I’m packing to get out of town, like I told you I was going to—like you would be, if you had any sense. It’s not too late, you know. You can ditch the preschool, blow this pretzel stand with me. We can set up business in some new city, someplace that doesn’t have the baggage this one does. You and me, just like old times . . .”

The smell of damp linen and pine gathered around him as he spoke, the tangled edges of his magic trying to slink past my defenses. Glastig are masters of persuasion. If Bucer had been a pureblood, I might have had reason to worry. As it was, I glanced to my companions, trying to measure how they were holding up in front of Bucer’s barrage of magically persuasive chatter. Quentin looked dubious; Raj looked disgusted. Only Connor looked

like he was coming around to Bucer's line of crap. That was fine. Training him wasn't my problem.

I turned back to Bucer, took three long steps forward, and grabbed the edge of one sensitive ear before he had a chance to react. He yelped. I twisted. He yelped louder, the smell of linen and pine dissipating. "I was trying to do this the nice way, Bucer, but oh, no, we can't have nice things, can we? You just had to go and try enchanting me. Now we can't play nicely anymore. That was a mistake, don't you agree?"

"You're *hurting* me!" he wailed.

"No, I'm showing you that I *can* hurt you." I let go. He staggered back a step, eyes wide and wounded. "Someone told Raysel where to find my daughter, Bucer. It wasn't me. It wasn't Connor, because he didn't know. Not even the Queen knew where she was. It was a *secret*, and someone told."

Bucer licked his lips, looking cornered. That wasn't much of a surprise. He *was* cornered. "Somebody had to know where she was. Maybe that liege of yours—"

"Sylvester would never have told anyone where to find Gillian. Not even his own daughter knew where to find mine. But Devin knew, didn't he? Devin knew what she looked like, because he sent a Doppelganger that looked just like her to my door. And if Devin knew, someone had to find out for him. You've always been good at finding things out, haven't you, Bucer?" I took a step forward, closing the distance between us again. "How did she find you? *How much did she pay you?*"

He looked into my eyes. Whatever it was he saw there, he didn't seem to like it very much. "I don't know how she found me," he whispered. "People like her, they always find people like us when they need to, you know? Someone told her who I was. That we used to work together, that I'd . . . I'd . . ."

"That you'd know where to find my little girl."

Bucer took a slow breath before he said, "Yeah. That's what she wanted. One of the things, anyhow. Maeve's ass, Toby, you left the kid. She was going to get hurt sooner or later. You had to know that. I was doing you a favor."

My hands itched to lock around his throat. I fought the urge back, taking a calming breath. "And you don't know who sent her?"

"No." His ears drooped. "I just wish whoever it was had sent her to somebody else. This ain't worth it."

“No. It’s not. What did she pay you?”

Bucer’s expression turned shifty again. “Money. Lots of it. And she said she’d make sure I had time to get out of the Kingdom before they found the bodies of the little boys. She said I could come back when the fighting was over, and they’d make me a Baron.”

Raj scoffed. “What, and you believed her?”

“Just the first part. Not the Baron stuff. I figured the Baron stuff didn’t matter so much anyway, since I was never going to come back here.” Bucer frowned, ears twitching. “Why’d you bring kids here, Toby? This ain’t something kids should see.”

“We saw this sort of thing, remember?” I grabbed his ear again, twisting. He howled. “Keep it down. If the neighbors call the cops, you’re going to regret it more than I will, and believe me, I am *not* in a merciful mood. Where is she keeping the children, Bucer? *Where are they?*”

“I don’t know! I don’t—” His protests became a scream as I twisted his ear downward. I clapped a hand over his mouth, slamming him against the wall. His scream became a whimper.

“Now you listen to me, and you listen good,” I whispered, leaning forward to keep the others from hearing me. Raj might hear me anyway—Cait Sidhe hearing is some of the best in Faerie—but he would understand. The others might not. “I want to kill you right now. Do you understand that? I want to hurt you in ways I have never wanted to hurt anyone, because you crossed a line. You involved my daughter. Cooperate and maybe you walk away.”

He nodded, eyes so wide that the whites were visible all the way around his irises.

“Smart boy. Now, I know there’s no way Rayseline went to ground without leaving a trail, and there’s no way you didn’t consider the value of being the only one to know her hiding place. You followed her when she took Gillian. Now where is she? Tell me, and I let you live. Understand?”

He nodded again.

“Good.” I took my hand away. “Where are they, Bucer?”

“Muir Woods,” he whispered. He swallowed hard before continuing, “There’s an old shallowing there. Little Mike told me about it before he left for Angels. Said I could hide there if Devin ever got to be too much to deal with; said it was part of some knowe that fell down a hundred years ago. We lost the rest of it, but the shallowing stayed.”

“If Little Mike told you about it, how did Rayseline know it was there?”

He didn't answer me. He didn't have to. The way he glanced away told me everything I needed to know.

I was suddenly, unendurably tired—and more, I was suddenly aware that my self-control wasn't going to hold for very much longer. I let go of his ear, giving him one last shove before I turned to face the others. “Raj, go get your Uncle. Tell him he needs to meet us in Muir Woods.”

“Where?” asked Raj.

“The main parking lot. It should take us about an hour to get there.”

Raj nodded, once, and turned, stepping into the shadows clinging to the corner of the room. The smell of pepper and burnt paper rose and was gone, taking him with it.

I looked to Quentin and Connor. “Are you coming with me?”

“Yes,” said Quentin.

“You can't stop me,” said Connor.

Bucer cleared his throat behind me, asking, “So, ah, does this mean I can go?”

“You're a traitor to the Kingdom of the Mists, Bucer O'Malley,” I said dully. “I don't care so much about that. I probably should, but hell, it's not *my* Kingdom. You're also the bastard who sold me out—who sold my *daughter* out—for the promise of something you knew you'd never get. So yeah, Bucer, you can go. You can take your things, and you can get so far out of this Kingdom that I never hear your name again.”

“And, ah . . . if I come back?”

I glanced back over my shoulder, smiling pleasantly. “If you come back, no one will ever charge me with breaking Oberon's Law, because nobody will ever find your body. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yeah.” He wiped his nose with the back of one hand, looking at me with wide, wounded eyes. “You always were Devin's favorite. I guess I finally see why.”

“Good-bye, Bucer.” I started for the door. Quentin and Connor followed me, neither of them saying a word. I'm pretty sure they had no idea what they should say. That was fine by me, because I wouldn't have known how to answer them.

Bucer closed the door behind us.



TWENTY-EIGHT

I WAITED UNTIL WE WERE BACK in the car before I called May. Filling her in only took a few seconds. It would have taken longer, but there were no troops for her to send out, no backup for her to offer. Like it or not, my army was already in the car.

She did try, once, to convince me to call Shadowed Hills. “Let Sylvester send his knights with you,” she begged.

“I can’t wait that long. Etienne can’t open gates for them all—not when we’re not going into a knowe—and if Rayseline’s reached the stage where she’s chopping fingers off the kids she needs to keep alive, who knows what she’s going to do to Gillian.”

May’s silence told me she knew I was right. Finally, she sighed, and said, “Just be careful.”

“If I can,” I said, and hung up. I turned to look at Connor.

“I’m not leaving you, so don’t ask,” he said quietly.

I smiled. “I wasn’t going to. Let me make one more call, and then we’re out of here.” I started to raise the phone again, and stopped as the half-forgotten shell in my jacket pocket began to vibrate. I pulled it out, looking at it in bemusement for a moment before lifting it to my ear. “Hello?”

“Come get me,” said the Luidaeg.

I blinked. “So what, you call me now? This is new.”

“I thought you might appreciate skipping the headache.”

“That’s uncommonly considerate.”

“I have my moments.” The Luidaeg sounded tired. “You’re going to want me for what happens next.”

“Luidaeg, what are you—”

“Did you really think I wouldn’t start keeping tabs on you after the night-haunts came and complained to me about you summoning them again? I

heard everything that happened in that apartment, and I'm telling you to come and get me. *Now.*"

The Luidaeg had neglected to mention her shell could be used as a two-way listening device. Oh, what fun it is, to live in a world where "full disclosure" is something that only happens to other people. "I thought you couldn't be directly involved."

"In stopping the war, no. In bringing those kids home . . . yeah. Now stop screwing around and get over here. Don't worry about the traffic. I'm taking care of it."

That simple statement was enough to raise a hundred horrific images, some of which wouldn't have been out of place in a movie about a giant rubber monster rising out of the San Francisco Bay and starting to lay waste to everything in sight. "Luidaeg . . ."

"Not like that. What do you take me for?"

"The sea witch."

It was her turn to pause, before allowing, "Fair enough. I'll be outside when you get here. Make it fast." With that, she was gone. I scowled at the shell before shoving it back into my pocket.

"Looks like we're making a pickup," I snarled, and started the car.

"Oh, what fun," said Connor, deadpan. "Adding the sea witch to today's field trip is probably the *only* thing that could make it even *better*."

I scowled at him. He shrugged, expression so innocent that I couldn't help laughing. "Jerk," I said.

"I have to do something to make you keep me around when this is over."

I was still laughing when Quentin stuck his head into the front seat, tapping my shoulder to get my attention. "Toby?"

"Yeah?" I glanced his way.

"What you did back there—have you done that before?"

I'd been hoping to put this conversation off for a while. Say, maybe, forever? Forever would have been nice. "Yes," I said. "Why?"

"It was . . . it was . . ." He paused, clearly searching for the words. Finally, he said, "It wasn't honorable."

Oberon spare me from pureblood honor. "I didn't break the Law, I didn't really hurt him, and I got the information we needed. He wouldn't have given it to us any other way. Sometimes, when your options are limited, honor takes a back seat to necessity." And it had felt good. That was probably the worst part: that I used the things Devin taught me, the way he taught me to

use them, and it felt *good*.

Sometimes I lie to myself a little bit, and pretend that Sylvester was the only man who taught me to grow up. Then things happen—things always happen—and I remember that nothing was ever that simple.

Quentin nodded, expression thoughtful. “Am I going to have to do that?”

“That’s up to you. Someday, you may find yourself in a position where you feel like you don’t have a choice. When that happens, it’s better if you have a way to deal with it. You can only repair your honor if you survive.”

“I guess.” He pulled back into his own seat, brooding. I just drove.

The Luidaeg’s apartment wasn’t far from Bucer’s. She was waiting for us on the corner, looking as human as I’d ever seen her, with her curly black hair bound in untidy braids. Her cable-knit sweater was too big, bagging around her waist and making her look even younger than her human mien normally did. She could have passed for an awkward nineteen year old still getting used to her own skin, as long as whoever she was trying to fool never saw the almost-infinite age in her dark brown eyes.

I pulled up to the curb, idling the engine while Connor opened his door and climbed out, clearly intending to get into the back seat. Quentin was already getting out, grinning as he threw himself toward the Luidaeg. “Luidaeg!” he said, any lingering tension washed away by his joy at seeing the sea witch.

She caught him in a one-armed hug, returning his smile. It was a sincere expression, made all the sweeter by the knowledge of how rare her smiles tended to be. “Hey yourself, kiddo,” she said, letting him go and ruffling his hair. “Dad’s teeth, you’re getting huge. They need to stop feeding you. Dead kids don’t grow much.”

“Sometimes I consider it, but I don’t want to fill out the paperwork for a replacement,” I said. “Come on.”

Connor stayed where he was, blinking as the Luidaeg followed Quentin into the back seat. He looked at me for guidance. I shrugged, and motioned for him to get back in the car. We needed to get moving, and if the Luidaeg wanted to sit with Quentin, that was her business.

Quentin met the Luidaeg after Blind Michael stole Quentin’s human girlfriend. The Luidaeg was the one who gave him the chance to save her . . . by giving her up. He could have hated her for that. I probably would have. Instead, she wound up added to his personal pantheon of people worth trusting. Boys are weird.

I met the Luidaeg’s eyes in the rearview mirror. Her irises were a plain

human brown, and mine were the no-color mist gray I inherited from my mother. I scowled, mostly at my own carelessness. Until that moment, I hadn't actually thought about the fact that I wasn't wearing a human disguise. Getting Gillian back would be a pyrrhic victory if I betrayed the existence of Faerie in the process.

The Luidaeg lifted her eyebrows, waiting for me to speak.

"Buckle up," I said, and pulled away from the curb.

"I've cleared the roads between here and Muir Woods," said the Luidaeg. "You can go as fast as you need to. No one's going to stop us."

"This is probably where I'm supposed to say 'neat trick,' but I can do that with a don't-look-here and a little fancy driving." Still, I hit the gas, accelerating to a speed that bordered on unsafe. True to the Luidaeg's word, there were no other cars in sight as we drove out of her magically-generated mist. "Where is everybody? Please don't tell me you've turned the entire mortal population of the city into pillars of salt. I really don't know how I'd explain that to the Queen."

"There's more than one way to get almost anywhere," said the Luidaeg. Her tone was dismissive, like casting spells on half the city was no big deal. "People are just choosing those alternate routes tonight. That's all."

"What . . . what about the ones who were going places that *didn't* have an alternate route?" asked Connor uneasily. He sounded like he didn't really want to know the answer to his own question. That made one of us.

"They decided to do something else with their time," said the Luidaeg. "The movie theaters are doing excellent business. Now *drive*, October."

Her command was sharp enough that I sped up another ten miles per hour. The buildings outside the car windows were starting to blur and blend together, flickering past too quickly for me to make out individual details. "How do you know you're going to be needed tonight?" I asked, raising my voice to be heard above the engine.

"Hold a moment." The Luidaeg rolled down her window. Then she raised her left hand, tracing an elaborate pattern through the space between the seats. The air got suddenly colder, and I tasted saltwater on my tongue. Then the cold and the salt were both gone, taking the sound from outside the car with them. Her window was still halfway down, but there was no rush of air. We might as well have been driving in a hermetically sealed bubble—and for all that I knew, we were.

The Luidaeg met my eyes in the rearview mirror again before she shook

her head, saying, “There’s no way of knowing who might be listening in. It’s better to be safe than to be sorry, especially right now.”

“You’re afraid of being spied on?” asked Connor. “That seems a little far-fetched.” He stopped, reddening as if he was just now realizing he’d spoken aloud.

The Luidaeg’s attention swung to him. When she spoke again, her voice was cold, almost without inflection. “I don’t believe I requested your opinion, *Selkie*,” she said, spitting out the word like it tasted bad. “As for things being ‘far-fetched,’ a year ago, you were a married man, and October here was a half-blood Knight living alone and half in love with the idea of her own death. Now your former wife is wanted for treason, October’s a Countess, her own personal death omen is paying half the rent, and the balance of her blood is a lot harder to read. No one who travels regularly in her company gets to use the term ‘far-fetched’ around me.”

“She’s got a point,” said Quentin, sounding almost cheerful. Having the Luidaeg in the car seemed to have made him feel much better about the whole excursion. That made one of us.

“Still,” I said, feeling like I should contribute, “for someone to be listening in, they’d have to be—”

“I’m not the only Firstborn left in the world. You should know that better than anyone, daughter of Amandine.” She somehow managed to turn the reminder of my mother into an endearment, like being Amandine’s child was a special, magical thing, rather than the source of half the complications in my life. “I don’t believe any of the other First are involved in this—but I can’t be certain. I can never be certain. And unless I absolutely know that none of my siblings are assisting our kidnappers, I can’t assume they’re not.”

“Oh, there’s a cheerful thought,” I said dourly. “How much do you know? Did you start listening as soon as the night-haunts left Goldengreen?”

“No. Not immediately. I knew you were going to call them, and it didn’t seem necessary.” There was quiet sorrow in her voice as she continued, “After you met with Duke Lorden, Mary . . . decided the circumstances were dire enough that she needed to call me with what she’d seen. She was worried that something terrible would happen if I didn’t go with you to Muir Woods.”

“Something terrible?” I asked, hands clenching on the steering wheel. “Something terrible like what, exactly?”

“She didn’t say. I don’t think she knew.” The Luidaeg’s reflection closed her eyes, letting her head rest against the back of her seat. “Mary, Mary, quite

contrary. She doesn't always understand *what* she sees, only that she sees it, and that what she's seen can't be unseen. She used to be more in control of her prophecy. But that was before."

"Before what?" asked Quentin.

"Before the betrayal of the Roane," said Connor. His voice was barely more than a whisper. If not for the Luidaeg's spell shutting out all sound outside the car, I wouldn't have heard him at all.

I frowned, slanting a glance in his direction. "What are you—"

"That's a history lesson for another day, October," said the Luidaeg, her tone leaving no room for debate. She didn't lift her head or open her eyes as she gestured toward the road in front of us. "Drive. There isn't time left for anything else."

"I'm tired as hell of people being oblique and prophetic at me, you know," I complained, pressing my foot down harder on the gas. "Do you people take some sort of correspondence course on making no damn sense at all?"

"It's more of a graduate degree, actually," the Luidaeg replied. I glanced again at her reflection. She was smiling. Only a little bit, but it was there. "I got the best grades in my class."

"Figures," I said, and focused on the road.

We were making the trip out of San Francisco at record speed, even for me, and whatever she'd used on the car was much better than an invisibility charm or a don't-look-here. I didn't even have to avoid the few other drivers who had somehow managed to avoid the Luidaeg's misdirection charms and stay on the main roads. They just never happened to be where we needed to be next.

The Luidaeg's presence was definitely making Connor uncomfortable. He sat, straight-backed, and watched the road ahead of us like he was counting down the miles to his own execution. An air of palpable tension was settling over the car, getting stronger with every minute that passed. We were moving toward a conclusion.

I saw a few cars after we crossed the Golden Gate Bridge into Marin, but the road ahead of us remained as open as ever. I was doing seventy when the phone rang. "Oh, *thorns*," I swore, fumbling it out of my pocket and flipping it open with one hand. "Hello?"

"Tobes, hey. I tried what you said. This a bad time?"

"You shouldn't be on the phone while you're driving," said Connor. "It's against the law." He sounded faintly alarmed—less, I think, because I was

breaking the law, and more because I wasn't slowing down to compensate for splitting my attention.

I would have needed a third hand to flip him off. I settled for hitting the gas a little harder, and watching him go pale.

"No, Danny, this is a great time," I said. "We're on the way to Muir Woods now. Did you get anything out of the rocks?"

"You're already on the way to Muir Woods? What are you, psychic?"

"No, impatient." I shook my head, trying to clear away the image of Bucer's wide, frightened eyes. "What did they tell you?"

"Three of the rocks recognized the smell of redwood—said they missed the big trees. One of 'em also said it missed the water, so I put it in the sink." He sounded exceedingly pleased with himself as he continued, "They like the environmental cues."

"Good. Did they give you any other details? Anything we can use?"

"The smallest one remembered redwoods an' cars. Used to be at the edge of a parking lot. Apparently, it got picked up and put down again by a whole lotta kids, so it remembered Raysel real clear. She was the first one that didn't put it back." Danny hesitated. "I, uh, promised I'd put it back when we were done. Is that okay?"

"I'm not going to make you break your word to a rock, Danny."

"Oh, good," he said, relieved. "I didn't think you would. Anyway, second one remembered water, third one remembered bein' pulled out of the ground."

"Great," I said, heart sinking. The first two rocks were useful. The third . . . how many rocks came out of the ground? All of them, that's how many. "This is very helpful, Danny."

"No, no, you don't get it! It remembers bein' pulled out of the ground, but it wasn't bottom-down, like in a trail or something!" Danny raised his voice in his excitement, words booming into the cabin. I winced, holding the phone away from my ear. "She pried it out of a wall, a mud wall. Like you get where a trail's been cut, you know?"

"So she picked up one rock at the entrance, one rock from a stream, and one rock from the side of a trail?" I brought the phone back to my ear. "Did you get anything else?"

"Not really," said Danny. "Rocks aren't so good with time, and everything else they had to say was about how much they don't like the shape stuff's been in since the big shake."

“The big shake?” I asked blankly. “What the hell are they talking about?”

“The earthquake in nineteen-oh-six,” said the Luidaeg. She leaned forward, close enough to the phone for Danny to hear her when she asked, “Did the rocks say they cried when the towers fell?”

“What—” I began.

Danny’s answer cut me off: “Yeah, they did. You know what that means? Who is this, anyway?”

“It’s a pleasure to finally get the chance to speak with you, Mr. McReady. You can call me the Luidaeg.”

Silence fell on Danny’s end of the line. Looking amused, the Luidaeg sank back into her seat. Finally, Danny asked, “Toby? Was that really the sea witch just there? On the phone? Talking to me?”

“Yeah, Danny, it was. She’s not wearing a seat belt, either.” I shot a sharp look at her reflection in the rearview mirror. She looked quietly amused. “Call if you get anything else out of those rocks, okay? We’re almost to Muir Woods. I’m going to need both hands if we don’t want to drive off the edge of a cliff.”

“Open roads, and I’ll call.”

“Good. Hug the Barghests for me.” I couldn’t thank him, and so I just hung up, handing the phone to Connor as I turned my focus back to the road. The closer we got to Muir Woods, the less developed the land around us became. Housing developments and strip malls had already given way to half-hidden private driveways and tiny general stores with rickety wooden porches. The smell of the redwoods was seeping in through the vents, filling the entire car with the living green memory of something older and cleaner than the modern human world.

The lack of human development also meant a lack of concern among the local wildlife. Wild turkeys casually strutted along beside the road, their scrawny brown chests fluffed out like little avian gangsters. We startled a pair of deer as we came around a blind curve in the road, and I hit the brakes just in time to keep from getting Bambi pâté all over the windshield.

“Whoa,” said Quentin.

“My thoughts exactly.” I glanced over my shoulder. “Everyone all right back there?”

The Luidaeg, who was still not wearing a seat belt, didn’t look like our sudden stop had perturbed her in the least. “Fine,” she said. “Keep driving.”

I kept driving, more slowly now that we were on the treacherous roads

marking the final approach to Muir Woods.

The Muir Woods National Monument was established to protect one of the last old-growth redwood forests in the state of California. It's kept open to the public, as much to remind them why the forest is important as for any other reason. "These used to be everywhere in California," said Connor suddenly. "Just about this whole part of the state was redwoods."

"So why'd they cut them down?" asked Quentin.

"I don't know."

"Because they could," said the Luidaeg. "Parking lot's just ahead, Toby."

"Good."

I pulled around the last corner between us and the designated parking area and hit the brakes, swearing as I saw the gate blocking the entrance. Heavy chains held it shut. According to the posted sign, the park closed at sunset.

"Wait here," said the Luidaeg, and climbed out of the car.

"What's she doing?" asked Quentin.

"At this point? I have no idea."

The Luidaeg walked to the locked gate and lifted the padlock that held the chains in place. She tapped it twice with her index finger, and it popped open, letting the chains fall loose. The Luidaeg unhooked them and swung the gate open.

She smiled into my window as I drove slowly past her, commenting, "Once you've pried open the gates of Tirm Aill with nothing but a headache and a stick, padlocks are surprisingly uncomplicated."

"Uh, sure," I said. She waved me to the nearest parking space, following the car as I pulled in and killed the engine.

I stretched as I got out of the car, taking a deep breath of the clean, redwood-scented air. I still wasn't wearing a human disguise. In a place like this, where humans have done their best to step lightly and leave few traces behind, that felt appropriate. Connor and Quentin did much the same, even as they started scanning the woods around us.

Too bad we weren't there to sightsee. "Quentin, I have a baseball bat you can use," I said, brushing past the Luidaeg as I moved to open the trunk. "Connor, I don't actually have any weapons for you—"

"That's quite all right," said Tybalt, from a point immediately behind my right shoulder. "I assumed that would be the case, and brought extra."

I jumped, but managed not to embarrass myself by shrieking like a girl. Instead, I turned, finding myself eye-to-eye with Tybalt. He smiled with his

usual easy arrogance, but I could see the concern in his eyes.

“Raj found you,” I said. My voice was lower than it had been when I was shouting to be heard by the people still getting out of the car. It felt like louder words had never escaped my lips.

“He did,” Tybalt agreed. “I was with my subjects, searching for our missing mice, and the rats that stole them.”

“Did you find anything?” I asked.

His expression darkened. “More, and less, than I wanted to,” he said. He dipped a hand into his pocket and produced what looked at first like a children’s toy—a bunch of dried sticks tied together with ribbon and string. I frowned at it, not sure what I was seeing.

Then the Luidaeg gasped. Her eyes went black from one side to the other as she pushed her way between us, grabbing the bundle and clutching it against her chest. Her sudden fury would almost have been amusing, if the air around us hadn’t been getting steadily colder. “Where. Did. You. Get. This?” she demanded, biting each word off into its own separate sentence.

“From the hand of a slain Goblin soldier,” replied Tybalt. He held his ground, somehow managing to meet the Luidaeg’s eyes without flinching. “He told me it had been given as a sign of faith by those who hired him.”

“Does somebody want to tell me what it *is*, since we’re all getting upset about it?” I asked.

The answer came from a surprising quarter: Quentin, who was standing off to one side, staring at the artifact with a look of nauseated awe on his face. “It’s a hand of bones,” he said. “Someone gave the Goblins a hand of bones?”

“What in Oberon’s name is a hand of bones?” I wasn’t asking now; I was demanding.

My tone caught the Luidaeg’s attention. She turned to face me, still clutching the bundle against her chest. The things I’d taken for sticks before rattled against each other, and something in the sound sang to me, telling me that yes, these things had once known blood. “A hand of bones is a promise to the land,” she said, voice tight. “Each piece comes from the hand of a former reigning monarch—one who no longer reigns, for whatever reason. The night-haunts leave the bones of the hand behind for us, to mark the fall of a regent. This,” she touched a bone that looked like all the others around it, “came from the hand of King Gilad, who ruled the Mists before your current Queen stepped up to claim his empty throne.”

“Okay, that’s charming, but what does it have to do with anything?” I stalked to the back of the car and unlocked the trunk. My baseball bat was on the top. I grabbed it, tossing it to Quentin. “What does a hand of bones *do*?”

“They mark a promise made on a Kingdom’s throne,” said Quentin. He hugged the baseball bat against his chest, shaking his head. “If the Goblins had that, it’s because someone made them a promise on the Mists. What were they promised?”

Tybalt looked past the Luidaeg, looking straight into my eyes as he said, “Goldengreen. The ones who hired the Goblins promised that, when the war was done and the Kingdom was theirs, the Goblins would have Goldengreen, and respectability.”

“My house is not for sale,” I said. I gave the grisly trophy the Luidaeg held another look, and asked, “Did the Queen give it to them?”

“No.” Tybalt’s answer was quick. “The Goblin who . . . surrendered . . . it to me described a woman with red hair, and a dark-haired man who stood behind her, in the shadows, watching.”

“Rayseline,” said Connor wearily. He walked toward Tybalt, holding one hand out, palm up. “You said you brought weapons?”

“It seemed rude not to bring enough for everyone.” Tybalt produced a crossbow from inside his coat and passed it to Connor, along with a leather-wrapped packet of arrows. “I look forward to fighting beside you.”

Connor looked at him like he couldn’t quite figure out whether Tybalt was messing with him or not. Tybalt looked back with an expression of complete sincerity. Finally, Connor nodded. “It will be an honor,” he said, and turned away.

The Luidaeg gave the hand of bones one more angry look before tossing it into the backseat of the car and slamming the door. “We should be moving,” she said. “Time isn’t standing still while we mess around down here.”

“No, it’s not,” I said. Looking back to Tybalt, I asked, “Is it just you?”

“For now,” he said. “Raj is bringing the knights from Shadowed Hills. I understand your reluctance to wait for them, but a little last-minute cavalry never hurt anyone. My subjects stand watch at Goldengreen, and at your apartment, in case this is a diversion of some sort.”

“Good thinking.” I shut the trunk. “I’m glad you came.”

“No other places beckoned half so sweetly,” said Tybalt. “I’ll keep watch as we go.” He half-bowed, and was gone in a swirl of pennyroyal and musk. I looked down at the tabby tomcat now standing by my feet.

“Well?” I asked. “Were you going to take point or not?”

Tail high, he turned and trotted toward the open parking lot gate. I looked at the others.

“Come on. Let’s go get my daughter back.” Not waiting to see if they’d follow, I started after Tybalt. One way or another, this was going to end.



TWENTY-NINE

WALKING BENEATH THE TOWERING REDWOODS was very much like walking into a forest in the Summerlands: majestic and unspoiled. Only a few undeniable signs broke the illusion of the forest primeval. Wooden walkways wound among the great trees, protecting the forest floor from careless feet, and there was a small gift shop near the entrance, polluting that part of the wood with the smell of human habitation. Tybalt lashed his tail as he glared in that direction, then continued down the wooden path, a dark streak moving through the growing shadow as the night descended.

I kept my hand on the hilt of my knife as I walked, flinching a little every time the bushes rustled. An owl hooted in the distance. The sound was answered by another, deeper hoot, before a chorus of frogs began to sing somewhere in the creek that ran beneath the wooden planks.

The Luidaeg paced next to me, her dark curls almost blending into the background. Her feet were silent, unlike Connor's or Quentin's; the two of them alone managed to sound like an entire invading army as their shoes clomped on the walkway. She looked at my face, reading the tension there, before casting a glance back over her shoulder and whispering a word in a language I didn't recognize. The temperature of the air around us dropped by several degrees, and the sound of their footsteps stopped.

I nodded silent thanks, the need to stay as quiet as possible saving me from the effort of talking my way around the forbidden words, and kept on going.

Muir Woods was designed to retain as much of the spirit of the land as possible, while making it accessible to humans at the same time. They wouldn't preserve anything they couldn't appreciate, or so the logic ran; unless they saw the true beauty of California's wilderness for themselves, they'd never understand why they shouldn't burn it all to ashes. I've never understood that sort of thinking, but this time, it was working in our favor.

We'd have been moving a lot slower if we'd been forced to make our own way through the undergrowth.

Tybalt reached a fork in the path and stopped, looking one way and then the other before turning to look at the rest of us. Deliberately, he sat, flattening his ears.

I bit back a sigh. If Tybalt had lost the scent—and he wasn't a bloodhound, no matter how cheerfully I exploited the keenness of his feline nose—we were going to need to try something else. I looked to the Luidaeg, raising an eyebrow.

She nodded and held out her hand, gesturing for me to give her mine. I didn't hesitate. Whatever she needed from me, she could have it, if there was a chance it meant we'd be able to get my daughter back.

The Luidaeg raised my hand to her mouth, looking at me solemnly before making a “hush” gesture at Quentin and Connor. They hadn't been making any noise. All three of us looked at her quizzically, trying to figure out what she wanted.

We were still looking at her quizzically when she opened her mouth and bit me hard enough to draw blood.

I'd been expecting pain—I've learned that when I let the Luidaeg take hold of any part of my anatomy, pain is going to follow very shortly—but it still took everything I had to grit my teeth against the urge to scream, or at least squeak. As it was, I made a small, muffled, moaning sound before clapping my free hand over my mouth, stopping anything else from getting free.

The Luidaeg withdrew her teeth from my flesh, studying the resulting puncture wounds for a moment before nodding to herself and letting go of me. Motioning for the rest of us to stay where we were, she stepped off the edge of the walkway and into the creek. Her feet slid into the water without a sound. My blood ran from the corner of her mouth, looking almost like chocolate syrup in the dark.

Chocolate syrup doesn't sing to my senses. I cradled my wounded hand against my chest, trying not to think about the fact that I was bleeding, or that we were standing here while Rayseline might be torturing my daughter. Connor stepped up beside me, putting a comforting hand on my shoulder. I let myself lean into it, breathing slowly in and out, trying to ignore the smell of blood.

The smell of musk and pennyroyal joined the mingled scents of blood and redwood trees, and Tybalt stepped soundlessly up on my other side, back in

his human form. He looked at Connor, and nodded. That was all; just nodded.

The Luidaeg stooped to grab something out of the creek. Then she straightened, holding a dripping, Y-shaped branch in one hand, and climbed back onto the walkway. She held out the branch to me. I took it, giving her a blank look. She mimed grasping the two short ends and holding it out like a

—
Like a dowsing rod. Of course. I turned the stick around so that I would be holding it appropriately, only wincing a little as the bark rasped against the wounds made by the Luidaeg's teeth. My blood ran down the right side of the stick, mixing with the water, as the copper-and-cut-grass smell of my magic started to rise. I wasn't the one calling it, not on purpose, but I forced myself to relax and let it come. The Luidaeg knew what she was doing. My daughter needed me to trust her.

As if that thought were the key, the magic locked into place, and the dowsing rod in my hands twitched drowsily to life. It pulled, hard, toward the path up ahead. I started in that direction, holding the dowsing rod straight out in front of me. The others followed, fanning into a rough diamond formation: Quentin right behind me, Tybalt and Connor walking side by side, and the Luidaeg bringing up the rear.

All of them looked like they really wanted something they could hit. Anything that tried getting the jump on us in this forest was going to have a nasty surprise when it realized what it was dealing with.

The dowsing rod's pull led us down one path after another, until I found myself starting up a series of mud-and-timber "stairs" cut into the side of the mountain. We were about halfway up when Quentin grabbed my elbow, bringing our whole procession to a stop. I turned to frown at him, and he indicated a hole in the muddy bank beside us. A place where someone had recently pried loose a rock. We were getting close to our destination.

I nodded and started forward again, moving a little more cautiously as the dowsing rod urged me to continue ever forward. My hand wasn't bleeding anymore, but it didn't need to be, because the blood I'd already spilled was singing so strongly. Gillian was my daughter, blood of my blood, and the dowsing rod was taking us straight to her.

The pull stopped abruptly, my spell shattering. I stumbled, nearly dropping the now-quiescent dowsing rod. The others stopped in turn, all of them scanning the underbrush for signs of the shallowing we'd come here to find. All but the Luidaeg. She pushed me gently aside as she walked up to a vast

redwood with a trunk so big around that it could have been hollowed out and used as a home for a family of four. Leaning forward, she pressed one palm flat against the bark of the tree, and spoke the first words I'd heard any of us utter since she spelled Quentin and Connor's footsteps into silence:

"I know where we are now. I'm sorry you've been alone for so long. I should have guessed, when you blocked my scrying. You're still protecting the King, aren't you? It's all right now. You can let us in." She paused before adding, with the air of someone who was confessing a great secret, "Arden lives."

A ripple seemed to pass through the trees around us, briefly filling the air with the sea-sweet smell of salt and something fainter, less distinct, like a woman's perfume left open in a sealed room for a hundred years. It was gone before I could figure out exactly what it was.

The Luidaeg pulled her hand away from the tree, smiling sadly. "Thank you," she said . . . and the tree opened where her hand had been, the bark fading into nothing and leaving a dark tunnel behind. She looked back to the rest of us. "Hurry. I don't know how they've been abusing the knowe to get inside, but I can't hold this door for long."

I nodded. "We're moving." I gestured for the others to follow me, and drew my knife as I slipped past the Luidaeg, into the door in the tree.

Entering a shallowing isn't quite like entering a proper knowe. The separation between the worlds isn't as pronounced, and the disorientation passes faster. This passage was even more subtle than the norm, since the air in Muir Woods was already so clean, and the night was already so silent. We moved from the mortal world into the fringes of the Summerlands without missing a step. The Luidaeg's spell of silence must have broken when she spoke, because I could hear our footsteps again, little scuffs against the hard-packed clay of the tunnel floor.

There were no sounds but our footsteps as we walked through the dark of the shallowing. The clay under our feet gave way to smooth gray stone. I shivered and sped up. We were getting closer to the children—we had to be. This was the place, and this was the type of stone I'd seen through Dean's memories. They had to be somewhere up ahead, waiting for rescue.

And then there was light.

It was subtle at first, the faintest decrease in the darkness surrounding us. It grew brighter until I could see the walls of the tunnel without needing to be right up against them. There was a corner just ahead; whatever was casting

the light had to be on the other side. I sped up, sticking close to the wall in case someone was waiting with a lantern and a crossbow. When I reached the corner, I stopped, listening. There was no sound. Gripping the hilt of my knife a little tighter, I stepped forward.

A hallway with oak-paneled walls and the same stone floor extended on the other side of the corner. That wasn't what caught my attention. The light was coming from a lantern hanging from a hook on one wall, and it seemed to be moving. I took a step closer, and realized that it was lit, not with a candle or an oil wick, but with three live pixies. They were crammed into the tiny glass rectangle, leaving them with barely enough room to move their wings. Quentin's breath hissed through his teeth as he saw them, and Tybalt scowled. Connor looked away.

"Well?" whispered the Luidaeg, stepping up behind me. "What do you want to do about that? We can't have them alerting Rayseline to our presence. And we could use the light."

"Hang on." I stepped forward and took the lantern down from the wall, bringing it close to my face. The pixies inside looked at me with mingled hope and terror. Keeping my voice low, I said, "I need your help. We need to have light to find the people who put you in this lantern. If I let you out, will you stay and help us?"

The pixies eyed me suspiciously before turning to each other and starting to speak in their rapid, high-pitched language. Finally, the smallest of the three turned to me and nodded, folding her arms to punctuate the gesture.

"Here goes nothing," I whispered, and opened the panel on the side of the lantern.

All three pixies immediately flew out, performing an elaborate series of aerial acrobatics in the narrow confines of the hall. Then they turned and zoomed over our heads, vanishing into the hallway up ahead.

"Oh, good call," grumbled Connor.

"Wait." The pixies in Goldengreen were pests, thieves, and tricksters . . . but they kept their word. I had to hope these pixies would do the same.

The seconds ticked by. I was about to admit defeat and move on into the dark when the light came racing back along the tunnel, and our three pixies flew back into view—now joined by six of their cousins. Quentin grinned.

"They just wanted to get their friends out," he said.

"Let's hope Rayseline wasn't using one of those lamps," said the Luidaeg . . . but she was smiling to herself as one of the pixies landed on her shoulder.

The other pixies found perches on the rest of us, their multicolored wings casting a soft glow through the hall.

“Come on,” I said, and started walking again.

The pixies stayed with us as we made our way through the darkened hall, pausing only to free more of their people from lanterns. The sight of them crammed in there was enough to turn my stomach, and only intensified my need to find Gillian as soon as possible. Pixies are essentially defenseless when they’re not swarming. Using them as living light bulbs wasn’t just wrong; it was unnecessarily cruel. There are plenty of spells and plenty of candles in the world.

We’d been walking through the shallowing for a good ten minutes when we came to the end of the hallway. A large oak door filled most of the final wall, standing ever so slightly open. I gestured to Connor, who nodded and slotted an arrow into his crossbow, raising it to shoulder height. Quentin and Tybalt stepped back, pressing themselves against the wall. Only the Luidaeg stayed where she was, arms folded, scowling.

I crouched, making myself as small a target as possible, and pushed the door slowly open. Then I straightened, all caution forgotten, as the scene in front of me made my mouth go dry and my blood start to boil all in the same instant.

Gillian was sitting in front of me, dressed in bloodstained sweatpants and an over-sized T-shirt. She wasn’t sitting up on her own; no, she was held upright by loops of rope, tied into thick knots and binding her to a heavy chair. Her ankles were tied to one of the chair legs, and her hands were bound behind her. She raised her head at the sound of the door opening, and her eyes widened when she saw me standing there. We must have looked like something out of a fantasy novel to her, all pointed ears and inhuman eyes, surrounded by the constantly-moving swirl of the pixies.

“M-Mom?” she whispered, her voice raspy and dry. “Is that—are you—Mom?”

“Oh, baby.” I took a step into the room, trusting the others to watch for any dangers. All I wanted was to get to Gillian as fast as possible, to cut her free and hold her, and never, never let her go. “It’s going to be okay, I promise.”

“Mom . . .” She swallowed hard, the gesture seeming to take everything she had. Then she whispered, in a barelyaudible voice, “Run.”

“It’s too late for that,” said Rayseline, her voice coming acid-sweet and oily from the hallway. We all turned, even the Luidaeg, to see her standing

behind us with a longbow in her hands, an arrow nocked and ready to fire. Four Goblins stood behind her, their weapons raised. “It’s been too late for quite some time, don’t you think?” Her smile was radiantly bright. “I’m so glad you could come to my party. We’re all going to have so much fun together.”



THIRTY

“**RAYSEL—◆◆** CONNOR BEGAN. “Shut up, Connor. I have nothing to say to you. As for the rest of you, stay where you are, or the girl dies.” Raysel took a casual step forward. “And you, sea bitch, you have no power here. I am a descendant of Titania, and I deny you the right to stand against me, or to aid those who would. Do you hear and honor my words?”

“. . . yes,” hissed the Luidaeg, fury dancing in her eyes. “I hear and honor your words.” The glance she cast in my direction confirmed my sudden fear: she wouldn’t be able to help us. Power like hers always comes with a price. The phrase Rayseline uttered was apparently part of the price the Luidaeg had to pay.

“Then stand to the side and hold your tongue. This is not your business anymore.” Raysel lifted her chin, jerking it imperiously toward the wall. Silently snarling, the Luidaeg moved as she was ordered, glaring daggers all the way.

“Rayseline.” I tried to put my body between her and my daughter without it being too obvious that I was doing it. If I’d had any doubts about her willingness to kill Gillian before, her own words had destroyed them. “Shut up or the girl dies” didn’t leave much room for argument. “We just want to talk.”

“Talk? You want to talk, so you come skulking through my new home in the dark, carrying weapons, damaging my things? I don’t know what kind of fool you think I am, October, but no one brings the sea witch and the King of Cats when they just want to ‘talk.’ ” Rayseline’s smile slipped, revealing the fury behind it. “You never had any intention of talking. You came to *steal*, and I don’t take kindly to thieves.”

It took a moment for me to realize that “damaging my things” meant freeing the captive pixies. My stomach rolled. The pixies had vanished the

moment Raysel came into the room, diving for whatever cover they could find. One of them was hiding in my hair. Its body was plastered against my neck, wings vibrating with every anxious breath. As for the rest of them . . . I just hoped they could escape before Raysel bottled them up again.

“I don’t think we have the same definition of theft,” I said, struggling to keep my voice as level as possible. “Gillian’s my daughter.”

“She’s your daughter, and my honored guest.” Raysel took another deliberate step forward. “We have so much to talk about, after all. You failed us both. Why, we’re practically sisters, aren’t we?”

Gillian whimpered.

“Shut your mouth,” I snapped, all attempts at reason forgotten in the face of the sudden, fierce need to protect my little girl. “Don’t make this harder on yourself than it has to be. Put down the bow, call off your Goblins, and come quietly. I’ll ask the Queen to go easy on you.”

“That’s not an option. You know that, or you’d never have made the offer.” Raysel shook her head. I thought I saw a flash of regret in her eyes, there and gone in an instant. “Not even the High King could go easy on me now. Could he?” None of us said anything. Fury contorted her face as she turned to aim her bow at Quentin, shouting, “*Could he?!*”

“No,” Quentin said. I shifted to get a look at him. He was standing with his chin up and his shoulders squared, staring down the length of his nose at Raysel. “But he could show clemency. You didn’t mean to kill the Selkie. You could be granted a sentence other than death.”

“A century decorating some garden as a marble statue doesn’t appeal to me,” she spat. “I chose this. I’ll see it through.”

“Did you choose it, Raysel?” I asked, shifting my weight to put myself a bit more solidly between her and Gillian. “Or did someone offer it to you? We know you didn’t do this alone. What did Dugan promise you? Did he tell you this would make everything better? It won’t.”

Raysel’s fury slipped as she turned back to me, and for a moment, I saw the little girl I used to know in her face, a child trapped within the prison of her own induced madness. “Whether this plan was wise or not, it’s mine now,” she said. “Something had to be. This will be enough.”

“Will it? Or is he just using you to get what *he* wants?” I shook my head. “No honor between thieves, remember? He’s going to clean up his loose ends, just like Oleander tried to do.”

“Then he’ll die. Just like Oleander did.” The momentary vulnerability

passed, replaced by a smug little smile. “I have to thank you, October.” She put a poisonous spin on the word “thank.” “You’ve collected everyone I need to kill in one place. It makes things so much more efficient.”

I was surprised enough that I laughed out loud before I thought better of it. Raysel’s eyes widened, making her look like a startled child. “Do you really think this is everyone you’ll have to kill? Seriously? Oak and ash, Raysel, stop posturing and *think*. If you want to make this go away, you’re going to have to kill a lot more than just us.”

“There’s my nephew,” said Tybalt calmly, “and a large percentage of my Court.”

“The Duke and Duchess of Saltmist,” said Connor.

“Danny and Walther,” I said, even though I wasn’t sure Danny knew about the dead Selkie. The look of alarm on Raysel’s face was promising; I just had to make it worse. “Oh, and most of Goldengreen.”

“Shut up,” said Raysel, without conviction. She licked her lips, shifting her weight from foot to foot. Her Goblins murmured behind her, starting to look concerned. Maybe they were realizing how unlikely their promised payday really was. “All of you, be quiet.”

“Your parents,” I said.

That was the wrong card to play. Raysel’s eyes narrowed this time, and her grip on her longbow steadied. “They already chose you over me,” she said, pulling the bowstring tight. “They can rot for all I care.”

I froze. I may be faster than I used to be, but I knew better than to believe I could outrun an arrow. If she let go, I was going down—and worse. Elf-shot is normally small, sized to fit in a handheld crossbow . . . but the tip of Raysel’s arrow glittered poisonously. Clearly, she’d been making some adjustments.

Raysel smiled at the terror on my face. “So maybe killing you won’t make this go away. So what? I’m going to be Queen when the war is over, and there’s plenty of space on the battlefield to arrange for an ‘accidental’ death or two. You’ve given me a list to work from. I’ll just think of it as a challenge before my coronation.”

Still not daring to move, I asked the only question I could think of that might buy us a little more time: “How were you planning to kill the Luidaeg? She’s Firstborn. I only know one person who knows how to kill a Firstborn, and you’re talking to her. If you kill me, the Luidaeg lives.”

“Even the Firstborn can be . . . incapacitated for a little while. I only need a

hundred years or so. After that, she can say whatever she likes. I'll have my throne. She won't be able to hurt me."

"Then there's May, and the night-haunts—I mean, this is a *lot* of killing."

Raysel scoffed. "The night-haunts are nothing. I own flyswatters."

"The Court of Cats will hunt you to the farthest marches and beyond," said Tybalt. He sounded almost bored. That was a dangerous tone coming from him. A cat that looks bored is a cat that's getting ready to pounce.

Please, Tybalt, be careful, I prayed silently, unsure, as always, if anyone was listening. *There's no telling what she has on that arrow*. Elf-shot, treated with a little something extra to make waking up impossible, if Walther was right.

"I don't care," said Raysel. She drew the bowstring back a little farther. Tybalt glanced at me, and nodded, almost imperceptibly. This standoff couldn't last forever. Raysel's attention was on me. All I had to do was keep it there.

I said the only thing I could think of that would guarantee I held her attention. "If you're going to kill us anyway, you should know that Connor and I have been sleeping together since the day I came back from the pond."

Her eyes narrowed. "Liar."

"Oh, no. I called him from the motel. He came right over—said you wouldn't notice, that you were too stupid to see that he was cheating on you." I took a deliberate step forward, baiting her. "*We laughed* at you."

"Liar!" shouted Raysel. Her fingers tensed as she swung her bow up, shifting her aim from my shoulder to my throat.

"She's telling the truth," said Connor. Raysel's aim wavered, like she couldn't decide which of us she should kill first.

"*Now!*" shouted Tybalt, and leaped for Rayseline.

He wasn't moving as fast as I knew he was capable of, but he was still moving fast enough to slam into her before she could react. The impact knocked her off-balance, and she released the arrow, sending it flying to embed itself harmlessly in the ceiling. She shrieked, hitting him with her bow. The Goblins lunged for him, their knives out and gleaming wickedly.

I pulled the pixie from my hair, whispering, "Help us, please," before hurling it toward Raysel and the others. It rang stridently as it tumbled through the air. That must have been the pixie equivalent of sounding a cavalry charge, because more pixies came swarming from their hiding places, biting and scratching as they dove into the fray.

One of the Goblins went for Quentin, and was promptly dissuaded by a baseball bat to the side of the head. Not to be outdone, Connor drew his own bow and shot the Goblin in the arm. It howled and dropped its knife.

I wanted to help them, but more, I wanted to get Gillian away from all this madness. I turned and knelt by her chair. “Just hold on, baby, I’m going to get you out of here,” I said, starting to saw through the rope binding her ankles.

“Mom? What *are* those *things*?” She sounded terrified.

“Close your eyes, Gilly,” I ordered. Tybalt was snarling, which meant he’d probably abandoned at least part of his human form in favor of a cat’s claws and fangs. Even my allies probably looked like monsters to her. “This is all going to be over soon, but I need you to close your eyes, because you don’t want to see this.”

“I don’t understand,” she whispered—but she turned her face away. Thank Oberon for that. She’d already seen too much.

I’d worry about that later. For now, my biggest concern was getting her out of the shallowing alive.

The rope holding her feet gave way. I moved around to the back of the chair. “Just keep them closed, baby,” I said, keeping my tone soothing, like I was trying to coax the toddler I remembered her being back to sleep after a bad dream. “I’m almost done here, and as soon as I’m done, I’m going to take you home. I’m going to get you out of here, and I’m going to take you home.”

“Promise?” she asked, voice barely audible above the sound of fighting. My hands faltered at the work of sawing through the rope, suddenly realizing what she was asking me—and what Raysel had really done.

Gillian had seen Faerie. Her introduction wasn’t the kind most changelings got, but she’d seen Faerie all the same. When Quentin’s human girlfriend was stolen by Blind Michael, the Luidaeg was able to pull her memories of the fae out of her mind, leaving her whole and undamaged by the experience. Katie was human. Katie had that option.

Gillian wasn’t human. Gillian didn’t.

Changeling children can live human until their powers manifest, or until they know too much. Katie’s mind wanted to reject Faerie, because it wasn’t hers. Gillian, on the other hand, belonged to Faerie, at least a little bit; she would never let the memories of something that big, that *integral*, go. She’d drive herself crazy trying to figure out what was missing from her mind.

If I got Gillian out of here—*when* I got her out of here—I was going to have to do the thing I'd thought I had managed to avoid completely. I was going to have to give her the Changeling's Choice. The one where, if she chose Faerie, she would never see her father again . . . and if she chose human . . . if she chose human . . .

I bent my head, redoubling my effort to cut the ropes that held her. She wouldn't choose human, that was all. She *couldn't* choose human. Because if she chose human, I'd have to kill her, and then I'd have to break Oberon's Law myself. If Raysel's actions forced me to kill my own daughter, I'd strangle her with my bare hands, and go to the Iron Tree without regrets. And that couldn't happen. I wouldn't let it happen. My daughter would choose Faerie.

I was less than halfway through cutting the ropes around Gillian's wrists when Quentin's shout of pain made me raise my head again. Every instinct I had told me to go to him, to do a knight's duty to her squire. I risked a look at the fight. Tybalt was holding off two Goblins, the three of them moving so fast that it was almost impossible to tell where one ended and the next began. Not all of the blood I tasted in the air was theirs. I hoped their weapons weren't poisoned. A third Goblin was lying on the floor, his black blood turning everyone's footing unsure even as it filled the room with the stink of tar and molten rock. He'd been casting a spell when he was killed, reaching into the limited arsenal of Goblin magic for something he never had the chance to finish.

Raysel and Connor were off to one side, circling one another. They both had their bows raised, waiting for the opportunity to strike. I would have needed to be blind to miss the hatred in her expression, or the sorrow in his. He didn't love her. But he didn't mean to fail her, either.

Quentin was backed into a corner, the fourth Goblin prodding at him with a long spear. My squire was already bleeding from several puncture wounds in his side and shoulders. He'd lost his baseball bat at some point; it was lying on the floor, well out of his reach. The pixies were trying to help by darting in and slashing at the Goblin's eyes, but he just batted them away, his attention remaining focused on Quentin. Quentin, meanwhile, was having more and more trouble keeping the spear at bay.

I only stared for a second before I made my decision. I straightened, pausing to kiss Gillian's cheek and say, "No matter what you hear, do not open your eyes, understand me? Do *not* open your eyes." I didn't wait for her

to answer. I was already running across the room, dodging fallen pixies and broken arrows as I charged toward the Goblin who was harrying my squire.

Quentin pressed himself farther back against the wall when he saw me coming, forcing the Goblin to close in just that tiny bit more. The Goblin chuckled as he advanced, clearly believing his quarry was finally pinned. He never saw me coming up behind him, swinging my knife in an arc designed to plant it firmly between his ribs.

Raysel saw me running. In less time than it took for me to bury my knife in the Goblin's back, she abandoned her standoff with Connor, whirling to release her arrow in Gillian's direction.

Connor shouted something that was drowned out by the scream of the Goblin I'd just stabbed. I turned to see him drop his bow, throwing himself in front of my daughter. The arrow caught him high on the right side of his chest, going all the way through before the fletching on the end stopped it. Connor looked down at it with an almost comic expression of surprise . . . and then he fell, hitting the floor in a boneless heap.

"Connor!" I shouted, and ran toward him.

I was still running when Raysel pulled another arrow from her belt, fitting it into place, and drew back her bowstring. Tybalt was suddenly behind her, another of her arrows in his hand. He jammed it into the back of her arm, and she fell.

But she released her arrow first.

The sound of Raysel's bow hitting the floor was surprisingly loud, given everything else that was happening in the room, and the smell of her blood—Daoine Sidhe and Kitsune and Blodynbyrd; a mixture that should never have been possible, made possible by Luna's desperation and a Kitsune girl's sacrifice—filled my mouth for an instant before it was chased away by another, more urgent flavor. Human blood, spiced, ever so slightly, with Dóchas Sidhe.

Her arrow should have gone wild. Every ounce of logic, of *fairness*, in the world said that her arrow should have gone wild. Raysel was still falling as I stumbled to a halt, feeling myself go cold. I recognized Gillian's blood the second it hit my tongue, even though I'd never tasted it before. Quentin shouted something, and another Goblin hit the floor a split second before Raysel did. I barely noticed.

I was too busy staring at Gillian, and at the arrow protruding from her left shoulder. Her eyes were still closed, and her head was lolling forward until

her chin brushed against her chest. All the tension had gone out of her, leaving her collapsed like a boneless doll.

And it didn't look like she was breathing.



THIRTY-ONE

“*GILLIAN!*◆◆ I SCREAMED HER NAME so hard it hurt my throat, and kept screaming it as I ran back across the room to drop to my knees beside her. Only the fact that I hadn’t finished cutting the rope was keeping her in the chair; her body was completely limp, and my fumbling attempts to find a pulse did nothing. If she was alive, I couldn’t tell.

“October.” The Luidaeg’s voice was pitched low and gentle. That just made it harder for me to breathe. She only sounded like that when things were really bad.

I shook my head, cupping Gillian’s face in my hands and lifting it until her closed eyes were pointed toward me. “It’s okay, baby, it’s okay. Open your eyes, okay? I’ll take you home, if you’ll open your eyes . . .”

“October, you have to get the arrow out.”

“What?” I twisted around to glare fiercely at the Luidaeg. “That’s the worst thing I could do. We need a healer before we take the arrow out. We need—”

“She’s been elf-shot. The longer you leave it in her, the less chance she has.” The Luidaeg moved around to my left. “She’s too human for this. If you want her to have any hope at all of surviving, you need to take the arrow out.”

“She can’t die,” I whispered. “She’s my daughter.”

“Death doesn’t care.” The Luidaeg’s words hit me like a blow. She was right. Oberon damn her, she was right.

I let go of Gillian’s head, bracing a shaking hand against her shoulder. “I’m sorry, baby,” I whispered, and grabbed the shaft of the arrow with my other hand, pulling hard.

Gilly moaned as the arrow came free. It was a soft, sighing sound, more like a whimper than a genuine cry of pain, but it was there. I stiffened, arrow

slipping from my nerveless fingers to clatter on the floor.

“Gilly . . . ?” I whispered.

“Changelings can’t survive elf-shot,” said the Luidaeg. The sympathy in her tone was almost buried under a calm, commanding practicality. “It didn’t have to be that way, but my eldest sister took it upon herself to improve the original design, and she had her own opinions about such things.”

“Shut up,” I snapped, raising my head and glaring at her. “She’s going to be *fine*. She has to be.”

“That’s up to you, October.” The Luidaeg knelt, putting a hand on my shoulder. I tried to shrug it off. She tightened her fingers, keeping me where I was. “You can do for her what your mother did for you. You can give her a chance. If you change her blood—”

“No.” I shook my head, tears threatening to blind me. “I can’t. I don’t know how.”

“That’s never stopped you before. If you change the blood, you’ll burn away the poison.” She clucked her tongue, gesturing to the chair. Quentin stepped into view, my bloody knife in his hand. He moved to crouch behind Gillian. I heard him saw through the rope, and then she was pitching forward into my waiting arms. There was no tension to her at all. It was like holding something that was already dead.

“I can’t,” I whispered again, too terrified to think of anything else. If I tried, if I *failed* . . . “Where’s my mother? I want my mother.”

“Amandine isn’t coming to save you this time. This time, you have to save yourself.” The Luidaeg stood, taking her hand away from my shoulder. “Do it, October, or say good-bye to your daughter. Those are your choices.”

I took a shuddering breath before raising my head, looking around the room until I saw Tybalt crouching next to Connor’s fallen . . . next to Connor. He had his hand resting lightly on the Selkie’s arm, and was watching me with grave, sorrow-filled eyes.

I had to make a decision. I had to *choose*. Oberon forgive me, but I made my decision based on who needed me more. Connor would be fine when he woke up. I’d just have to wait for him until then. “Get over here,” I said, as firmly as I could. “Help me get her comfortable.”

Tybalt nodded, and rose, and came. Quentin was close behind him. The four of us working together stretched Gillian out on a relatively clean patch of floor, using our sweaters and jackets to provide a degree of padding. I folded my own leather jacket into a pillow, sliding it under her head. She

didn't moan again. For all the signs of life she'd shown since the arrow was removed, it might have already been too late.

I looked to the Luidaeg. "You said I could do what my mother did. What did she do? What do *I* do?"

"I don't know," she said, voice soft. "My sister's ways aren't mine. I don't know how her line works its magic."

"That's what I was afraid of." I held my hand out to Quentin. "Give me my knife."

"Are you sure?" he asked, biting his lip. "It's all gory."

"And I'm going to get it gorier. Please."

He nodded, holding it out to me hilt-first. I took it, not bothering to wipe it clean before laying the blade across the inside of one wrist.

"Wait." The Luidaeg grabbed my arm before I could start cutting. I looked up to see her offering her own wrist. "You're going to need more power than you have on your own."

"You can't be serious."

She didn't say anything. She just looked at me, waiting. I took her hand, pulling it toward me, and ran my knife down the skin of her wrist. I cut deeply enough to bleed her, but not so deep as to do any permanent damage; I've gotten pretty good at gauging my cuts over the last few years. Her blood welled to the surface, silver-red and glittering like the sea.

The Luidaeg nodded, motioning for me to continue. I closed my eyes, raising her wrist to my mouth, and drank.

Most blood magic involves the blood of the dead, or at least the blood of the missing. It's very rare for a spell to require drinking directly from the source, unless the spell includes the transfer of another's power. The Luidaeg's blood was colder than I expected, cold enough that I was able to take several mouthfuls before I realized that the taste was changing, going from the normal sharp copper of blood to the sweet sharpness of frost covering the fens, the distant hint of loam, the smell of bonfires in the autumn night—

I jerked myself out of her memory and dropped her hand at the same time, taking a gasping breath. Suddenly, all the spilled blood in the room was singing to me, not just of *what* the wounded were, but of *who* they were. Rayseline's blood smelled of roses and frost, of fox-fur and longing, a little girl so lost she couldn't find her way home. Connor smelled like sweet eucalyptus and hot, dry sand, golden afternoons and laughter. The Goblins,

strangely, smelled like baking cookies and burnt popcorn. And Gillian . . .

Gillian's blood smelled like terror and confusion. The hint of Dóchas Sidhe I'd caught before was stronger now, easier to identify; it smelled like fresh-cut grass and blooming primroses. The smell made my heart hurt. That was what her magic would have smelled like, if I'd been part of her life, if I'd been there to teach her what she was.

I didn't need to cut her; the wound in her shoulder was still bleeding. I sliced my own wrist shallowly, adding the smell of my own blood to the dizzying mixture. "Don't watch this," I said, and lowered my mouth to her shoulder without looking to see whether the others listened to me. I didn't have time to care.

Gillian's blood filled my mouth, the poisonous bite of elf-shot running through it like rot lurking under the skin of an apple. It was too diluted to hurt me. My mostly human daughter was another story. The crackle of my magic rising around us was almost audible, and the cut-grass-and-copper smell of it was stronger than it had ever been before, sharpening until the metallic tang that always accompanied my spellcasting sweetened into the near-twin of my mother's bloody signature.

I closed my eyes, focusing on the magic. *Please*, I thought, putting everything I had into the word. *Please, Gillian. Let me help you.*

"Help me with what, Mom?"

I opened my eyes. I was standing in the middle of a wide green field. The sky overhead was a bright, flawless blue. The taste of blood still filled my mouth, and if I really focused, I could see the shallowing where I fought for my daughter's life, but for the moment, this scene was just as real as that one.

Gillian stood about ten yards away from me, her bare toes digging nervously in the grass. She was unhurt, and her eyes were open. The breeze blowing by ruffled her hair and the primrose-patterned pink sundress she was wearing.

"I don't understand what's going on," she said. "Am I asleep? Is this a dream?"

"It can be." I took a step forward, moving slowly, so as not to frighten her. "Honey, we don't have much time. I need to talk to you about something."

Her brow knotted briefly, a frown twisting her mouth. "Is it about why you left us? Because if it's not, I don't know that I want to hear it."

"I didn't have a choice."

"Everything's a choice."

Her words were truer than she could have known. I flinched. “I didn’t know what I was choosing when I did it. I didn’t find out until it was too late.”

“Why did you do it?” Her frown cleared, replaced by an aching confusion that I knew all too clearly. She looked more like the little girl I remembered in that moment than she’d ever looked before, and it hurt my heart. “We needed you, and you left. Where did you go?”

I took a breath. “Your Uncle Sylvester asked me to do him a favor. It wasn’t supposed to take more than a few hours.”

“It took my whole life.”

“Mine, too.” I took another step toward her. “Gillian, believe me, if there’d been any way for me to come home to you, *any* way, I would have done it. I would have given anything to come back to you faster than I did. I couldn’t. I tried, and I couldn’t. I came as soon as I could.”

“It wasn’t soon enough.” There was no anger in her voice. Just resignation. “Am I dying?”

“What? No! No, you’re not dying. Don’t even think that, Gilly.”

“Then what’s going on, Mom? Where are we? Why do you look like that?” She gestured toward my ears, and I realized that in this liminal place that was real and not real at the same time, she could see me as I really was.

“Honey—”

“What are you?”

It was too late to lie to her, especially with what I was about to ask. “I’m fae, Gillian. I’ve always been fae.”

“What, you mean, like an elf? Like from the movies with the Hobbits and everything?”

“Not quite, but . . . yes, like an elf.” I hesitated before adding, “You are, too.”

Gillian stared at me for a moment, brown eyes wide. Then she started to laugh. “Oh, right. Like *I* could be some kind of magical whatever.”

“You’re my daughter. You can be whatever you want to be.”

Bit by bit, her laughter stopped. The meadow behind her was getting misty, losing definition. I knew from my own Choice—the second one, the one Amandine led me through—that time here ran differently than it did in the real world; this was like a dream, and it could condense a great deal into a few seconds. We still didn’t have forever.

“You’re serious,” she said.

“Yeah, honey. I am.” I closed the rest of the distance between us, offering her my hands. “You’ve been hurt, but it’s going to be okay. I just need you to make a decision now, and then everything can be all right again.”

“What?” Gillian looked at me nervously. Her own hands stayed by her sides. The smell of primroses was strong this close to her, all but rolling off her skin.

“Your father’s human. I’m not. Right now, you’re somewhere in the middle, and that makes you vulnerable. The thing that hurt you, it’s going to hurt you worse if you stay where you are. So I need you to decide. You can be fae, or you can be human, but you can’t be both.”

Her eyes widened. “What? I can’t . . . you can’t mean that *I* . . .” She stopped in the middle of her sentence, suddenly focusing on a point just past my left shoulder. I knew what I would see if I turned around. I turned around anyway.

Another Gillian was standing behind me. This one’s sundress was red, still patterned with pink primroses. Her ears were sharply pointed, and her eyes were the no-color gray of mist rolling in off the water. There were streaks of gold in her dark brown hair. There was nothing human about her, and she was beautiful.

Next to her stood a third version of my daughter, this one wearing a white sundress. She was almost identical to the girl in front of me. There was a faint, nearly indefinable difference in the shape of her face and the way she held herself, but she was close to Gillian as she’d always known herself, and she was beautiful, too.

I tore my eyes away from these possible futures, turning my attention back to my daughter as she existed in the here and now. “Gillian.” She was still staring past my shoulder, awe and horror mixing in her expression. “*Gillian*. You need to choose. Either of them can be you, but, honey, we don’t have time to stand here arguing about which one it’s going to be.”

“What if I get it wrong?” Gillian met my eyes, fear finally washing away her awe. “What if I want to change my mind?”

“You can’t. This is a choice you only get to make once. You’re either fae, like me, or you’re human, like your father. Please.”

She hesitated again before asking, very softly, “Which one lets me go home?”

Her words stabbed me like knives. I forced my voice to stay level as I replied, “Human. You have to be human if you want to go home. If you

choose fae . . . I'm sorry, honey, but if you choose fae, you have to stay with me."

"Forever?" she whispered.

I couldn't bring myself to answer that. I swallowed hard, and nodded.

"I . . . I want . . ." She stopped for a long moment before saying, rapid-fire, "I want you to take it all back. I want you to have never left us. You're magic, right? Like a Fairy Godmother? Can you do that? Can you make it so you never went away?" Even her tears smelled like primroses.

"Nobody has that much magic, baby. I'm sorry. I love you, and I'm sorry."

"I am, too." She kept crying as she slid her hands into mine. "I love you, Mom. I wish you'd never gone away. I want to go home now. Please let me go home now."

"You have to say the words, Gillian. You have to tell me what you want."

She sighed. "I want to be human. I just want to go home."

"All right, honey. If that's what you want, you can go home." I let go of her hands, gathering her into a hug. It felt good, and right, and like it was everything I'd been missing since I came back from the pond. "This is going to hurt, okay? But it has to hurt if you want to go back to your dad."

"Okay," she said, sniffing, and buried her face against my shoulder.

I closed my eyes, the smell of grass getting stronger, the smell of copper overwhelming the primroses. Even with my eyes closed, I could see everything she was, every trace of her heritage. And I reached out, still holding her close to me, and grabbed hold of everything that wasn't human—including the poison that was struggling to kill her. Wipe away one, wipe away the other.

Set her free.

Her screaming was the worst thing I'd ever heard—but if I stopped, she'd die, so I kept going, changing and twisting and wiping away, until the screaming stopped, giving way to silence. And I opened my eyes.



THIRTY-TWO

GILLIAN WAS STILL UNCONSCIOUS on the floor, but the wound in her shoulder had closed. That seemed to be the only immediate change. Her fae blood was thin enough that removing it hadn't visibly altered the shape of her face; she still looked like my little girl. And she still wasn't breathing.

"Move," said the Luidaeg, pushing me roughly to the side as she moved to put her hands on my daughter's chest. She looked up, pupils expanding until her eyes were consumed by blackness. "Go to your Selkie," she said. "You don't need to watch this."

I nodded numbly, climbing to my feet. I swayed there for a moment, and then I turned and ran to Connor.

He was lying where he'd fallen, motionless, save for the shallow, strained rise and fall of his chest. The arrow was still in place, sticking out of his body like an accusation. *See?* it seemed to say; *see what happened because you let him love you?*

"Oh, Connor." I knelt, letting my fingers brush against his cheek. "You idiot. You wonderful, stupid, beautiful *idiot*."

Gillian whimpered. I didn't let myself turn around.

"I love you," I whispered, and leaned down to kiss Connor's cheek. My lips left a bloody print behind. "Sleep well."

Something was wrong. The blood in the room was trying to tell me what it was, but I was tired, and everything was so jumbled that I couldn't tell what was happening anymore. I stood, wiping the tears from my eyes and the blood off my lips and chin. "Come on," I said, to no one and to everyone who was listening. "Let's go bring those damn kids home."

The room only had two doors. We entered through the first, and so I walked toward the second, not looking to see who followed me. I was exhausted. My head ached from the strain of what I'd just done to my little

girl—a thing I would have said was impossible a year ago. “Impossible” no longer seemed to have much place in my life. Connor was . . . Connor was asleep. I refused to admit to anything more than that. As for me, I was somewhere past “done” and accelerating toward “completely finished.”

“Toby?” asked Quentin. He ducked ahead of me as I opened the door into the next section of the shallowing, revealing a long, dark hallway. The pixies flew ahead of us, lighting it. “Are you okay?”

“No,” I said, stepping past him. A blue-winged pixie landed on my shoulder, providing a dim but steady local light. “We’re looking for two teenage boys. They’re probably scared, so try not to startle them.”

“Are we quite sure Rayseline had no other little helpers?” asked Tybalt. I glanced back to see him making his way through the doorway.

“No,” I said. “But if she did, they were probably more hired thugs, and they’ll run when they realize they’re not going to get paid. There’s no way she paid them enough to stay—Dugan could never have stolen that much from the Queen’s coffers without getting caught, and Raysel didn’t exactly have resources of her own.”

“You have such a generous view of fae nature,” said Tybalt mildly.

“I’ve earned it.” The pixies illuminated the hall, showing doors lining the walls. “From what Bucer said, I don’t expect the shallowing to be huge. Let’s stay together. I don’t want to be surprised by something nasty.”

“Your wish, our command,” said Tybalt, falling into step behind me. Quentin fell in beside me, and together, the three of us walked silently on.

The smell of blood followed us from the main room, but every step we put between us and it made it a little fainter, and a little easier to ignore. That was good; that wasn’t the blood I was looking for. Tybalt had his sense of smell to depend on. I had something similar. Dean bled when they cut his finger off. If he was here, I’d find him.

Tybalt cleared his throat before beginning, uncertainly: “October, I’m not sure—”

“Are you going to say something useful, or are you just going to see how hard it is to get me to punch you?”

“I’m sorry.”

The words were offered quietly, almost as if he was apologizing for saying them as much as he was apologizing for everything else. Tears jumped to my eyes, blurring my vision and making it briefly impossible to see. I shook my head, dragging my hand across my eyes as fiercely as I could.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I said, voice sharp.

“I understand.”

The worst of it was, he probably did. As King of Cats, he’d buried more subjects than I could imagine losing. And that didn’t make a damn bit of difference. Connor was going to sleep for longer than I’d been alive, and no apologies were going to change that. Nothing ever was.

We walked in silence, the pixies periodically darting ahead to keep lighting our way. Tybalt and I stopped almost at the same time, both turning toward the same door.

“Do you smell that?” I asked.

“There,” he said.

“What?” asked Quentin.

“It smells like . . . wet stone and eucalyptus.” I stepped closer to the door. A new note introduced itself underneath the others: blood. My eyes widened. “Dean’s in here.”

Quentin frowned. “How do you know?”

“I can smell him.” I was going to have to ask the Luidaeg what this new level of sensitivity meant—and whether it was going to go away. It was a lot easier to cope with the smell of blood when it didn’t bring a person’s entire history with it. “Okay. Both of you, stay behind me.”

I opened the door, revealing a small room with a stone floor and stained wooden walls. Dean’s memories were right: it smelled like something had died in here, a very long time ago. I didn’t want to guess at what it might have been. At least the scent of blood was covering up the worst of the decay.

The source of the blood was huddled in a corner of the room, clearly feigning sleep. He had his body turned so that his back was to the door. I knew that trick; we used to use it on Devin. If they can’t see your face, they can’t tell that you’re crying.

“Hi,” I said, moving about halfway into the room before crouching down and resting my elbows on my knees. “Dean, right? I’m Toby Daye. These are my friends, Tybalt and Quentin. We’re here to rescue you.”

Dean didn’t move.

“Your parents sent me,” I said. “They’re really worried about you. Helmi’s really worried about you, too. She thinks it’s her fault you were kidnapped.” Dean didn’t say anything, but he shifted, changing positions very slightly. That was a good sign. He was listening, waiting for us to prove that we were who we said we were. “We don’t have Cephalis here on the land, so I thought

she was a little funny-looking at first. All those tentacles.” He shifted again, still not saying anything. I decided to try another tack: “You know that wheelchair your mother uses when she wants to go on land without having legs? Well, I rode it—and her—down a large hill to get away from a bunch of Goblin archers who were trying to hit us with elf-shot.”

That worked. Dean lifted his head, turning to stare at us with wide, baffled eyes. “You’re really here,” he said, in a voice that was rusty from disuse. “I can’t be dreaming you. My dreams make more sense than this.”

“I get that a lot,” I said. “You don’t have to be scared anymore.”

Dean looked from Quentin to me and back, still huddled in his corner, looking utterly unconvinced. “Where’s Peter?”

“We’re going to go find him now that we’ve found you.” A bright orange pixie zipped into the room, ringing excitedly as it circled my head. “. . . actually, I think one of our friends just found him for us. Tybalt?”

“On my way,” he said. He bowed to Dean, said, “It is a pleasure to see you safe,” and followed the pixie out of the room.

“What are we waiting for?” Dean scrambled to his feet, almost toppling over before he caught his balance again. He kept his hands balled into fists, probably to both hide and protect the stump of his severed finger. “Let’s go get my brother!”

I smiled. “Yeah. That sounds like a good idea.”

We had to walk slowly as we made our way down the hall; Dean wasn’t willing to be assisted, but he wasn’t steady enough on his feet to move at a normal pace. Quentin walked behind him, trying not to look like he was there to catch Dean if he fell. He was a damn good squire. Probably better than I deserved.

We were barely halfway down the hall when a joyful, unfamiliar voice called, “Dean! Dean, I’m here!”

Dean perked up, life coming back into his eyes. “Peter?”

For a moment, it looked like he was going to bolt. I put a hand on his shoulder, stopping him. He looked at me with bewilderment, and I shook my head. “Don’t run. They’ll be here in a moment.”

Tybalt proved me right by walking out of the dimness up ahead, carrying a dark-haired boy with a slate gray fishtail where legs would more customarily have been. He was as dirty and thin-looking as Dean, but he was rocking up and down in his excitement, flukes slapping rhythmically against Tybalt’s side. Tybalt was doing his best to bear up stoically, but amusement tugged at

the corners of his mouth.

“Peter!” Dean *did* break into a run when he saw his brother. This time, I didn’t try to stop him. There were enough of us that someone would catch him if he fell. “Are you okay? Did they hurt you?”

“They threatened a lot. They didn’t give me much water—just enough so my scales wouldn’t start cracking.” Peter stilled his thrashing as he leaned down to put his arms around his older brother’s shoulders. “They said they’d kill you if I was bad.”

Tybalt’s eyes narrowed. He didn’t say anything. Quentin was less restrained. “We should wake Raysel up so we can beat her up some more.”

“I’m a bad influence on you,” I said. “No one is waking anyone up just to beat on them. Peter?” The younger of the Lorden boys raised his head. He had his father’s eyes. “I’m Toby. Your parents sent me to find you. Can you have legs?”

“No,” he said mournfully. “I haven’t had any saltwater in days.”

“That’s okay. Tybalt?”

“I will gladly carry him as far as is needed.”

“Then let’s go tell your parents that you’re okay.” I forced myself to smile as I led the way back to the door connecting to the room where we’d left the Luidaeg with my now-human little girl. Peter babbled the whole time, holding tight to his brother’s hand.

Gillian was still on the floor when we stepped back into the main room. The Luidaeg, on the other hand, was pacing, her eyes back to pseudo-human brown. She turned at the sound of our footsteps, a smile splitting her face. “You found them!”

“We found them,” I agreed wearily. “Now all we have to do is get them down to the water. I think their parents would like them back.”

“They’re not the only ones.” She looked meaningfully toward Gillian. I finally allowed myself to look in that direction. Her chest was rising and falling in a steady, even rhythm. I couldn’t stop my sigh of relief. The Luidaeg shook her head. “Yeah, Toby, she’s alive. I fuzzed her memory enough that she won’t remember this outside of her dreams.”

“You mean outside her nightmares,” I said quietly.

The Luidaeg shrugged. “I did what I could.”

I didn’t want to ask the question. I had to ask the question. “And Connor? How long before he wakes up?”

“He won’t.”

My head snapped up again. I stared at her. “What?”

The Luidaeg shook her head, looking defeated. “I did what I could. We should have taken the arrow out faster. I’m sorry.”

It felt like the bottom dropped out of the world. “What . . . what do you mean? It was *elf-shot*, Luidaeg. Purebloods don’t die of elf-shot.”

“No, they don’t. But they do die of arrows to the chest.” She met my eyes, expression sad. “I didn’t realize how badly he was bleeding until it was too late. None of us did. There was so much blood already . . . I’m sorry. I really am.”

“Oh.” That tiny sound seemed to be all I was capable of. I wiped my eyes again, and asked, “Will the night-haunts come soon?”

The Luidaeg nodded.

“Then we . . . we should go. We should get Gillian out of here before she wakes up.” That was something I could focus on: getting my little girl back to humanity before she saw something that would remind her of Faerie all over again.

“I know what to do,” said Quentin.

We all turned to look at him, even the Lordens, who probably had no real clue what was going on. Quentin’s ears reddened, but he pressed on.

“Have Tybalt take her to somewhere in the city, like Ocean Beach or maybe the Park. If he puts her down, calls the police, and keeps an eye on her until they arrive, they’ll take her back to her dad. That’s what the police are for, right?”

I swallowed hard. “Yeah. I guess it is. Good idea, Quentin.”

He smiled halfheartedly, clearly pleased by the praise, and just as clearly aware of how much this whole situation was destroying me. I moved to kneel next to Gilly and bent to kiss her forehead.

“You’re going to go with a friend of mine now, baby,” I whispered. “He’s going to take good care of you, and make sure you get home. I love you. You can forget everything about tonight, but never forget that. I love you.”

Tybalt put his hand on my shoulder. “October?”

“Yeah.” I stood, wiping my eyes before I turned to face the others. The Luidaeg was holding Peter, who was still holding tight to Dean’s hand. “She’s ready. Don’t let anyone see you.”

“I’ll be back.” Tybalt bent to scoop my daughter off the floor, cradling her gently to his chest. Then he stepped forward into the shadows, and he was gone.

I took a shaky breath, swallowing my tears, before forcing a smile and pulling the second of Dianda's messenger bottles out of my pocket. "Come on, you two. Let's get you back to your parents."



THIRTY-THREE

WE EMERGED FROM THE SHALLOWING in a cloud of pixies that whirled around us like an honor guard of Christmas lights, their wings illuminating the night. The Luidaeg led the way, carrying Peter in her arms like the fishtailed boy weighed nothing at all. He nestled against her chest, flukes swaying, utterly at peace with the world. Even Dean looked calmer. The words “I’m the Luidaeg” clearly had some talismanic power in the Undersea that they lacked on the land.

The sky was dark and clear, lit by what seemed like uncountable pinprick stars. I stopped to look up at it, blinking hard as I tried to make myself stop crying. It wasn’t working. The tears hadn’t stopped since Tybalt took Gillian away. I wasn’t sure they ever would.

“October?”

The sound of Sylvester’s voice should have been surprising. I was too tired to be surprised anymore. I turned to see him coming up the path from the woods, with a dozen of his guards close behind. I didn’t hesitate. I just started sobbing and ran the few yards between us, flinging myself into the safety of his arms.

Sylvester gathered me close, making a soft shushing sound as he looked past me to the others. I couldn’t see them, but I could imagine their expressions, Quentin looking a little lost, the Luidaeg shaking her head in quiet negation.

“Ah,” Sylvester said. “I see. Etienne? Tavis?”

“Yes, Your Grace,” said Etienne. He walked past us, followed by the hulking shape of Sir Tavis, the only Bridge Troll in Sylvester’s service. Raj came close behind them, stopping at the outside edge of my range of vision.

“We came as fast as we could,” he said. “I had to get there, and then . . .”

“It’s all right, Raj.” I pulled away from Sylvester, taking a shaky breath,

and wiped my eyes. I wanted to fall apart. I was *going* to fall apart. I just couldn't do it yet. "You did good. You couldn't have gotten here any faster."

Whatever Raj was going to say died on his lips as he looked past me to the door into the shallowing. His eyes widened, pupils expanding. "What happened?"

"War," I said, and closed my eyes for a moment, willing myself not to cry. "This is why it's bad, Raj. Remember this, for when you're King someday. People get hurt."

"I'll remember," whispered Raj.

"So will I," said Quentin.

"Good." I opened my eyes and turned to see Tavis standing next to the Luidaeg, Rayseline's body hanging limply in his arms. Peter Lorden was staring at him with undisguised awe. I guess they don't get many Bridge Trolls in the Undersea.

"Take her to the car, Tavis," said Sylvester. His voice was tightly controlled. If I hadn't known him so well, I might not have realized how hard he was fighting not to cry. "Guard her. We'll be along shortly."

"Yes, Your Grace," said Tavis, and turned to start making his way down the hill. Two more of Sylvester's knights followed him—just in case, I suppose.

"Connor—?" I looked to the Luidaeg.

She shook her head. "The night-haunts will be coming. They don't want to see you right now, and you don't want to see what they do. I'll come back for his skin when they're done. Now come on." She freed one hand from Peter long enough to stroke the bark of the tree that opened onto the shallowing. "You will be remembered," she said.

Again, it felt like the night shivered, and when the moment passed, the door was gone. The Luidaeg smiled at the place where it had been, expression half-sad, half-wistful. Then she turned and started hiking farther into the trees. She didn't look back.

I took a breath. "Well. Let's get this over with." I followed her, Raj and Quentin falling into step beside me. Sylvester and his knights brought up the rear, looking a little lost. I couldn't blame them. I didn't have it in me to explain.

The Luidaeg seemed to know her way through these woods. She led us unerringly over a small ridge and down through the trees to a stretch of beach that was geographically isolated from the rest of the shore, granting us

effectively total privacy. Peter brightened as soon as the sound of the surf became audible above our footsteps, and started to bounce in the Luidaeg's arms when the waves came into view.

"Get me to the water!" he said, flukes slapping against the Luidaeg's side. "Please."

"That's the magic word," said the Luidaeg, and walked on.

Dean's reaction was subtler than his brother's, but it was just as real—a new confidence in his steps, a light in his eyes. He even started smiling as he watched the waves batter themselves into froth against the sand.

"Don't let them go too far, okay?" I called after the Luidaeg. I didn't wait for her to answer me. I just walked to the water's edge, the bottle with its simple message—"Come now, we found them, they're okay"—in one hand. Quentin and Raj followed me, stopping where the waves turned the sand to dark satin in the night. I walked a few steps further, feeling the foam froth around my feet, and hurled the bottle out to sea as hard as I could.

It traced a glittering arc through the air before hitting the water and vanishing without a trace. I stared at the place where it had been like I expected a miracle to happen. There were no miracles. Not here; not tonight.

Raj and Quentin were watching me with wide, worried eyes when I turned back to them. Sylvester and his knights were a little farther back, clearly worried, and just as clearly giving me my space. That made me want to start crying again. Rayseline was gone. Not dead, but asleep for a long, long time. What right did I have to expect her father to be here, with me, and not with her?

"Are you okay?" asked Quentin.

"No. Not really." I wiped my eyes surreptitiously as I turned to look down the beach toward the Luidaeg and the Lorden boys. Peter was standing on his own two legs now, hugging his older brother fiercely. "We found them."

"I knew you would." There was absolute conviction in his tone.

I glanced his way. "You never doubted me?"

"No." Quentin shrugged. "I know better."

"We all do," added Raj.

I couldn't quite manage a laugh, but I dredged up a small, sad smile. For the moment, that would have to be enough. I walked out of the water, offering my hands to the boys—to my squires, one official, and one not. Together, we walked back to Sylvester and his knights, and settled in to wait.

We didn't have to wait for long. We were all sitting on the sand, watching

Dean and Peter splash around at the edge of the water, when the surface of the water in the distance exploded upward in the strangely-familiar sight of a pod of Cetacea breaching. I recognized Anceline—and the green-tailed, black-haired woman who pushed away from her as they both fell back toward the water. I stood.

Almost everyone else did the same, until only the Luidaeg was seated. I looked at her curiously, and she shrugged. “I can’t intervene directly in the waters, remember? Go tell them it’s okay. Go tell them what comes next. I’ll stay here.”

“I understand,” I said, even though I didn’t. I raked my hands through my wind-tangled hair and went trudging down the beach, with the others close behind me.

We had barely reached the water’s edge when Dianda came running through the surf, a look of pure, electric joy transforming her features into something so beautiful it hurt. “Boys!”

“Mom!” shouted Peter and Dean, and threw themselves into her arms. They were still embracing when Patrick came walking more sedately out of the waves, water streaming from his hair, a corked bottle in one hand—Dean’s breathing potion. Magic was the only way a Daoine Sidhe could survive in the Undersea. That was what Dean had to look forward to: a life of depending on other people’s magic for his survival.

I watched Patrick join his family, the four of them holding onto each other like there was nothing else in the world, and felt the slow tendrils of an idea uncurling in my mind.

Quentin stopped next to me, tilting his head back so he could look in my direction. “I think we did okay,” he said.

“Say that again next week,” I said.

Dianda raised her head, cheeks gleaming wet with more than sea spray, and started wading toward us. Peter came with her, holding onto her arm like he was afraid one of them would wash away. “You found them,” she said, once she was close enough to be heard over the waves.

“I told you I would.”

“But you actually *did*.” She said the words like they were some sort of miracle. In a way, I guess they were.

“I did.”

Dianda paused, frowning. “Where’s Connor?”

This time, when the tears came, I didn’t fight them. I just let them fall,

letting them say all the things I couldn't bring myself to voice.

"Oh. Oh, I am sorry." Dianda reached out, putting her hand on my shoulder. "The tides sing a threnody of sorrow for your loss."

It was a ritual phrase, even if it was one I'd never heard before; it had the cadence and weight of something repeated many times. Somehow, it helped. I sniffled, nodding my thanks, and said, "So maybe this is a bad time to ask, but about that war . . ."

"I'll send a message to your Queen at once. You have the eternal gratitude of my family, and of my Duchy. You will always be welcome there."

"Cool. I can bring Quentin for a visit next time I feel like letting the Luidaeg use dangerous enchantments on me."

Dianda hesitated before asking, "Was she here?"

I didn't even have to look to know that the Luidaeg was gone. "Yeah. She helped us get into the shallowing where Dean and Peter were being held."

"It would be nice to see her again," said Dianda wistfully. "It's been a long time."

"About that. Why is she here? If she's the sea witch, shouldn't she be in the Undersea, and not drinking all the damn Diet Coke in San Francisco?"

Dianda looked startled. "She abandoned the Undersea centuries ago. I thought she would have . . . she's welcome in the waters any time she wants to come home. She left us, not the other way around."

"Why?" asked Quentin.

"The Roane," said Dianda simply. "They were her descendants. Almost all of them died. And she left."

I thought back on her behavior around Connor, and asked, "Did the Selkies have something to do with it?"

Dianda nodded. That was all she had to do.

I took a deep breath, preparing to change the subject. "Your Grace, I'd like to talk to you about Dean. I have some ideas, if you'd be willing to hear them. About how we can make relations a little better between the land Courts and the Undersea." I looked toward Patrick and his sons. The boys were sitting on the sand now, Patrick hovering nearby, like he was afraid they'd all be washed away at any moment.

Dianda followed my gaze. "What do you have in mind?"

"It's a little complicated, and we're not actually done yet—Rayseline has been elf-shot. She'll stand trial when she wakes up, but she wasn't working alone, and the man I think she was working with is a trusted courtier in the

Queen's Court." I raised a hand to cut off Dianda's protest before it could begin. "I really don't think the Queen was involved, but I need your help to prove it."

"Help?" She tilted her head, assessing my expression. "What did you have in mind?"

"Well, first, we call a man named Walther for a final bit of confirmation. And then we give Dugan a lot of rope, and see whether or not he hangs himself." I smiled grimly, motioning for Sylvester to come closer. "Once Patrick's done reassuring himself that your sons are okay, I can tell you what I'm thinking."

Dianda nodded. "I think I speak for all of us when I say I truly can't wait to hear."

"Good," I said. "I can't wait either."



THIRTY-FOUR

I WALKED INTO THE QUEEN'S COURT with an unconscious, emaciated teenage boy hanging limply in my arms. A hush fell, creating a bubble of silence that moved with me across the ballroom floor. Sylvester followed me, and his men followed him, all of them as silent and as solemn as I was. For once, the Queen had done nothing with my clothes, possibly because we'd all come courtesy of the Tuatha de Dannan shuttle service. Etienne would forgive me eventually. I hoped.

The Queen herself stood when she saw me coming, eyes narrowing as she marked our progress across the floor. "What have you brought me today, Countess Daye?" she asked, sinking slowly back into her throne. Her voice sent shivers racing along my spine, but she was holding back, not using it as the weapon that it sometimes was.

"I found the Lorden children," I said, my eyes searching the crowd for Dugan. He was standing behind the Queen's throne, just to the left of the dais. "They're injured, but alive."

"Did you find the perpetrator of this horrible injustice?" asked the Queen, tone implying that it had been no such thing. Her eyes went to the boy in my arms, watching him hungrily. She probably saw him as a bargaining chip against his parents. That, more than everything else, told me that I'd been right: the Queen wasn't involved in their disappearance. She'd been just as much a patsy as everyone else.

"I did," I said calmly. "Rayseline Torquill."

"You can't prove it!" shrieked an indignant voice behind me. I forced myself to keep looking straight ahead as everyone else turned. I knew what they'd see. A furious, ruffled Rayseline being held in place by her father's hand, unable to break his grip enough to get away. We'd run the scene ten times on the beach to make sure we got it right, after my call to Walther

confirmed that the sleeping tincture had been brewed by a Daoine Sidhe. “I didn’t do anything!”

Dugan stiffened, a look of pure panic flashing across his face.

That’s what I’d been waiting for. “If not you, then who?” I asked, still not looking behind me.

“Dugan! He said it would work! He said—”

“Dugan?” said the Queen, cutting “Raysel” off. “She’s delusional.”

“Is she?” I kept my eyes on Dugan, watching him, rather than the Queen. “He’s unlanded Daoine Sidhe, Your Highness. Everyone knows they get hungry sometimes. They get . . . anxious . . . to improve their positions. So I looked a little deeper. It turns out Rayseline isn’t the only one ready to point the finger. There’s a Glastig named Bucer O’Malley who’d be happy to testify.” I smiled thinly at Dugan. “The Undersea is going to be very interested in finding out who was behind the kidnapping. They’ll need someone to blame.”

“Perhaps—” began the Queen.

“He said everyone would forgive us because we’d make things so much better!” The sounds of a scuffle came from behind me, “Raysel” trying to break away from her captors. “Tell her, Dugan! Tell her what you promised me! You swore! You said—”

“Shut up!” snarled Dugan. He vaulted himself onto the dais, grabbing the Queen by the hair before she had a chance to react. The crowd gasped. He pulled a knife from inside his tunic, yanking her head back and pressing the blade against her throat. The metal gleamed dully. Even as far back as I was, I could feel the waves of sickness coming off of it.

“Okay, I didn’t consider the possibility of iron knives,” I muttered. “Get down. I need my hands.”

The boy in my arms opened his eyes. “Okay,” he said. The voice was Quentin’s, even if the face was Dean Lorden’s. The illusion held as he let me set him on his feet. When Garm disguises something, it damn well stays disguised.

“Don’t do anything stupid, Dugan,” I said, stepping forward. “Regicide is not a party game.”

“You did this,” he snarled. “Everything would have been perfect without your intervention.”

“Yeah, I know, me and my meddling kids. I’m sorry I don’t have a dog. Now *think* about what you’re doing, Dugan. You didn’t kill anyone. You’re

going to be in trouble, but until you drew an iron knife on the Queen—”

“I will not be made a fool of!” Dugan yanked the Queen’s head back farther. “You little mongrel bitch, prancing about like you belong with the nobility, just because your mother is a legend. You’ve never had to work for anything! I worked for everything, and I still had to make nice with abominations like *you*. I still had to watch as you wormed your way into the company of your betters.”

“But you didn’t kill anyone,” I repeated. “Maybe you hurt my feelings a little just now, but Oberon’s Law doesn’t concern itself with that sort of thing. No, you let Rayseline do all the killing, didn’t you? A crazy woman who might as well have been a child. Faerie failed her, and then you used her. You’re a real asshole, aren’t you, Dugan?”

“Shut up,” he snarled.

I took another step forward. “Still, you’re not guilty of murder—not unless you mixed the elf-shot Rayseline was using. You had to know it was a murder weapon disguised as a normal tool, right? If you didn’t make it, you shouldn’t have anything to worry about. All the other deaths since this conflict was declared have been in self-defense.”

The look of fury on Dugan’s face confirmed my suspicions. “You’re next, you half-blooded whore. You’re next, and I’m going to—”

We never found out what he was going to do. Etienne appeared beside him on the dais, yanking the arm holding the iron knife away from the Queen’s throat. The Queen ducked away, whirling to face her attacker, who was having issues of his own: Etienne had finally been given a target for his anger, and since Dugan was holding an iron knife, Etienne was no longer bound by the concept of the fair fight.

I winced. “See, Quentin, that’s why you should wear a cup before trying to assassinate someone.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Quentin said.

Dugan was a conniving asshole and a bigot. What he wasn’t was a very good hand-to-hand fighter. It took Etienne only seconds to get the knife from his hand and pin him to the dais. The Queen knelt, hissing something in Dugan’s ear, and he went limp, eyes wide and staring at the ceiling. I didn’t know what she’d said. I didn’t want to.

Sylvester and the others walked forward to form a group around me. Garm waved a hand, dispelling the illusion that had cloaked Quentin in the form of Dean Lorden, and Dianda in the form of Rayseline Torquill. I looked toward

her.

“Are you content that justice will be done?” I asked.

She nodded. “I am.”

“Good.” I turned back to the dais. Several of the Queen’s guards were there—too little, too late—and were carrying a catatonic Dugan away. Raising my voice, I asked, “Is this a good time to talk about canceling the war?”

The Queen’s attention snapped to our motley lineup, eyes widening as she took in the changes among our group. Patrick moved to stand beside his wife, no longer disguised as one of Sylvester’s knights. “I suppose it should be, shouldn’t it?” she asked, tone somewhere between amusement and bitterness.

“Saltmist is willing to stand down,” said Dianda. “Our sons have been returned. The land has shown good faith, and we believe that you were not involved in their abduction.”

“How kind of you,” said the Queen. “What if the Mists will not stand down?”

“Then I guess we go to war,” I said. “Do you really want to be the one that makes that happen, Your Majesty? Over a problem that one of your own courtiers started?”

The Queen hesitated.

I took advantage of the pause, jumping in to say, “I have a proposal. A way for both land and sea to show their willingness to maintain the peace.”

“And what is that, Countess Daye?” asked the Queen wearily. She sat on her throne, eyeing me with deep suspicion. “Would you take my throne for them?”

“No. Mine.”

The Queen clearly hadn’t been expecting that. She sat upright, demanding, “*What?*”

This was it: the big plan. I took a deep breath. “I never asked to join the nobility. It’s not something I’m prepared for. But the sons of Saltmist . . . they *have* been prepared. They’ve been trained. Patrick Lorden was a noble of the land before he left for the Undersea. I propose Goldengreen be granted to Dean Lorden, to bring unity to the land and sea. How can we be divided, when our children can move between the realms?”

The Queen hesitated, glancing around the Court. Every eye was on her. The purebloods and nobility, who’d always hated having a changeling Countess in their Kingdom. The guards, who would be the first to die if she

pressed for the war to go forward. I was willing to wager that what she found in those gathered eyes was a lot of support for my plan, and none at all for her damned war.

“Is this acceptable to Saltmist?” she asked.

“It is,” said Dianda.

I smiled. We’d already discussed my requirements for giving Dean the county. Marcia had to stay on as his Seneschal, and none of Lily’s people could be turned away. The bargain with the pixies and bogeys had to stand, since it was really their knowe, not mine. He’d agreed to every one of them before we left for the Queen’s Court, leaving Dean and Peter to return to Saltmist with Anceline and the others.

“Then I suppose there are no objections,” said the Queen. “You win. Again.”

“It’s not about winning. It’s about doing the right thing.”

“Call it what you like. Goldengreen will pass from you, and you can return to the servitude you so clearly desire.” She turned her attention to Sylvester. “I apologize for returning her to your care.”

“I can manage her,” said Sylvester mildly. “I’ve had a measure of practice.”

“I’m tired.” The Queen stood. “Court is done. You may all go.” Then she was gone, leaving a haze of rowan-scented smoke floating around the dais.

I let out a breath. “Well. That wasn’t so bad. I mean, beyond the attempted regicide and the part where I just pissed the Queen off again. Let’s get out of here. I need coffee in the worst way.” I needed coffee, and to cry until my chest stopped aching. Somehow, coffee seemed like the more achievable of those two goals.

“Why am I not surprised?” asked Sylvester. He clapped an arm around my shoulders, and we walked, all of us, out of the Queen’s Court and into the sweet embrace of the mortal night.



THIRTY-FIVE

THE NIGHTS TRICKLED BY, turning slowly but inevitably into weeks. After the first mad flurry of activity—explaining the situation to Marcia and the pixies, introducing them to Dean, whose awkward pleas for guidance did more to smooth over the situation than anything I could have said; waiting by the phone for Cliff to call and tell me Gillian was safely home, and the police were looking for her abductors—everything sort of went numb, fogging into an endless stream of people offering their condolences. They were so sorry. Everyone was so very, very sorry.

You know what “sorry” does? Sorry doesn’t do a damn thing. They called my phone and they showed up at my door, they sent pixies and rose goblins and a dozen other, stranger forms of messenger, they delivered casseroles and cakes—like calories were somehow the answer to the ills of mortality? Who the hell decided *that* made sense? And none of it did a thrice-cursed thing. Connor was still dead. Faerie could endure until the end of time. I could burn out enough of my mortality to watch the sun die. And Connor would still be dead.

I spent a week in my bedroom, emerging only to get more coffee and to clear another bevy of people out of my living room. To be fair, May handled most of the ones who decided they actually needed to show up rather than sending a pixie; my friends understood why she was screening my calls, and everybody else could go hang for all I cared.

Quentin stayed at the apartment the entire time, leaving only when he had lessons on fighting technique or magical theory to attend. On those occasions, Etienne picked him up and brought him back, and he didn’t try to talk to me. Shadowed Hills was sunk deep in its own strange form of mourning—Raysel wasn’t dead, just sleeping . . . for now. Dugan’s elf-shot recipe contained a slow poison nasty enough to be one of Oleander’s creations. All we could do

was hope that Walther would be able to counter it before it killed her.

I was dimly aware that I needed to talk to Sylvester about Rayseline. Her blood was a blend that could never have existed without magic; maybe my magic could help her. If her blood was less mixed-up, there was a chance she might be less mixed-up, too. In the meantime, Dianda was willing to place the blame for Margie's death on Dugan alone. He mixed the elf-shot and put it in the hands of a woman who didn't really understand the consequences of her actions. If everything came together right, maybe we could give Raysel another chance. As for Dugan . . .

Dugan was the Queen's problem now, and she didn't strike me as the kind of woman who would go easy on someone who'd been planning to depose her. I just hoped he was enjoying his stay in the Queen's dungeon. Oberon knows, I was never going to forget my time there.

And Connor was still dead.

Gillian was going to live. I had to hold onto that. She was going to grow up, and become the amazing woman I knew she was destined to be. She was just going to do it without me. Eventually, growing up would turn into growing old . . . and I was no longer human enough to grow old with her.

Most changelings are abandoned by their pureblood parents when it becomes apparent that mortality is the one disease magic won't cure. Changeling children are cute. Changeling adults are a constant reminder that anything that begins in the human world will eventually end there. I ran away from Amandine before she could start looking at me the way the other pureblood parents I knew looked at their own changeling children. Was I going to look at Gilly that way someday, when she was old and I wasn't?

Maybe it was for the best that she didn't want anything to do with me. All we could do—all we could ever have done—was break each other's hearts.

And Connor was still dead.

Tybalt had taken his jacket with him when he carried Gillian back into the mortal world. I didn't even realize it was gone until later, and then I was too busy grieving over the people I'd lost to really miss it. May brought it in with the mail one evening, hanging it on the inside of my bedroom door without a word. The leather smelled like pennyroyal and musk, the way it was supposed to. As for Tybalt himself, he didn't appear, but this time, it didn't feel like an abandonment. It felt like respect for my loss, and for the ones who hadn't made it out alive.

And Connor was still dead.

I was curled under the covers on my bed, both cats and Spike nestled against me, when the door to my bedroom banged open. I stuck my head out, ready to tell May I didn't want anything to eat, and stopped, briefly stunned by the sight of the Luidaeg standing at the foot of my bed.

"L-Luidaeg?"

"Good guess." She leaned down and yanked the blankets away, throwing them onto the floor. "Get up and get dressed. We're going out."

Thank Maeve I don't sleep naked. "I'm not going anywhere," I informed her, trying to find the shards of my dignity. It wasn't easy.

"Yes, you are," she replied, voice calm. "Your only actual *choice* here is whether you're doing it in socks and a nightshirt."

I glared at her, taking note of her attire for the first time. She was wearing a long black skirt and a loose, somehow old-fashioned blouse in peacock blue. Her jewelry—necklace, earrings, even a matching bracelet—consisted of driftglass, seed pearls, and verdigris-tinted copper wire. I'd never seen her wearing jewelry before. She'd even taken the tape out of her hair, leaving it hanging loose in thick black waves.

"Get dressed," she repeated.

"Fine," I said sullenly, and rolled out of the bed. "Is this going to take long?"

"Dad forbid I should interrupt your plans for a night of feeling sorry for yourself. Yes, Toby, it's going to take a while. I'll be in the living room. Don't make me wait."

She didn't slam the door when she left. Instead, she eased it gently closed, pulling until the knob clicked home. That, more than anything else, told me how concerned about me she actually was. Moving slowly, but with increasing curiosity, I got out of bed.

When I emerged five minutes later, still dragging a brush through my hair, it was to find the Luidaeg and my Fetch engaged in a hushed, rapid-fire conversation that stopped as soon as they saw me. May glanced away, a flash of guilt in her expression. The Luidaeg, meanwhile, looked me up and down, assessing my attire: black dress slacks, the dark green cashmere sweater from Shadowed Hills, and a pair of black flats. Finally, she nodded.

"That should be acceptable. Get your keys."

"Glad you approve. May, we'll be back later."

"I'll be here," she said, mustering a small, not-quite-steady smile. I couldn't quite make myself return it as I grabbed my jacket from the rack, checking to

be sure my car keys were still in the front pocket, and followed the Luidaeg outside.

“Where are we going?” I asked again, once we were both seated in the car, me with my seat belt fastened, her without. I didn’t see any reason to argue. It wasn’t like she’d let us get pulled over. “I sort of need to know which direction to go.”

“Half Moon Bay,” she said, settling deeper in her seat. She made a complicated gesture with her hands, and there was a silk-swathed bundle that smelled of fur and seawater stretched across her knees. “I have something to return to Roan Rathad.”

I paled. “Luidaeg, is that . . .”

“One is Elaine’s, most recently worn by Margie Atwater. The other is Owain’s, most recently worn by Connor O’Dell.” She touched the silk covering the skins with an almost caressing hand. “We’re taking them home.”

There was nothing I could say to that. I started the car.

San Francisco to Half Moon Bay isn’t an inconsiderable drive. We’d been on the road for half an hour, neither of us saying anything, when the Luidaeg suddenly said, “We’re square, you know. There are no debts between us.”

“Swell.” And all it cost was Connor’s life, and maybe Gilly’s sanity. “I’ll try not to need a favor any time soon.”

“That would be an interesting change.” The Luidaeg glanced at me. “How are you doing?”

“Doing? I get up. I eat. I go back to bed. The bills are paid for at least another month before I need to do anything else.” More than a month, actually. Sylvester insisted on paying for everything until I felt like I could deal with working. Normally, I would have refused, but he was my liege, and his daughter was the reason I was in mourning. If he wanted to pay my rent, that was his call.

“I asked how, not what.”

“I really don’t know, Luidaeg. I really don’t.”

“It gets better.” She ran her fingers across the silk again, sighing. “It doesn’t go away, but it gets better. Believe me, if it didn’t, I would have followed my sisters to the night-haunts’ table years ago.”

“That shouldn’t help, but it does,” I admitted. I took a deep breath, and said, “Luidaeg, about the night-haunts . . .”

Her sidelong glance was troubled, her eyes skittering over me and away again in an instant. “Don’t,” she said, voice somewhere between gentle and

cautioning. “They look like the people we lose, but they’re not. They’re only ever themselves.”

“That’s not what I want to ask.”

“Then what?”

“The night-haunts are connected to the Fetches somehow, aren’t they?” Her nod was all but imperceptible. I pressed on. “How?”

“When they were born, they were predators. Killers. It was how Faerie made them, but they took too much. Father couldn’t have that, and so he bound them to eat only the dead. To make it stick, he . . . changed them. Every taste of living blood became a lottery, and a death sentence for a member of the flock.”

“Because one of them will be called as a Fetch for the person whose blood they taste,” I finished.

“Yes.”

“May . . .”

“Was called after you shared blood with the night-haunts. She wore a hundred faces before ever donning yours.” Again that skittering sidelong glance. “She was the only one who tasted your offering to them; she chose to be a Fetch for you. She wanted to give you time to prepare.”

“Because I was her hero,” I said softly, remembering the flock as I’d first seen it—and the flock as I’d seen it for the second time. Dare’s haunt vanished between the two appearances. The night-haunt with the face and memories of a girl who believed in me, and who I failed to save. “Does she remember?”

“Bits and pieces. The memories of the fallen were only ever masks she wore. Yours was going to be the last. In a way, it still is.”

“Yeah.” I laughed a little, unsteadily. “This explains a lot.”

“Does it explain why she didn’t want to tell you?”

“I don’t know that *I* would have wanted to tell me. But it doesn’t change anything.”

“Be sure to tell her that when you get home. She’s been worried.” The Luidaeg’s attention suddenly focused on the road. “Take the next exit,” she said.

“Got it.” I followed her directions, asking, “Why are we doing this? I didn’t get the impression that you were a big fan of the Selkies.”

“Because it’s polite. Because it’s the right thing to do. And because once upon a time, they brought the dead home to me. Because I love them.” The

Luidaeg shook her head. “I hate the Selkies for what they are, but I need them to keep the skins they wear alive.”

I hesitated. “Luidaeg, what’s the connection between the Selkies and the Roane?”

“Turn left at the end of this street.” Her tone made it clear that my question would not be answered. I nodded, accepting that, and drove on.

The Luidaeg’s directions took us down increasingly obscure streets, all of them scrupulously maintained. We finally turned onto a private drive that wound almost all the way around a small hill before stopping at a beachfront house large enough to be a bed-and-breakfast. It was a classic Victorian, with extensions pointing off in every direction, making it clear that construction had never really ended.

The driveway was packed with cars, and every light in the house looked like it was on, creating an artificial twilight that extended well beyond the walls. The Luidaeg smiled at me, just a little, as we got out. “I need you to do me a favor,” she said.

I raised an eyebrow. “Driving you to Half Moon Bay wasn’t enough?”

“Just . . . please. Don’t tell them who I am.” Her expression turned pleading. “Most of them don’t know, and it’s not time for them to know yet.”

“I thought you couldn’t lie.”

“I can’t lie to anyone but them.” She stroked the silkwrapped bundle one more time. Something subtle shifted in her face, the bones rearranging themselves just enough to make her unfamiliar. When she looked up again, her eyes were a smoky driftglass blue, and she looked like another person. “Please.”

“Will you tell me why you can lie to them?”

“After we’re done here. I promise.”

“Then, yeah. I won’t tell them who you are.”

She smiled with obvious relief, and beckoned for me to follow up the long stretch of driveway between us and the house.

I could hear the music before we were halfway there, wild fiddling and the strumming of at least a dozen guitars. I blinked, but didn’t say anything. Not until the Luidaeg rang the bell, and the door was opened by a freckled teenage girl with Connor’s brown-and-silver hair and bluer eyes than I’d ever seen on a Selkie. She blinked twice, eyes darting from the Luidaeg to me. And then she burst into tears, all but flinging herself into the Luidaeg’s arms.

“Oh, Annie, Annie, is he really gone?”

“He is.” The Luidaeg patted the girl’s back with her free hand, and said, “Diva, this is October Daye. She was Connor’s sweetheart.”

Diva straightened, not bothering to wipe her eyes. Tears rolled unashamedly down her cheeks as she studied me. Then she smiled. “You really are a pretty one. He was lucky in the having of you.”

“I was lucky to have him,” I said, and extended my hand. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Family never meets family,” she said, ignoring my hand. She hugged me instead, with surprising vigor. “Welcome to our home.” Releasing me, she looked back to the Luidaeg, and said, “Come in. Food’s in the kitchen. I’ll tell Mum you’re here.” Then she was gone, vanishing into the halfseen living room. The Luidaeg and I followed her inside, and into chaos.

Purebloods don’t have funerals, but they do have wakes—sedate, structured things, meant to tie off loose ends rather than to allow for public mourning. The Selkies must have missed that memo. Everywhere I looked there were Selkies and Selkies-in-waiting, their children who had yet to inherit a skin of their own. Some of them wept as unreservedly as Diva. Others laughed, or sawed away on their fiddles, filling the air with jigs and reels that had some people dancing, despite the nature of the occasion.

And all of them were thrilled to see the Luidaeg, even as their eyes sorrowfully acknowledged the nature of the bundle in her arms. “Cousin Annie” was apparently a valued member of the family, even if she didn’t visit often enough for most of them. She was stopped a dozen times as she led me toward the back of the room. Each time, she was hugged and welcomed, and each time, she told the ones who’d stopped her who I was, and each time, they told me they were sorry for my loss. They told me Connor was lucky to have had me. I was crying, too, before we reached the stairs . . . but they were good tears, because everyone in this house understood them.

We finally reached the door at the back of the room, and the Luidaeg led me into a narrow hall, where a flight of stairs led to the second floor. She put a hand on the banister, and asked, “Do you understand why we’re here?”

“I think so.” I wiped my cheeks with the back of one hand.

“Good. Come on.”

The sounds of the party fell away as we climbed higher, replaced by the deep, comfortable silence that only old, well-loved homes ever manage to attain. We met Diva at the first landing; she was going down much faster than we were going up, and barely managed to stop herself in time.

“Annie!” She stepped to the side. “Mum’s expecting you. She said October could come, if you thought it was appropriate.”

“I appreciate it, Diva,” said the Luidaeg, and hugged the girl quickly before resuming her ascent. I followed, giving Diva a smile as we passed her. Then the girl was gone, leaving the faint smell of seawater in her wake as she thundered down the stairs.

“Diva’s a good kid,” the Luidaeg said. “Her mother’s a Selkie, and her father’s Roane. They’re still waiting to see which she’ll take after—if it’s him, she won’t need one of the family skins.”

“Oh,” I said, unsure what else was expected of me. “The Roane are . . . they’re pretty rare, aren’t they?”

“Now they are. And Selkies aren’t supposed to mate outside the family. Diva’s mother never cared much for rules. Diva’s father . . . well. He was just glad to have a child at all. When you’re on the verge of extinction, you’ll take what you can get.”

“Oh,” I said again.

The Luidaeg gave me a tolerant look, and kept climbing.

A single door was open in the hall at the top of the stairs, letting a warm, inviting light spill out onto the floor. The Luidaeg stopped in the doorway, rapping her knuckles against the frame. “Hello, Lizzy,” she said. “Mind if we come in?”

“As if any could stop you?” asked the woman seated behind the room’s carved mahogany desk. She looked to be somewhere in her late thirties, with ash-blond hair that couldn’t quite decide between gold and silver, and a Selkie’s characteristic sea-dark eyes. A snifter of what smelled like brandy was in her hand. The light came from the oil lamps set on the desk’s front corners, well away from the papers in front of her, or the books that lined the walls. “Come in, come in, and bring your friend along.”

“It’s still polite to ask,” said the Luidaeg, stepping inside. “Lizzy, this is October Daye. October, this is Elizabeth Ryan, current head of this clan.”

“And much grief it’s given me,” said Elizabeth bitterly. She took a sip of brandy. “You are welcome here, the both of you.”

“No, I’m not.” The Luidaeg dragged a chair to the front of the desk, gesturing for me to do the same. She put her bundle down in front of Elizabeth before she sat, and said, “That’s two skins returned. Be sure they’re passed quickly.”

Elizabeth’s gaze sharpened as she set her glass aside, reaching out to pull

the bundle toward her. “Why?”

“Because time is almost up.” One corner of the Luidaeg’s mouth turned upward in something that bordered on a smile. “October was Connor’s lover, and she’s Amandine’s daughter. You have a year to notify the clans. Then? Your bill comes due.”

“You come to me in time of mourning to tell me this?”

“Yeah, Lizzy, I do, because this is when you’ll listen to me.” The Luidaeg leaned forward, the driftglass haze bleeding from her eyes, replaced by blackness. “I can make the choices for you, but you won’t like them. Tell the clans. One year.”

“And what do I tell the children for whom there are no skins? What do I tell the parents who have to choose between them? Annie—Luidaeg, please —”

“You tell them the truth.” The Luidaeg stood. “I’ve been kinder than I had to be. You know that. I didn’t have to give you warning.”

“I liked you better when I was young and foolish and thought you a cousin, sea witch,” said Elizabeth bitterly, reaching for her brandy. I wasn’t clear on what was happening, but I was pretty sure that brandy wasn’t her first of the night, and it wasn’t going to be her last.

“Yeah, well, I liked you better when you were young and foolish and called me Annie-my-sweet and danced with me on the beaches,” said the Luidaeg. She stood. “Growing up’s a bitch, isn’t it, Liz? You have a year. October, come on.”

I lingered for a moment after the Luidaeg left the room—just long enough to say, “Sorry about this.” And then I followed her.

We were halfway down the stairs when she said, voice pitched low, “Everything has a cost, October; remember that. It may be a long time before the bill comes due, but everything has a cost.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Come on.”

At the bottom of the stairs, the Luidaeg turned away from the light and music of the living room, opening the door that led to the porch behind the house. Moonlight glittered off the waves like a thousand broken mirrors, all of them too shattered to ever be repaired. She kept walking, and so I kept following, until we reached the wet, hard-packed sand at the water’s edge.

“I can lie to the Selkies because I’m their First, even though they aren’t my children,” she said, as matter-of-factly as if she were remarking on the

weather. I made a small sound of surprise. She cast me a sharply amused look. “Did you think I’d lived a chaste life? I’m the mother of the Roane. I loved them so much it hurt. It still does, if I think about it too much.”

“But—”

“For the love of my father, October, *listen*. I don’t know if I’ll have the nerve to tell you this twice.” She looked out at the water, at the waves—at anything but me. “One of my sisters betrayed me. She put knives in the hands of humans and told them to kill my children, because it would make them immortal. The Roane who lived were the ones who were with me. Not enough to make a race. Barely enough to remain a family.”

I gasped. That was all.

The Luidaeg’s shoulders slumped. “They killed my babies because they wanted to live forever. Only it turns out forever isn’t very long. Their own children slit their throats while they slept, and brought the skins of my dead babies home to me. They begged me for their lives. Me, the sea witch, the wronged one . . . they *begged* me to forgive them for the sins of their parents. So I forgave them. And I bound them. They would be Selkies from that day onward, they would wear the skins of my sons and daughters and grandchildren, and they would keep the magic alive until I could find a way to make things right.”

“Until the bill could come due,” I whispered.

“Yeah.” She glanced at me. “I love the Selkies because they are my family. I hate them because they killed my family. Everything’s a contradiction.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I had children. I was a mother. And now my children are gone, almost all of them. Their skins live, on the backs of Selkies . . . for now. Because everything changes, Toby. Everything passes, even in Faerie. For now, you’re alive. Your squire needs you to be a knight; your Fetch needs you to be a sister; your liege needs you to be the daughter he didn’t lose. So be alive. If you’re not willing to do it for them, do it for Connor. I seriously doubt he took an arrow for your kid just so you could cry yourself to death. I’d tell you he wasn’t worth it, but no one gets to make that call for you. So I’ll just tell you that everything changes, everything passes, and we need you too much for you to keep doing this.”

“I miss him,” I said. The waves almost swallowed the sound of my voice.

The Luidaeg looked at me gravely, her irises shading back to dusty driftglass blue. It looked right on her; it looked *real*, like I was seeing her

eyes without a mask for the first time. “That doesn’t go away. But it gets better.”

There were so many things I wanted to ask. What was the shallowing in Muir Woods? What did the Luidaeg mean when she told Elizabeth the bill was almost due? Who was Arden, and why would a shallowing care if she was alive? Questions stacked upon questions . . . and none of them mattered in that moment, as we stood at the edge of the water and watched the waves beating themselves against the sand. Because the Luidaeg was right. Nothing stays the same for long, not in Faerie, not in the human world, not anywhere. But some things are worth fighting for.

Dean would have Goldengreen. Gillian would have her father, and nightmares she couldn’t explain—nightmares that would fade, if she stayed away from Faerie. I would have my strange little self-assembled family, with all the problems and pleasures that included. I wouldn’t have Connor anymore. But someone would wear his skin, and if that was enough to keep the Roane a little bit alive, maybe it was enough to keep him a little bit alive, too.

The Luidaeg put a hand on my shoulder. I glanced at her, startled, before nodding and putting my own hand over it. We stayed there for a long time, listening to the distant music drifting from the house behind us, and watched as the tide rolled out. She didn’t say anything about my tears. I didn’t say anything about hers.

Everything changes.

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ONE SALT SEA
ASHES OF HONOR
(Available September 2012)

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