

Winter's Orphans

Mina stood still for what seemed like a long time. She knew that it would be a mistake to do what Camhlaidh wanted. He could have nothing good in mind for her. But curiosity pulled at her like a riptide in the ocean, and she took one step, then another.

The woman turned slowly to look at her. Her face had the pallor of a corpse, and her eyes had sunk back into her head. Blood ran down her legs and feet, soaking through her wretched dress.

A feeling crackled along Mina's skin, a whisper of power that made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. She took a breath, and it was like needles in her lungs.

"Bean-nighe," she said, and her voice shook, "what is the name of the one whose winding sheet you wash?"

The bean-nighe smiled the ghastly grin of something dead. "Wilhelmina Cole," she said.

WINTER'S ORPHANS

by

Elaine Corvidae

NBI

NovelBooks, Inc.

Douglas, Massachusetts

This is a work of fiction. While reference may be made to actual historical events or existing locations, the characters, incidents, and dialogs are products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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To all my
grrlfriends
past and present;
you rock the world, ladies.

CHAPTER ONE

It began the day the girl was dragged into the machinery.

Her shrieks took a moment to pierce through the clattering din of gears, the clanging song of shuttles. Mina lifted her head slowly, her fatigued mind taking time to register the new sound, to wonder what it might be. Then with a terrified oath, she grabbed the clutch to stop her looms, saw at least one shuttle snarl the cotton threads into a hopeless spider's weaving before she had even turned away.

The victim was on her knees, her arm between two massive drums turned by heavy belts. Blood from the crushed limb slicked the drums as they rumbled on, grinding her bones and seeking to drag more of her into their hungry maw. She was a new girl, perhaps not yet cautious enough around the machines,

perhaps just unlucky enough to have a sleeve flutter where it shouldn't.

The overseer, Jacob, grabbed ineffectually at the drums and the belts driving them, only to have the skin stripped instantly from his palms. The belts hooked onto the huge drive shaft, which was turned by the gigantic water wheel that powered the mill.

And there was no way to stop the wheel.

The girl's shrieks turned into a high, keening wail that sounded like nothing human. Other girls were screaming now, for the horror of it, or because they knew that the same thing could happen to them all too easily. The male mule spinners ran past, going to Jacob's aid, as if the combined strength of all their muscles might somehow cease the wheel's turning.

Mina's body shook, a sick feeling pooling in her gut. She wanted to turn away from the sight of the girl being devoured by the machines, from her horribly slow and agonizing death. She wanted the screams to go away, the blood to vanish, the smell of fear to dissipate. She wanted it to *stop*.

Agony constricted around Mina's throat like a noose. Her legs went out from under her, and she crumpled to the hard wooden floor. Pain spiked through her neck, into her spine, down to her belly, and for a single instant of terror she thought that she had somehow gotten tangled in the machines herself.

The belt connecting the drums to the drive shaft snapped.

Then Abby was there, bending over her, long curly hair hanging into her face. Hands the color of fine chocolate touched Mina worriedly. "Mina! What's wrong? Are you all right?"

The pain eased, receding to an angry burn encircling her throat. Mina nodded, sat up, and tried her voice. It scraped coming out. "I'm fine. I just...got light-headed."

"Who wouldn't, seeing that?" Abby whispered, and fear crept into her rich voice. She turned to stare at the broken drive belt, pulling Mina's gaze involuntarily behind her. "The belt snapped...did you see it? It was a miracle. God must have been watching over us today."

Mina stood up carefully, forcing shaky legs to hold her. Jacob and the other men were carrying the injured girl out, and Mina caught a glimpse of the red ruin of her arm. *God wasn't watching any of us today*, she thought grimly. With a hurt like that, the girl would never work again. If she survived, she would find herself in debtors' prison for being unable to fulfill her Contract of Indenture.

Mina made her way back to the narrow aisle formed by the four looms she operated. The threads on two had become hopelessly snarled and would have to be untangled and knotted back together. The pieces they were in, by which Mina was paid, were probably ruined. The other girls went back to their own looms, even though it looked like there would be no more work today. They were already ten hours into the shift, and it wasn't likely that the belt would be fixed before the factory bells tolled.

Once the girls had passed by and left her in relative solitude, Mina slowly reached up to touch her throat. The iron collar around her neck had left a narrow band of burn-tender skin beneath.

She'd wanted the screams to stop. She'd focused on the drive belt. And something had gone out of her, like a bird flying free from her mouth...and the belt had snapped.

Mina closed her eyes and drove her fingernails into her palms in a futile attempt at denial. "Not again," she whispered. "God, not again."

Duncan's hands jerked sharply when the wave hit him, sending his bow flying across the violin strings and into the street. For an instant, his head spun and rang, as if the world was a kettle filled with water, and a giant had just struck the side. The smell of dark water, of earth, of the cold caverns beneath the ground, filled his nostrils like wine. He inhaled instinctively, holding the memory of it as its reality faded.

One or two passers-by glanced at him curiously; others averted their faces, perhaps fearing that he was having some sort of embarrassing fit. They had not heard the sound, of course, had not smelled that elusive scent which whispered of power more heady than the finest brandy. They only saw a crippled old street musician thrashing about at things no one else could perceive, as if perhaps his mind had started to go the way of his wasted legs.

Stupid, he berated himself. How many times had he warned his students against reacting to things that could be sensed by no one fully human? How often had he schooled them in keeping their expressions neutral before others, no matter what assaulted their feeling senses? Odd behavior was the quickest way to get noticed, and to get noticed was to court disaster. One wrong word spoken to the wrong ear would ensure that no one ever saw them again.

It had been shock that momentarily robbed him of his self-control. A burst of unwarded power...that wasn't the sort of thing one anticipated. Generally speaking, faelings who forgot to ward their spells died quickly, hunted down by the Seelie Court before they had the chance to make the mistake a second time.

It must be a child, who does not know any better, he thought uneasily.

But it hadn't smelled or felt like the work of a child.

A young man paused and bent to pick up Duncan's fallen bow.

"Thank you, kind sir," Duncan said distractedly.

The man smiled, tipped his hat, and dropped a small coin into the tin cup sitting within easy reach of the wheelchair. Although Duncan normally remained on his corner throughout the day, half-performing and half-begging, he began to pack his violin and bow back into their case. He had to find out who had been the source of the power he'd felt.

For if he didn't, they would be dead before the next day dawned.

~*~

It seemed odd to walk across the courtyard to the factory gate without the bells tolling behind her. The sun was still high in the sky, its merciless glare beating into Mina's tired eyes. Her swollen feet dragged, and all her bones felt as though they had been taken apart and put back together wrong. She wanted nothing more than to go back to the one-room apartment she called home, lay down on the straw mattress, and never stand up again.

Abby caught up to her at the gate. The girls pooled inside the counting room that guarded the only exit, waiting on shrew-faced Mr. Parsim to scuttle out from behind his desk and grudgingly unlock the heavy door. Their eyes were tired, sunken hollows in pale faces. In a way, they all looked alike, with their long hair tied up in buns, their skirts gone gray from a thousand washings, their dull iron collars. A few of the children bounced from one foot to the other, eager to be out early even though it meant less money for either their indenture or their families.

"Did you see how it happened?" Mina asked quietly as the gate swung back.

Abby shook her head. "No. Julia did, though. The girl's sleeve got caught somehow."

Mina nodded absently. That was why she had abandoned the fluttering skirts of the other women and adopted the more practical trousers, suspenders, and shirts of the men. Her hair she kept cut severely short, giving the machines one less thing to grab. So far, the only accident she'd had in sixteen years at the mill had come when a shuttle thrown from the loom struck her in the face, leaving a crescent-shaped scar over her left cheekbone.

So far. Confidence never paid.

Mina fished a crumpled cigarette out of her pocket and lit it. No open flames were allowed inside the mill, because of the cotton dust that choked the air. She tried to make up for it by chain-smoking her way through her few precious hours of freedom.

"Um, were you coming back to the apartment just yet?" Abby asked nervously.

Mina sighed, knowing what was about to follow. "Camilia coming over?"

"Yes." Three years and Abby still couldn't keep a note of happiness out of her voice. "Do you mind?"

Yes, I mind. I mind very much. Camilia's the daughter of the man who owns the biggest gun-making factory in Niune. She can damn well afford to pay for a hotel room if she's horny. Hell, she could pay off Abby's Contract and set her up in the nicest apartment in the city if she wanted to.

"No, I don't mind."

Abby broke into a sunny smile. "Thanks. I really appreciate it. We both do." She hesitated, looking down at her hands. The left one was missing the last two fingers. "I only have two years left on my contract, you know."

There was nothing to be said to that. Abby was too smart to truly believe that would change things in any substantial way. In two years, Camilia would probably have married some rich young factory-owner's son and started popping out a bunch of factory-owning babies. It would be harder for her to escape down into the tenements for a bit of quick sex. The chance that Abby would ever even see her again after that was remote at best.

Maybe Abby thought that once the collar was off, Camilia would somehow start viewing her as more of an equal. Maybe she thought Camilia would fall in love with her.

But Mina knew that love was just a pretty word for lust that people had invented so they wouldn't feel guilty about using others. It was too bad Abby wasn't a whore. At least then she'd get something for her troubles besides a broken heart.

Abby flitted away, dreaming of the evening to come. Mina sighed and turned her steps down towards the Blackrush. She briefly toyed with the idea of eating something, but that would cut into her money for cigarettes and alcohol, the only two things in the world she gave a damn about except for Abby. To hell with it—she'd have breakfast tomorrow.

She wove through the pedestrians until she reached the riverfront. The turbid water looked leaden under the cloudy sky. It sloshed rhythmically against bridges, piers, and boats, like the body of some huge, restless animal. A broken wagon wheel floated by, accompanied by the usual flotsam of waterlogged paper, fishing line, and sewage. Thin children searched the gray mud of the banks. Mina wondered what they could possibly be looking for.

The Blackrush was rank and foul with refuse, but she loved it nonetheless. The movement of its dark, peat-laden water was as compelling as the heartbeat of a lover. She liked to stand on the bank and smell the weeds that grew along the edge and watch the gulls that rose and dipped above. It would be foolish to actually enter the polluted waters, but sometimes she thought about it anyway; imagined the cold water closing over her head. If she dove down to the bottom, what secrets would she find there?

None. The water's too murky to see anything, fool.

Mina turned reluctantly away from the water and made her way along Fishwife Lane. Newspaper boys stood on street corners, crying out the headlines: "New Treaty with Grynith! Queen Rhiannon to Hold Greatest Triumph Celebration Ever! Partially-Eaten Corpse Pulled from the Blackrush!"

No shit, she thought sardonically. Fish and crabs would do that to a body that stayed in the water longer than a day. *I suppose it wouldn't sound so dramatic if they pointed that out, though.*

Her cigarette was nearly burning her lips, so she put it out and got another. She had to stand with her back to the rank wind off the Blackrush to keep the match from blowing out. People moved all around her, people who had families and friends and real lives that included something more than grinding twelve-hour shifts at the mill. She drifted through them like a shadow broken loose from its moorings. Herds of pigs grown sleek and fat from the garbage of the streets jogged past, snorting amongst themselves, their little eyes wild and smart. Mina envied them.

She turned onto Blackstrap Alley, passed the bars and wild taverns that catered to the men who worked the wharves. A few sailors loitering in the doorways gave her hard looks. They probably thought that they were eyeing up a pretty boy. No one bothered her, though, for which she was grateful. She'd never found herself in a situation down here that she couldn't handle, but even so, it often seemed like it was only a matter of time.

She stopped outside the familiar splintered door and wide glass windows of one of the bars. The drinks served within were advertised in paint on the inside of the window: racehorses, moral suasions, smashers, and phlegm-cutters. The pub on the other side of the door was a quiet place that didn't attract the rowdier sorts. Broken-looking men drank in the corners, their eyes fixed on their mugs. A few women were scattered among them, but most didn't look to be soliciting. The clientele here were seldom boisterous or rich enough to provide for a good whore.

Mina passed them by and slid onto a seat at the dark bar. The man behind the counter was as familiar to her by now as her own face, but she had never spoken to him beyond the demands of ordering and paying. "Apple-jack," she said automatically, and he started to fill a dirty glass. She fished in her pocket for the very last scraps of her pay.

The alcohol burned the inside of her throat but eased some of the ache on the outside. It was a good thing that the collar couldn't be removed. Otherwise, Abby would want to know what had happened.

And Mina didn't have an explanation.

She stared into the depths of her drink, wondering bleakly if it could bring even momentary forgetfulness. A part of her had spent the last eight years on edge, she acknowledged bitterly, just waiting for another impossible occurrence. It had been a long time since William died, but she remembered the feeling; as if her entire body breathed had out, or as if she'd pushed with some invisible muscle that she'd never used before. There had been that identical instant of euphoria, of complete and utter freedom, before the burn of the iron collar had dragged her back to earth.

Only the ending had been different: the broken railing, the screams, and William's shattered body on the

floor below. Everyone had thought his death was just an accident—after all, he had been seen to stumble without anyone else touching him. The railing must have been weak, a flaw in the wood, impossible otherwise that he had fallen hard enough to go through it.

Impossible that an unseen blow had shoved him through it.

She closed her eyes and took a deep, steadying breath. There was still the chance that William's death *had* been an accident and that blind luck had saved the girl today. *Maybe I'm cracking up. I just thought I killed William because his death made me guilty over what I was feeling towards him.*

But her main reaction to his death had been horror, not guilt. Horror...and the nervous fear that it might happen again.

But it didn't, not for eight years. So why now?

There was no way to answer that. She didn't even know what she was doing, so how could she speculate on how it might work? Hell, she wasn't entirely sure that this sort of thing *didn't* happen to other people. Maybe not commonly, or else she would have heard of it, but on occasion. Not for the first time, she wished that she'd had a little more education. She'd gone to school for eight years, three months each year—law required that much out of the mill—but that had been only enough to show her how little she really knew. Someone university-educated might be able to tell her what had happened. But that sort of person wouldn't be caught dead talking with a factory slave like Mina Cole.

And even if she did know someone to ask, who was to say that what she had done wasn't evil? She'd killed a man, after all.

Yes, but I saved the girl today. That has to count for something.

She let out a long sigh and tossed down the rest of her drink. For all she knew, it would be another eight years before anything else odd happened to her. It might be never.

She stood up and made her way out of the bar. This late in the month, she didn't have enough money to do any serious drinking, so she would have to find some other form of entertainment tonight. Maybe a long walk along the Blackrush.

The endless summer day was finally coming to a close, the heat-shimmer dying off the roadway. A hansom cab clattered by, curtains drawn. A dog barked somewhere nearby. The smells of rotting fish, rank riverweed, and stale vomit blew past on the breeze.

Mina walked aimlessly until the sun was a bloated red orb half-slipped below the horizon. The air lost some of its suffocating heat, and breath came easier as shadows descended. Lamplighters made their way down the street, and Mina felt a touch of scorn for those who tried to defy the night with pallid gaslight.

The faint click of nails on stone caught her attention. She slowed, glancing about warily. Her wandering feet had taken her back towards the tenements that housed many of Hobb Mill's indentured workers. She had lived there since leaving the orphanage at sixteen, long enough to know to step cautiously after nightfall.

The sound came again, became more regular, the *click-click-click* of a dog making its way along the street. Mina paused, suddenly uneasy. The echo off the sagging walls must have deceived her ears, for it sounded as though the beast was only a few feet behind her, despite the fact that there was no living creature in sight.

A mound of moldy kitchen garbage suddenly moved on its own, as if something unseen had brushed against it. The clear print of a huge paw appeared in the slimy ruin of some unidentifiable vegetable.

For an instant, Mina stood frozen, staring at the print in shock. Then, as the sound of unseen claws on the cobbles drew closer, she turned and fled.

~*~

Duncan was not a man given to swearing, but by now a number of creative expletives were running through his mind. His arms ached with weariness. It had been a long time since he had stirred this far from home, and he had allowed himself to lose some of his former stamina. Of course, he could admit that he was tired and ask Bryan to push the wheelchair for a while.

Poor, crippled, invalid Duncan cannot even get across town by himself. I think not.

Bryan paused in the shadows, comfortably away from the nearest gaslight. His dark skin blended with the night. "I don't know," he said, his handsome face creased with a frustrated frown. "I thought we'd have caught up with him by now. Do you think he's hiding from us?"

"No." Duncan took a deep breath, tasting and smelling for power. It pulled at him, like the pull of the earth on a homing pigeon's brain, like the suck and drag of a deep riptide. Fainter now, almost lost beneath the smells of the city, but still there.

"He's near," Duncan said quietly, the taste of power on his tongue like musk and wine. "I can feel the call of his blood. He isn't using any wards to keep me from tracking him, so I doubt he knows that we're here. He may not know anything about his power at all." Duncan shook his head and forced his aching arms to propel his chair forward. The smell of the Blackrush came to him, and his heart lifted. "He's near, Bryan. He—"

The sudden yelp of a dog in pain broke the night. Duncan froze, the wheelchair trundling forward on its own momentum, until it fetched up against an uneven paving stone. Bryan's eyes widened, and he shifted his grip on the heavy staff he carried everywhere with him.

"A *Hound*," Duncan hissed. "Straight ahead, down by the water!"

Then Bryan was running, long legs moving with unthinking fleetness. Duncan wheeled after him, letting the slope of the street carry him recklessly fast. The crumbling tenements flanking the street ended suddenly, opening out onto a slender bridge that gracefully leapt the river.

Something moved among the pylons at the water's edge.

A young man stood beneath the arch of the bridge, wildly swinging a broken piece of driftwood. Through Duncan's right eye, it appeared that the youth was striking at nothing. But through his left, he saw the pure glow of the Hound's white coat, the blazing fire of its blue eyes.

Bryan came in from behind, slamming his staff full force onto the Hound's back. The Hound bayed in surprise and pain, its hind legs going out from under it. Another swing of the staff caught the side of its head, staving in the skull so that its golden blood spurted out in a hot jet. Bryan jumped back to avoid getting any on him.

Silence descended. The youth dropped the broken plank he had used in self-defense and stared blankly at the now-visible corpse of the Hound. There was a ragged tear in the left sleeve of his shirt, and blood trickled unheeded down his wrist and fingers to drip in the weeds.

Duncan skidded to a stop as close to the bank as he could go without tipping the wheelchair over. Startled by the movement, the youth looked up, and Duncan realized his mistake. The unknown faeling was a woman. Malnutrition had robbed her of height and had flattened out any feminine curves. Her pale blonde hair looked as if she had cut it herself with dull shears, in the dark, and was so short that it stuck out in every conceivable direction. Against her hair and the pallor of the skin, her black eyebrows and earth-brown eyes looked startling.

There was something odd about the arrangement of her features, in the pointy chin and slightly upswept brows. Something fox-like, perhaps, that no one would be able to name unless they already knew what they were looking at. The fae blood was strong in her, to leave its inhuman stamp so clearly.

Then she moved, and he saw the faint gleam of light off the iron collar around her throat.

She's a factory slave. His stomach turned over queasily—to have iron pressed against your skin like that, day after day, the power strangling inside of you... God in heaven, it would be a wonder if she was still sane.

"W-who are you?" she demanded, glancing frantically from them to the corpse of the Hound. "What is that thing?"

Duncan sighed. Explanations were always the hardest part. "We call them Hounds."

"How did you know it was there? How could you see it? Why did it attack me?" She stopped and glanced at Bryan, who was busy shoving the Hound's carcass into the Blackrush. The water would obliterate it quickly. "Who the hell are you?"

Duncan smiled thinly. "My name is Duncan RiDahn. My friend is Bryan Shopper. There will be plenty of time for explanations later, but for now your wound should be tended to."

Her eyes narrowed in unexpected suspicion. "Are you some kind of doctor?"

"The old man is some kind of just about everything," Bryan opined as he climbed back up the bank to the road. There were weeds in his hair, and he stank of slime. "He knows what he's doing."

She shook her head, taking a step away from them. "I can't pay you."

"I don't want your money," Duncan said patiently. "If you'll come back to my home, where I have my things, I'll be able to treat you."

A sudden sneer transformed her mouth. "I don't think so. I'm not going anywhere with two men who say they want to doctor me and don't want any money for it."

Duncan blinked, shocked. Suspicion over sexual motives was not the normal reaction that a man in a wheelchair got from women.

Bryan burst out into gales of laughter. "The old man, luring women back to his house for—" He dissolved into chuckles, shaking his head in incredulity.

"That's quite enough, Bryan," Duncan snapped, mortified.

The girl quickly stepped back. Her dark eyes kept them both in her field of vision, not willing to lose sight of either. "I'm not stupid," she said softly. And then she turned and ran.

"Hey, wait!" Bryan shouted, startled. "Hey, we saved your life!"

"Let her go." Duncan listened to the sound of the wind, struggling to sort her footsteps from the lap of the water. If she made any noise, it was lost to him.

"But she needs our help!"

"I know." Duncan remembered the distrust in her look. *Of men in particular*, he wondered, *or of everyone?* "But she can't take it. Not yet, at any rate. Go down the bank and see if you can find any of her blood on the reeds where she stood off the Hound."

"Why?"

"We'll be able to use it to locate her. And it will tell us when we *need* to do so. A Hound has never bitten you, Bryan, but one has bitten me, and I remember its effects well enough. At best, the venom will make her very ill. If the bite was deep enough, it might kill her."

~*~

Rhiannon tapped the arm of her chair impatiently. It was late; for once, no sounds of servants chattering, or guards marching, or dignitaries stabbing one another in the back disturbed the tranquility of the palace. A sole human guard stood on the other side of the double doors leading to her private receiving room, unaware that his queen and the man who was supposedly her son needed no such protection.

She sighed and leaned back. For a moment, she considered dropping the glamour that made her appear the aging-but-still-regal stepsister whom she had killed so many years ago. But there was always the chance that the guard would enter for some unexpected reason, and she would hate to have to explain the man's disappearance.

Roderick stood arrogantly before her, golden curls falling delicately over his shoulders. He, too, wore glamour, although its purpose was more to conceal the alien features that came from blood more fae than human. He gave her a seductive smile that had once seemed appealing, but now irritated her.

Perhaps he thought that he could distract her from the matter of his failure.

"Let me make certain that I understand you aright," she said, giving him a cold smile that made his own grin fade like the sun before night. "The Hound sent to dispatch the faeling has not returned. Am I to understand that this person is still in my city, then?"

Roderick shook his head sharply. "No. Not at all."

"You think that the Hound killed him, then?"

"Of course. Otherwise, we would have felt him again, wouldn't we?"

Rhiannon rose to her full height and glared down at him from her dais. "Don't pretend to be stupid, Roderick. If the Hound did not kill him, then who killed the Hound? There *aren't* any unseelie faelings left in Dere!"

"We don't know that."

"I do." She sat back down, chewed delicately on a nail. "Or would you rather have me believe that the Knights and Hounds—which, I believe, are under *your* control—have somehow failed in their *only* task?"

He sulked. She had found his pouts becoming when she first assumed the throne. Of course, he had been

five then, not forty. "Of course not," he muttered.

She settled back into her raised chair, folding her long-nailed hands over her stomach. "They had better not. Find me the faeling, Roderick. And do so quickly, before I lose patience."

CHAPTER TWO

The tolling of the factory bell invaded Mina's dreams, dragging her up from a troubled sleep that had brought her little rest. Her eyes felt crusted shut, and once she opened them she wondered why she had bothered. The mildewed plaster ceiling seemed to sway overhead, and the smell of cooking bacon drifting up from one of the apartments below made bile rise to her throat. For an instant, she wondered if perhaps she had gotten drunk last night after all. But the pain in her left arm belied that moment of wishful thinking.

She sat up, moving slowly to keep her stomach in its place. Last night, Abby had torn up her only spare shift to make a bandage for the vicious-looking bite. Mina had told her all of the truth that seemed credible—she had been attacked by a stray dog but had managed to fend it off. Invisible dogs and strange men in wheelchairs would have been too hard to explain, to herself as well as to Abby.

Pus stuck the cloth bandage to the wounds, and she gritted her teeth as it pulled free. The punctures beneath appeared deceptively small, but the skin around them was swollen and inflamed, and yellowish liquid oozed slowly from each wound. The injury hadn't looked half so bad last night.

Abby pushed herself up on the straw mattress on the other side of the room. Her spiral curls of black hair almost hid the iron collar at her throat. "How does it look?" she asked sleepily.

"Fine," Mina lied, hurriedly retying the bandage before Abby could see. "What's for breakfast?"

"What do you want?"

"How about potatoes, eggs, cheese, bread, and butter?"

"We've got oatmeal. The servants must have forgotten to do the shopping again."

Mina stripped out of her sweat-soaked shift and dressed slowly, while Abby boiled water on the cast iron stove. In the winter, the stove also served as the only source of heat for the one-room apartment. Unfortunately, it served much the same function in the middle of summer.

Abby cast her a few odd looks as they ate oatmeal out of a pair of cracked bowls, which Mina had found in the garbage behind a restaurant. Not wanting to talk, Mina pretended to study the scarred surface of their rickety table. Her thoughts went back to the night before and the two men who had charged in to save her. The younger one had struck at the invisible dog as if he could see it somehow, as if he had faced such things before.

The dog and the men had to be connected to what had happened in the mill earlier. Invisible dogs didn't attack most people, and Mina couldn't believe that chance had anything to do with the fact that it had selected *her* as its victim. What if there were others like it out there? Would she have to spend the rest of her life scared of something she couldn't even see?

And the two men—where had they come from? How had they known? Who were they?

A part of her uneasily wondered if she should have gone with them after all. They hadn't seemed

surprised by the invisible dog, which meant that they knew something about what was going on. Knew things that she needed to know, too. Like maybe how to avoid being mauled to death.

They might have been just as predatory as the dog, she reminded herself sharply. Whatever drew it to me must have drawn them as well, and there's no knowing that their intentions were better than those of the beast.

She remembered her last glimpse of her mother's face, the only part of the battered body that the nurses at the charity hospital would let her see. The once-smooth skin was swollen like ripe fruit, turned red and black from bruising. Her nose was nothing but a pulp with bits of white bone gleaming here and there through dried blood. One eye socket had been broken, and her jaw was shattered, distorting her features into those of a stranger. Mina had cried then, thinking that the nurses had brought her to see a monster.

She had stayed at the factory even after she left the orphanage, hoping to avoid her mother's fate. The orphanage didn't care who held her Contract, so long as they got their money. Mina owed them for eight years of food, clothing, and shelter; the crude numbers etched into her collar proclaimed that she would be thirty-two years old before they considered the debt paid. The only things she had been qualified for were staying on at the mill or lying on her back in some whorehouse. She'd thought the factory would keep her from selling her womanhood.

The stupidity of youth. But at least she was safe behind brick walls, instead of out on the streets somewhere. No matter how tired and sore she was at the end of a shift, she was safe.

Or had that safety just been an illusion, one that was starting to wear thin like cheap drapery?

"Mina?" Abby's voice intruded into her thoughts.

Mina blinked, discovered that she had been sitting listlessly, spoon dangling over a half-full bowl of congealing oatmeal. "I'm sorry. What?"

"I said we have to get going, or else we won't get there before the gates are locked."

Mina scrambled to her feet, and the two roommates hurried down the narrow, ill-lit stairwell and into the street. Fellow workers from the mill surrounded them, faces gray and wan in the early light. Weariness had settled into Mina's bones years ago, a constant fatigue that she would have thought she'd get used to, yet never did. The ache in her hands and feet never really went away either, even after a night's sleep.

She smoked two cigarettes in quick succession on the way to the mill, stamping out the last on the street when the familiar brick wall came into view. The factory bell began tolling just as they walked through the gate. Mr. Parsim glared at them and shut the doors with a hollow boom.

They climbed seven flights of creaking wooden stairs. The only light came from tiny windows set in the thick brick of the outside wall. Faded posters sternly reminded everyone not to smoke or to light any open flames. Cotton dust had settled in every crack and crevice, and hung thick and heavy in the air. Mina paused halfway up the stairs to cough, and she wasn't the only one. She wondered if anyone had ever died just from breathing.

The weavers' room was directly under the attic, and all the summer heat collected there. Mina wiped sweat from her brow as she threw the clutch on her looms, unwilling to contemplate what the temperature would be like by midsummer. The heat made her feel a little faint this morning, and she wished that the weavers were allowed to sit down.

Jacob walked past, sharp eyes on the lookout for any girl who might be starting late. Mina yelled his

name before she took the time to think about the wisdom of it. Jacob stopped and came back. He was a big, burly man with a perpetual scowl, which made a pleasant contrast to William's lying smile. Mina wondered what Jacob would think if he knew that she had inadvertently cleared the way for his own promotion by killing his predecessor.

"What? Is there a problem with a loom?" he demanded.

"No. I just wanted to ask about the girl. The one who got caught in the drums yesterday? Did she live?"

He seemed vaguely surprised that she didn't know. "She'll live. But they say she'll never work again."

Mina winced and nodded. They both knew what that meant. Debtors' prison. Unless the girl had some free relatives willing to accept indenture to work off her debt, she might never see the light of day again. Her heart heavy, Mina threw herself into the work, taking the girl's fate as a painful reminder. She despised the looms, despised the noise, the tedium, and the weariness.

But she also depended on them, and that was something she could never allow herself to forget.

The burning pain in her arm hadn't diminished any. In fact, it seemed to be getting slowly worse. She rubbed at it, and then jerked her hand back with a yelp at the tenderness. What if the wound was infected? What if...?

No.

But by the end of the day, Mina could no longer deny that her condition was worsening. The exhaustion that dragged at her was more than the normal weariness of a workday. The stairwell spun threateningly around her as she exited the mill, and she paused a moment outside, letting the cool evening wind touch her face.

"You look awful!" Abby exclaimed when she came abreast. She touched Mina's forehead with a dark hand. "You're hot, and your skin is clammy. Are you sick?"

"Nothing that a little rest won't cure," Mina managed to say. "Maybe I'll go to bed early."

Abby fussed over her the rest of the way home. Mina lay down on her straw mattress as soon as she came within reach of it, rousing just enough to eat a little of the broth that Abby fixed from their dwindling stores of food. When Abby finally stopped bustling about and went downstairs to fetch water from the communal pump out back, Mina propped herself up against the wall and slowly rolled up her sleeve.

Radiating out from the bites were angry red lines that streaked her arm almost up to the shoulder. The flesh around the wounds had swollen hugely, and thick yellow pus oozed out.

"Oh God," Mina whispered in terror. "Oh God."

~*~

The next morning came in a blur of light between fever dreams. Mina burned as though held up to the face of the sun. Sweat drenched her shift and plastered her hair to her forehead. It took all the strength she had to lift her head and take a sip of water from the cup Abby held to her parched lips.

"I'll tell Jacob you're sick," Abby said, fear lacing her words. "I'll leave the pitcher and the cup here by you. Will you be all right by yourself?"

"We can't both miss work," Mina pointed out hoarsely. In truth, neither of them could afford to skip a

shift. Their salaries were not that large to begin with, and after half was taken out to pay back their respective indentures, very little was left over for food or the rent on the apartment. "It's Saturday, so I'm only missing a half day. And we have tomorrow off—that'll give me plenty of time to get better before Monday."

Abby left reluctantly. Mina lay half in a daze, her arm throbbing in time with her heartbeat. She knew that she should change the dressing, but fear of what she might see beneath the bandage prevented her. All of her muscles ached, as though she had been beaten with a broom handle, and any strength that had been in them was gone. For the first time, she wondered whether she would survive.

The hours passed like a bad dream. Mina drifted in and out of consciousness, no longer certain what was delirium and what reality. Ethereal voices sang at the very edge of her hearing, keeping time to an unearthly music. The fire inside her grew, until she felt as though tiny jets of flame must be coming from every pore in her skin. But the pitcher, its water long since warmed to the summer heat of the room, seemed impossibly far out of her reach.

She was drifting, half in hallucination, when she heard the faint creak of the door opening. Her head felt like a leaden weight as she turned to look. Surely it was too early for Abby to be back.

The black youth, who had fought off the invisible dog, stood in the doorway, cradling his crippled companion in his arms. The older man looked furious about something, his mouth drawn into a tight line. "She *would* have to live upstairs," he grouched, waving an angry arm at nothing.

Sweat dripped down the other's face. "Don't do that! You aren't exactly light as a feather, old man."

"Stop complaining, Bryan. We're here to help."

Mina stared at them in bewilderment, certain that this was some bizarre fever dream. The youth rolled his eyes and lurched across the room with his burden. His boot struck the edge of Mina's mattress, and she realized suddenly that they were all too real. She tried to sit up, or at least roll away from them, but her strength had deserted her. All she could manage was to bare her teeth and hiss, like a cat protecting its territory.

"No need to be afraid," the older man said mildly. "We won't harm you." He held up a battered doctor's bag, as if it constituted proof of his good intentions. "Prop me up against the wall by her pallet, Bryan, where I can reach her arm."

Bryan obeyed. Once he was settled, the man laid a cool hand on Mina's forehead. "My name is Duncan RiDahn, if you've forgotten," he said conversationally. His voice was deep and rich, and he spoke as if he had come straight from the university. But his jacket was old and patched, the elbows worn thin and the collar sadly frayed.

His long-fingered hands slipped down to her wrist and began to unwind the bandage. Unable to pull away, Mina closed her eyes to avoid seeing the wounds. Bryan's horrified gasp came to her clearly enough.

Duncan clucked his tongue. "Nothing that can't be taken care of. But first we have to do something about *that*."

Mina opened her eyes and found that he was pointing at the iron collar around her throat with a look of extreme distaste. Bryan reached into the doctor's bag and drew out a small hacksaw.

"What the hell?" she gasped, jerking away from them. "What are you doing?"

"I can't help you while you wear iron," Duncan said, as if the comment were self-explanatory. "You do want help, don't you?"

They were obviously both madmen. "Why won't you help me with the collar on? They'll put me in prison if you take it off!"

Duncan touched her forehead lightly, as if soothing a nervous animal. She tried to draw back but was too weak to do so. He saw her small movement and dropped his hand quickly. "There is venom in the bite of the Hounds. If it isn't drawn out, it will kill you. I can help you, but not if the collar is in place. Will you allow Bryan to remove it?"

Mina closed her eyes. The room spun beneath her, and everything seemed distant and distorted. She felt sick, so sick, and it was hard to think about what might happen tomorrow. Or about what made sense and what didn't.

"Do it, then."

The hacksaw made a hellish noise as it sawed through the weld on the back of the collar. The iron was of poor temper, and it snapped long before Mina thought that it would. Bryan carefully pulled it away, and for the first time in eight years Mina felt the collar's weight gone from her neck.

"Very good," Duncan said soothingly. "What is your name?"

"Do what you're going to do," she whispered hoarsely, ignoring his question.

Duncan nodded and took her hand loosely in his own, the gesture oddly comforting. He pressed the fingers of his other hand against the wounds, sending a sharp stab of pain up her arm. After a moment, the burning sensation around the bites began to ease, and soothing coolness took its place. He closed his eyes and bent over her arm, a little line of concentration springing up between his brows.

With nothing better to do, Mina studied his face. His features were narrow, ascetic, except for a startling aquiline nose. A pair of gold-rimmed glasses with small, round lenses gave him a scholarly look, which matched his cultured accent. He wore his long hair caught back in a tail, except for a lock to either side of his face that had escaped the binding. Silver streaked its light brown, and she guessed that he was looking at the wrong side of fifty.

He caught her staring at him as he came out of the trance-state he seemed to have slipped into. The irises of his wide eyes were a soft blue-gray that probably shifted hue depending on the colors around them. His wide mouth quirked into a sudden smile.

"Are you feeling any better?" he asked.

She nodded, surprised to find that it was true; the fire that had raged through her veins was gone. "What did you do to me?"

He only shook his head. "Keep the wounds clean so that they don't become infected. And as for your missing collar..." He trailed off as he began poking around in the apparently bottomless doctor's bag. A moment later, he drew out a cheap brass necklace, one short enough that it would encircle a neck in much the same way that the collar had. Duncan held it up, as if exhibiting some oddity about it. Then the chain was gone, replaced by an exact replica of her collar.

"What the hell?" she breathed, awed.

He leaned over, awkwardly fastened it around her neck with one hand, while keeping himself from

tipping over with the other. Bryan looked anxious, but seemed to know better than to offer assistance.

Even though Duncan's movements were those of a man fastening a chain, the necklace *felt* like her old iron collar. Once he was done, Mina ran her fingers along its surface, and found only a crude weld in the back.

She swallowed heavily. "What did you do?"

Duncan gave her an impish grin that removed years from his lined features. "Magic."

He gestured imperiously at Bryan, who lifted him with a look of long-suffering patience.

They were leaving, Mina realized in shock—simply walking out, as if they hadn't waltzed in and turned everything she thought she knew about reality upside down.

"What do you mean, *magic*?" she called frantically. "I don't understand!"

Duncan gestured for Bryan to stop. "You are very weak right now," he said quietly. "Spend the rest of today in bed, sleeping as much as you can. If you still want to know tomorrow, come to the Angel's Shadow Theater on Mummers Street. I'll explain everything then."

"Oh." She watched them ease out the door. "My name's Wilhelmina Cole."

The last thing she saw of Duncan was his smile.

CHAPTER THREE

Mina stood outside the Angel's Shadow Theater and wondered whether she had come to the right place. The theater's name was engraved on a slab of granite above the main doors, impossible to mistake, yet the building had obviously been abandoned for some time. Paint peeled from its wooden walls, its windows were boarded up, and drifts of trash had collected around the columns out front. The marquee proclaimed that "The Inn at Donlauden" was currently being performed, but the words were so badly weathered that they were hard to make out.

The rest of Mummers Street had suffered a similar fate. The thoroughfare nestled in the wide bend that the Blackrush made through the east side of the city, terminating in a bridge at either end. It looked as though it had been a popular area at one time, lined with theaters, galleries, and restaurants. However, affluence had moved on like a fickle lover, and now most of the buildings were either boarded-up or converted to shops selling second-hand goods.

Maybe there's another theater by the same name, Mina reasoned uneasily. But surely there wasn't another street with the same name, and she had walked up and down the length of this one without spotting another more likely prospect for her destination.

Feeling rather foolish, she walked up to the front doors and knocked. The heavy oak swallowed the sound instantly. A few pigeons took flight from the nooks at the tops of the ornate columns, startling her.

No noise came from within in response to her knock, and a heavy padlock discouraged any thoughts of prying open the doors. Swearing angrily to herself, she spun on her heel and started away.

"Hey! Wait up!"

She turned back and saw Bryan jog out from a narrow alley between the theater and its nearest neighbor. He was a few years younger than she and possessed of the sort of good looks that most women probably found irresistible. His brown hair was almost the same shade as his skin, and he wore it tied back with a red cloth at the nape of his neck. His clothing was nondescript: shirt, suspenders, and trousers that could have belonged to almost anyone who worked in the city.

He walked right up to her, his posture radiating an air of confidence that she thought some people would find charming and others annoying. "I wasn't sure you'd come, but Duncan seemed pretty certain of it."

"He didn't give me a hell of a lot of choice." Her hand stole unwillingly to what felt like an iron collar around her neck. "Why are we meeting here? If you think I'm going into an abandoned theater with you, you're crazy."

Bryan looked surprised. "This is Duncan's home."

"*This?*" She frowned skeptically at the dilapidated building. It didn't fit. Duncan's accent said educated. And his name, RiDahn, said nobility somewhere along the line.

Bryan shrugged. "Yeah, well, the old man's a little bit barmy," he explained affectionately. "But hell, he's lived in Dere for decades without the Hounds or anything else getting him."

He started off again, as if that explained everything. Mina hesitated, then shook her head and followed. They went around to a small side entrance that let onto a long hall lined with doors. Sunlight fell in dusty stripes from skylights, providing the only illumination. They walked the hall's length, passing an unlit open space on their right, which Mina guessed was the back of the stage. At the end of the hall, Bryan stuck his head in through a doorway, which looked as if someone had done an inexpert job of widening it.

For the wheelchair to get through, Mina realized.

"She's here," Bryan called cheerfully, beckoning her in after him. She hesitated, suddenly nervous about entering a small room where she might be trapped. *They had plenty of opportunity to do whatever they wanted yesterday,* she told herself uneasily. But still, she remained wary as she followed Bryan inside.

The room she found herself in was a study in chaos. Trinkets, knickknacks, and obscure junk stuffed it to bursting. The delicate cogs of clocks spilled off one table, while a shelf on the wall sagged under the weight of water-polished stones. Playbills emerged from a drawer too full to close. A telescope with a large dent in it teetered on its tripod, and a microscope lurked on a chemical-stained worktable. A score of chipped teacups and a profusion of pressed flowers filled the spaces between.

And everywhere there were books. Books piled on shelves, books stacked under tables, books spilling off chairs, so many that she felt a sort of awe to think that one person could have read so much. The air smelled of paper, ink, and the dust that accumulates on bindings.

All of the tables and shelves were oddly low, probably so that Duncan could reach them without trouble. Heavy copper bars had been bolted into the wall in various places, and thick cloth loops hung from the ceiling here and there, undoubtedly meant to help Duncan lever himself from his wheelchair into the over-stuffed wing-backed chairs.

Duncan was sitting in one of the chairs, perusing a book. If he had been able to stand, he would have been exceptionally tall. The upper part of his body looked slender but lithely muscled beneath his worn frock coat. But his long legs had wasted into skeletal thinness, so that his trousers hung on him like those of a scarecrow. He looked up quickly as she entered, shoving his spectacles farther up his nose.

"I'm glad you came, Miss Cole," he said gravely.

Mina moved hesitantly into the center of the room, careful to keep an eye on both of them. "You two act like you left me some choice."

He looked a bit rueful at that. "No. I don't suppose we did. How are you feeling? May I look at your wound?"

"Stop playing with me. I want answers. The Hound, the wound, the collar—either explain them to me right now, or I'm gone."

He cocked his head to one side. Delicate gold earrings gleamed in the shadows of his long hair. "Haven't you left something out? Didn't something else odd happen to you, before the Hound attacked?"

Her eyes narrowed in distrust. She'd been right—the incident at the factory *had* drawn them to her. "You are the one supposed to be answering *my* questions, not the other way around."

He sighed, holding up his hands in a gesture of peace. "Of course. Will you have a seat? Just move the books out of the chair."

"I'll stand."

His mouth twisted slightly in annoyance. "As you wish. Bryan, if you'd be good enough to make us all some tea?"

Bryan nodded and left the room, probably heading back to a kitchen somewhere else in the building. Duncan watched him go, and then gravely folded his hands together in his lap. "Tell me, Miss Cole, what do you know about the fae?"

A bark of surprised laughter escaped her. What had Bryan said—that Duncan was a bit barmy? "I didn't come here for faery tales."

"Humor me a moment."

She shrugged. "Not much. My mother didn't have time for silly tales, and they don't tell you bedtime stories at an orphanage. I know that the fae were supposed to be human-like, some of them at least, but immortal and with strange powers. They once ruled Niune and the other islands, before humans came. But that was a long time ago. If they ever did exist, they're all gone now."

Duncan studied his ink-stained fingers as though they were no part of his own body. "Not precisely. The fae did not die out, but as their numbers waned, most of them withdrew from human lands, until the greatest of them linger only in castles deep beneath the hills. The smaller fae are still about, but even they have become wary and seldom allow humans to glimpse them. But contact *does* happen yet. Sometimes humans stumble unwittingly upon a faery rade, or tumble into a faery ring. Others wander where they should not, in the forests and the wild places, and come upon them there. Some seek them out deliberately and make terrible pacts."

"What does this have to do with anything?"

"They say patience is a virtue, Miss Cole," said Duncan with a look that reminded Mina of a reproofing schoolmaster. "Although I spoke of fae as being greater and lesser, that is not the true distinction. There are two basic types of fae: seelie and unseelie, with greater and lesser of each. Fae are elemental creatures, and seelie fae have dominion over fire and air, heat and light. The unseelie fae are creatures of earth and water, cold and night."

"They're evil, then."

Bryan came in with a tray laden with three mismatched cups and a steaming teakettle. He and Duncan exchanged a quick glance that Mina couldn't read.

"No," Duncan said firmly. "I don't believe that the fae understand either good or evil, not as humans perceive it. They simply follow their own natures."

"As I said before, sometimes the paths of humans and fae yet cross. Sometimes, the result of such a meeting is a child. We call such an offspring a faeling. The magic of the fae parent manifests in the faeling and in any of the faeling's own children, until the blood becomes too thinned. The way in which the magic manifests is unpredictable, however. Two faelings might have completely different powers, even if they possess the blood to the same degree."

It didn't take a university diploma to see where this was heading. Mina gave him a look to let him know that she wasn't taking his words at face value. "You're saying that's what I am."

"What *we* are," Duncan corrected her softly.

"You—both of you?"

Bryan passed Duncan a teacup, then offered one to Mina, which she refused with a quick shake of her head. Duncan cradled his cup in long fingers for a moment, and then held it out to her. "Take it."

Puzzled, she took it, and then jerked her hand back as the icy cup almost stripped skin from her palm. The cup fell to the worn carpet with a dull clunk, the tea inside frozen solid.

"I have a particular aptitude with cold," Duncan said quietly. "It's what helped me combat the fire the Hound left in your veins. Bryan understands earth and stone and growing things."

She looked over at Bryan, who perched on a stool by the cold hearth. He gave her his charming smile, and then reached out to the stone fireplace. His brown fingers sank into the rock as though it were mud, and then withdrew again without leaving any trace.

Mina stood still with shock. Suddenly her bizarre powers seemed trivial. "Is Bryan your son?"

Duncan seemed surprised by the question. "Good heavens, no. Bryan is my student."

"What do you teach?"

"I *attempt* to teach him how to use his powers to stay alive. Although I sometimes despair of the project."

Bryan only grinned and shrugged; this was obviously old ground for them.

Mina paced across the worn carpet, uncertain what to think or do, before coming to a stop in front of the cold fireplace. The mantelpiece was clear of the odds and ends that choked the rest of the chamber, understandable since it was far out of Duncan's reach. But someone had placed on it a small portrait in a gilded frame. The painting depicted a young woman dressed in a style that had been fashionable several decades ago. She was enchantingly beautiful, her delicate face surrounded by masses of red curls. The artist had managed to capture a mischievous gleam in her green eyes, in the set of her perfect little mouth. Mina wondered who she was, that she had earned such a prominent place in Duncan's home.

"What about the Hound? How does it fit into things?"

"There's more than what I've told you," Duncan said quietly. His cultured voice resonated off the close walls like the brush of velvet wings. "There have been faelings for centuries, and they have gotten along well enough. But in the past few decades, a war has begun. The seelie faelings have turned their powers against us and seek our destruction."

Cold touched her heart, and she spun to face him, putting her back to the solidity of the hearth. "*You're unseelie?*"

He gave her a puzzled look. "Of course. We are, as you are."

"I...am? Are you sure?"

He sighed. "Your favorite time of year is winter. You can bear the cold better than your peers, but summer heat often leaves you weak. You see better in the dark than anyone else you know, but your eyes sometimes have trouble during midday. You have an affinity for water and probably spend a lot of time staring into the Blackrush."

She stiffened. Not even Abby knew so much. "So?"

"So I could have described myself or Bryan just as easily. But it isn't just your unseelie tendencies that reveal you. I *felt* your power the other day. You must know that Bryan and I did not happen on you by accident—we were looking for you. Because we knew that the seelie faelings had felt it as well, and we knew they would send the Hound." He paused. "The blood...calls to the blood. Most faelings can't feel it on any conscious level, but it is there, drawing at us whenever we come close. The Hounds *are* aware of that pull, and they can use it to find you. I can sense it also."

Mina swallowed nervously, feeling a faint tingle of fear. "Will...will they send another Hound?"

Duncan removed his glasses and tiredly rubbed at his eyes. "I hope not."

"What will I do if this happens again? If another Hound comes?"

"You'll have to make certain that one doesn't. There are ways to hide, Miss Cole, even from other faelings. You can learn to use your power, and learn to disguise it as well. I can help you, if you so choose."

And there it was: the snare. "In return for what?"

Duncan gave her an odd look. "You seem to think that I want something for myself."

"I've yet to meet anyone who didn't."

His eyes strayed to the portrait above the fireplace. "Then let me just say that I have a debt to repay and that training as many faelings as I can balances out the scales somewhat. This training will not be easy for either of us. It will be demanding, both mentally and physically. And it isn't something that you can just quit when you grow tired of the discipline and the long hours. Your very life depends on it. Are you willing?"

She turned to Bryan, who sat loosely on his stool, looking as if nothing in the entire world could possibly bother him. "Is this the sort of training he's getting?"

"Yes, although Bryan is obviously more advanced."

Bryan grinned. "Never thought I'd hear *that* word in a sentence with my name," he said cheerfully. "You

know, while the old man's teaching you how to be a faeling and all that, I might be able to show you how to defend yourself a little. Fight with a staff, like I did with the Hound the other day."

Mina held herself very still, trying to think over her options. There weren't many. Either go home and hope to hell that nothing else ever came after her—and never be quite sure what might be lurking both in the outside world and within herself. Or agree to Duncan's request and do what she could to learn about faelings and magic, in the hopes of being able to protect herself should the time come.

Only the second option meant that she had to trust Duncan and Bryan, at least a little. And that muddied things up considerably.

Damn it. "What else am I going to do?" she asked bitterly.

Duncan looked sad. "I know that it seems you're being forced into something you don't want. Most of us feel that way. But you aren't alone."

"All right. What do you want me to do?"

"For today, go home and rest. If no other Hounds have pursued you thus far, you should be safe enough for another day. Come back tomorrow, and we'll get started with your training."

"I have to work for a living," she pointed out tartly. "I do a twelve-hour shift at the mill five days a week, half-days on Saturday."

Bryan spread his hands apart. "I work, too, in my aunt's shop. I come by here after closing, though. At least for an hour or two."

Duncan grimaced. "As you can see, my family fortune has brought me vast luxury, and I spend my days flogging the servants. Obviously I must seek my income as best I can, given my circumstances, so I am not insensible of the constraints on your time. Come in the evening, when you are free. I don't think I have to remind you that your life depends on it."

"You don't." She moved towards the door, feeling suddenly tired. "Tomorrow it is."

"Goodbye, Miss Cole."

"If I'm going to be your student, you might as well call me Mina."

"Bye, Mina," Bryan chirped enthusiastically. But as she slipped out, Mina saw that her comment had brought an oddly troubled look to Duncan's face, and his eyes strayed again to the portrait on the mantel.

~*~

Duncan relaxed into his chair and closed his eyes.

Madness. Every word he had spoken today had been madness.

He should *never* have offered to take Mina Cole on as a student. He knew the danger of doing so, and yet he hadn't stopped himself.

A part of that danger was very literal. His grandmother had been half-fae. The power she had wielded had been diluted by her human husband, and then diluted again when her daughter married another pure human, until in Duncan it was but a whisper of what it had once been. But Mina...she'd mentioned her mother but not her father, he'd noted. The man had almost certainly been pure fae, gifting his child with a heritage that was only half human. Duncan could feel Mina's power like wind against his skin. To witness

the unfolding of that power would be both majestic...and terrifying. His meager abilities were nothing but a breeze compared to her gale, and she could obliterate him with the slightest effort. That danger would be particularly great after a few weeks, once she had learned how to unlock her powers but not yet learned to fully control them.

But that wasn't the only reason he should think twice. He sighed, eyes going automatically to the portrait on the mantelpiece.

Aerin.

It had been thirty-five years since the night she had died, but sometimes he thought that a part of him was still there in that hideous night, frozen forever like an insect in amber. It had shaped every part of his life since, from the useless legs that confined him to the chair, to the guilt that ultimately drove him to take on students in the blind hope that he could save them from Aerin's fate.

In the blind hope of atoning for his crime.

But he had chosen carefully, so very carefully. Only the safe ones, the ones who wouldn't spark too many memories, who wouldn't leave his heart clenched in a seizure of guilt. The ones like Bryan, who in no possible way could ever remind him of Aerin.

Safe.

He couldn't say exactly what it was about Mina that threatened to call up all the dark wraiths of the past. Aerin had been cultured, educated, and wealthy. Her physical beauty had been nothing short of stunning, and her spirit had shone like a brilliant star in a velvet sky. She had loved to laugh and had viewed the future ahead of them with nothing but hope.

Mina...was none of those things. Certainly her nearly sexless body and square hands lacked the classical semblance of beauty. And as for her personality, she seemed to view the world with all the surly distrust of a wounded animal. Anger broke through the surface of her words far too easily, as though some rage burned inside, banked down to white-hot coals that might someday flare again.

And that collar, that horrible iron collar. Duncan shivered, not wanting to imagine what its touch must have been like for her. Even the glamour he had put on the brass chain was hard to look at. Difficult to see a young woman reduced to being an indentured worker—a factory slave. Still, by constraining her powers for so many years, and thus hiding her from the Court, the collar had probably saved her life.

But even with so many things to separate them, there was still something in her that recalled Aerin. Something in the stubborn lift of her chin, the defiant gleam in her brown eyes; as if she shared Aerin's recklessness.

"Why didn't you tell her?" Bryan had asked as he readied to leave. "Shouldn't she know about the Seelie Court?"

"Not yet," Duncan had replied reluctantly. "I would prefer her to believe the forces aligned against us to be nebulous, without individual names or faces. At least until I have a better idea of how she might react to the news."

Because she might react the same way that Aerin did.

And if she did, there would be another young woman's death laid to rest at his doorstep. Duncan didn't think he could survive that.

CHAPTER FOUR

Mina leaned her uninjured arm against the window molding, resting her head beside it. Dawn was just creeping into a world made over anew. Pigeons flew in heavy clouds from their nightly roosts, and the pig herds nosed into the streets. Newspaper boys carried their heavy loads to their corners, territorial as cats. A bent old woman sang a song about the muffins piled high in her handcart, and a chimneysweep paused a moment to buy one from her. The wind came from the direction of the Blackrush, carrying on it the smells of cooking food, rotting garbage, and privies.

Everything looked the same. But it was only superficial appearance; substance was transformed forever. It occurred to her that a mere four days had passed since the incident at the factory. Only four days to tear down the walls of reality and put them back up in a new configuration.

The world hadn't really changed, of course. And she hadn't changed either. She just hadn't known the truth until now.

It had to be Father, she thought, trying to picture a man she had never seen. If Mom had any magic, she wouldn't have ended up lifting her skirt in alleyways.

What am I going to do?

"Are you feeling all right?" Abby asked worriedly from behind her.

Mina turned around, with a wan smile that convinced neither of them. "Fine. I'm still tired from being sick."

"I can't believe how quickly you recovered."

"Yeah." Mina looked away. "It must not have been as bad as it seemed."

If only she could tell her friend. If only she could tell *someone*. But she had never been one for sharing her burdens with others. Maybe because some days it felt like her burdens were all that she truly owned.

And what would she tell Abby, anyway? There was nothing she could say that wouldn't sound completely insane. She might find some way of demonstrating the truth of her words, but what then? Would Abby accept that her friend was not even fully human, or would she recoil in revulsion? It was too much to risk.

The day at the factory seemed longer than usual. Even the half-hour lunch break dragged, when normally it flew by almost too quickly to eat. Mina listened to the conversations of the other girls, wondering for the first time why she had never been able to fit into their social circles. She'd always had problems making even casual friends; except for Abby, she couldn't think of anyone who truly cared whether she lived or died.

Could it be because I'm not really human? Can they sense my difference somehow?

The lightness around her neck troubled her as well. She didn't miss the iron collar—how could she? But she felt as though the hidden secret of its removal, not to mention the magical disguise, was a weight even greater than the one she had carried before.

When the factory bell finally tolled the end of the workday, Mina offered Abby a flimsy excuse about wanting to take a walk. It wasn't that unusual; Mina often went off by herself and drank after work. But

this time Abby gave her a strange look, perhaps sensing that something had changed.

Mina turned her steps towards Mummings Street and the abandoned theater, where Duncan lurked like a spider in a web. As she walked, the tolling of bells from the Cathedral of the Martyr came to her on the evening air. The cathedral's tall spire was just visible in the gathering gloom, rising above the other buildings like a finger pointing the way to God. Mina stopped, staring at it in silence. Like most factory slaves, she was unable to afford the rent on a pew. There had been a priestess who came weekly to the orphanage when she was growing up, but her strongest recollections of the sermons were of how bored she had been during them. For the most part, she didn't think much about God, and figured that She felt pretty much the same way about Mina Cole.

But even Mina had heard of the Miracles performed by the royal family. When Queen Catherine had returned from exile and driven the Grynithian usurpers out of Niune, God had shown Her approval through blinding light and flame. It was the mark of divine right, demonstrated first by Catherine, then by Queen Rhiannon. Presumably, Prince Roderick and his daughter would someday take up fire in their hands to prove their worth as the lords and protectors of Niune.

So good people were light and warmth. And the priestess had been very clear that the Great Enemy was a thing of darkness and cold, which sought to keep humans away from the true path. If Mina was an unseelie faeling, did that automatically ally her with the enemies of God?

Duncan said the fae don't understand good and evil the way we do, Mina reasoned uneasily. *Maybe the symbols of faith just don't apply to them.*

But the thought troubled her nonetheless.

The sound of a violin greeted Mina as she approached the side door of the theater. She stopped, listening curiously to the music. Not only was it no tune she had heard before, it was *like* no tune she'd heard before. Wildness suffused the notes, as if the song would suddenly degenerate into cacophony at any moment, yet somehow never did. Frantic desperation fueled it, twisted it into a cry of loneliness and rage. Her hands curled unconsciously into fists, and for a moment she imagined herself lashing out in time with the music, shattering the factory machines into dust, striking down the contemptuous faces.

The door opened, and Bryan's head popped out. "What are you doing standing in the alley, girl? Come on inside!"

She stepped in after him. The wail of the violin was closer now, and her heart lurched in a sympathetic attempt to beat in time with it. "What—who's that playing?" she stammered.

Bryan cast a glance over his shoulder. "Awful, isn't it? At least the old man has enough sense not to play like that on the street."

"That's Duncan?"

"Unfortunately. Playing the violin is how he makes most of whatever money he has. It lets him pretend that he's not *really* begging. Don't tell him I said that," Bryan added hastily. "Anyway, he plays the normal stuff on the street and saves his own compositions for his unfortunate students. Not to scare you away, but if you keep coming, you'll probably be treated to more serenades like this one."

Mina bit her lip uncertainly. "I like it."

Bryan gave her a look that suggested her sanity might be in question. The music stopped abruptly when they reached the sitting room. Duncan was in his wheelchair near the cold fireplace, violin and bow in his

lap. A smile of genuine pleasure transformed his lined face when he saw them.

"Wilhelmina," he said pleasantly, as if calling her 'Mina' would solicit too much familiarity. "How good to see you. Can I offer you anything? Tea?"

"Uh, no."

"How are you feeling today? Any pain? Headaches?"

She shook her head, uncomfortable being the center of attention.

Bryan perched on the stool by the fireplace. "If you feel good enough, I'll show you what I know with the staff. First, we'll have to find you one of your own, of course. I'm sure there's one laying around here somewhere, even if it's just a stage prop."

She eyed the one standing near his hand. "Why do you use that thing? Why not a gun?"

"Iron binds the fae," Duncan said. He had put away his violin and now wheeled across the room to them. "It doesn't actually *harm* faelings like ourselves, but it does dampen our powers. It's why I had to remove your, er...."

Her mouth twisted in shame. "Collar."

"Yes, quite," Duncan agreed uncomfortably. "As for guns, you don't want to bind your own powers while facing an opponent who has no such trouble."

"Oh," she said, feeling stupid. Duncan obviously knew his stuff; she must seem like an ignorant child to him.

"It's probably why you managed to escape detection by the seelie faelings for so long," Duncan went on. "Normally, faelings begin to manifest odd abilities around puberty. Would I be wrong in guessing that you have been able to call on your faeling nature only in times of great emotional stress?"

She remembered the screams of the girl as her arm vanished in the machinery in a wash of red. But earlier memories pushed up underneath: William's face, twisted with contempt, his words like acid dripping on her skin.

His body thumping on the factory floor below.

"You could say that," she agreed neutrally, fumbling out her cigarettes and matches. "Do you mind if I smoke?"

"Only if you avoid burning the theater down," Duncan replied dryly. "We should begin your training tonight, if you feel up to it. I will work with you today. Perhaps tomorrow you can start with Bryan."

Disappointment smothered anticipation. "I can't work with Bryan. I'm sorry—I want to. But I don't have a lot of clothes, and it doesn't look like I'll be getting any more soon. I can't destroy the only things I have to work in."

Duncan smiled and extended his hand to her. "Clothing is one thing you'll never have to worry for here," he said cryptically. "Let me show you."

He led her back along the wide hallway they had entered through, and then maneuvered through another doorway that had been hacked out wider than its original dimensions. Mina felt vaguely uncomfortable walking behind him, primarily because she towered over him so much. If he wanted to speak to her, he

would have to crane his head back and look up. She wondered if he was used to it, or if it bothered him as well. How long had he been confined to the chair?

The shadowy hallway ran towards the back of the building. They passed empty dressing rooms whose mirrors were festooned with cobwebs. Jars of makeup stood open on tables, as if the long-vanished actors would return at any moment to resume their production. A scattering of sequins and feathers decorated the floor of one room; no footprints—or wheel tracks—marred the dust to disturb them.

"No offense, but how did you end up living here?" she asked, peering up at the exposed rafters. "RiDahn sounds noble, and I'm guessing you went to the university. That takes money."

Duncan sighed. "You're right, of course. I was born, if not to great wealth, at least to a comfortable living that could afford me a good education. But after I came to Dere, the Seelie—the seelie faelings found the family that I had left behind in the countryside. They were all killed, and I dared not lay claim to any inheritance lest I follow them to the grave. I found myself destitute and had to take whatever shelter I could find, whether it was the back room of a student's apartment or a doorway that barely kept off the rain.

"The Angel's Shadow was abandoned during the yellow fever outbreak fifteen years ago. The sickness didn't actually come here, so far as I know. I suspect that the theater wasn't doing all that well financially, and when Queen Rhiannon ordered all places of public gathering closed, it took its deathblow. The order was sudden enough that no one had time to come back for anything valuable. And people were fleeing the city in droves anyway; the actors were probably no different. At the time, I was living in the basement of a burned-out building. The theater offered amenities I could get nowhere else."

"So you're really just squatting?"

His mouth twitched in obvious annoyance at either the term or the reminder. "Quite. Various students have helped me make modifications to it over time, as I'm sure you've noticed. And fortunately for me the gas was never turned off—I expect it was overlooked during the panic surrounding the fever. I've found that the theater and I suit one another rather well."

"But what about all the stuff in your sitting room? The telescope? The books? How could you afford them if you don't have enough money to find a place to live?"

"You don't hedge at asking impertinent questions, do you?"

Mina sighed. "Sorry."

"Never mind. The telescope and other oddments either came from the trash, or were brought to me by my students. The books are a remnant of my earlier life. I have thought about selling them from time to time, but I need them to teach. And some of them are rare enough that a sale might attract notice." He glanced up at her sternly. "All our lives depend on blending in and not drawing attention to ourselves, *Wilhelmina*."

He creaked to a halt before a closed door and shoved it open with a grand flourish. "Your wardrobe, Madame."

Puzzled, Mina peered through the doorway. Inside the large room were painted screens, coils of rope, wooden swords, masks, helmets, and javelins. And clothes—racks of clothes, mounds of clothes, clothes heaped over the backs of chairs and bursting out of trunks. She drew nearer, reached out to touch a dust-shrouded dress that looked four centuries out of date.

"Costumes. This is the prop room."

"Quite. You're free to choose anything you can find that will fit you, and that the moths and mice haven't gotten to first. No one is ever likely to want these old things again, so you won't have to worry about any rips or stains."

She paused awkwardly. "I...uh, thanks."

Duncan smiled again, a pleased look behind his gold-rimmed specs. "Of course. Bryan and I will wait for you. You'll probably have to do some searching before you can find anything fit to wear, so take your time."

It didn't take Mina nearly as long as she expected to find something serviceable. Although time and nesting mice had damaged some of the costumes, most were simply dusty. After sorting through heaps of dresses, military uniforms, and togas, she found what she was looking for. The black trousers and quilted black shirt looked to have belonged to some play featuring a swordsman from the East. There was even a quilted black coat that hung to her knees. Although the coat was too hot for now, it might serve in the winter.

Wiping gray dust from the black cotton, she wandered back out into the corridor. The sitting room was empty, but voices sounded from the direction of what she guessed to be the stage. She followed them, emerging between the dusty, rotting folds of a blue velvet curtain.

The huge room beyond was oddly eerie in its silence. Row upon row of empty chairs stretched away towards the upper tiers, occupied by nothing save shadows. Pigeons nested in boxes where the wealthy of the city had once sat. The proscenium arch was ornate, covered with gilded figures of men and women, but its once-bright colors were turned a uniform gray by dust. An enormous chandelier hung over the first rows of seats, its crystal draped in spider webs. The moldering curtain behind her moved slightly in some breeze she couldn't feel, as if ghostly actors hurried past.

The only illumination came from the grimy footlights. Duncan and Bryan loitered near the edge of the stage, talking and gesturing at its expanse. When Bryan caught sight of Mina, he grinned and nodded his approval.

"That'll do," he said. "We can train here—the stage will give us plenty of room."

She nodded, feeling suddenly nervous. "Good. What do I do first?"

Duncan rolled over to her. He started to put a hand to her elbow, as if to guide her back to the hall, but she flinched away quickly. His brows quirked together slightly, but he was too much the gentleman to make any comment. Instead, he simply held the decaying curtain out of her way. "Let's go back to the sitting room, where we can be comfortable. Bryan has agreed to halt his own lessons while I concentrate on teaching you the basics. He can use the time to practice everything he should already know."

Bryan winked at Mina, obviously not at all disturbed by Duncan's acerbic comment. Mina found that she envied the easy camaraderie between them. What it would be like, to feel so comfortable with another person?

They made their way back to the sitting room. Duncan wheeled over to one of the wing-backed chairs and levered himself into it with the ease of long practice and the help of the conveniently located bars and straps. "Bring the other chair over to face me, if you would," he said mildly. Once Mina had situated herself, he studied her face in silence, as if searching for some clue written on it.

"I believe I mentioned yesterday that every faeling has different abilities," he began at length. "A good part of our time together will be spent discovering exactly what you can and cannot do. Would you like to tell me what happened when you used your magic the other day?"

She had the feeling that it was not really a request. In a halting voice, she explained the accident at the mill and how she had caused the drive belt to break. She didn't mention her one previous use of magic, which had ended in death, for fear of his reaction. When she was finished, he sat silent for a time, contemplating what she had said.

"I think that you are very strong, Wilhelmina," he said finally. "I'm amazed that you were able to summon your magic at all, surrounded by iron machinery as you were. I don't know that I would have been able to do so."

"Oh," Mina said, not certain what response to make.

Duncan eyed her thoughtfully for a moment, and then gestured at the decrepit doctor's bag that sat open on the nearest table. "If you'd be so good as to fetch a jar from in there. The opaque white one."

She did as he asked and started to hand it to him, but he motioned for her to open it herself. It contained an innocuous-looking white cream that smelled faintly of herbs. "What is it?"

"It's how Bryan and I were able to see the Hound the other night. The potion will allow you to see through the glamour cast by other faelings—or by fae, for that matter. Take a small amount, and dab it into your left eye. It's perfectly harmless, I assure you."

The potion stung sharply, bringing tears to her eye. "Damn it," she swore angrily. Blinking rapidly against the pain, she turned accusingly back to Duncan, only to be confronted by a bizarre double-image. Through her left eye he looked perfectly normal. But her right eye insisted that a young dark-skinned man sat in his chair.

"What the hell?"

"I'm wearing a glamour," he said calmly. A moment later the illusion of the young man vanished, and the true figure of an aging cripple showed again through both eyes. "Your untouched eye was fooled by it, but the other saw the truth."

"Oh. Will I be able to do that? Make myself look different?"

"In time. But there are more important priorities. Wards, for example."

"Wards?"

"Yes. Think of them as a sort of armor that will hide you from other faelings when you use your powers. My wards are what prevented a Hound from sensing the magic I used and coming for me when I healed you the other day. You must learn to create wards first if you wish to do other magics without fear."

"You said that all faelings have different powers. What if I can't make wards?"

"Then you'll most likely die."

~*~

Mina walked slowly home along the banks of the Blackrush, her wards feeling weirdly tight against her skin. Every so often, she reached up a hand to brush at them uncomfortably, only to be even more

disconcerted when her fingers found nothing of substance.

The sun had long set, and gaslight glowed gently along the street. Newspapers blew across the cobblestones, trying to entangle her feet. A few other people moved about on foot, and a hansom cab occasionally passed with a clatter, but for the most part the city had gone quiet. She would pay for this late night tomorrow at work, Mina knew. But there would be no rest afterwards—she would have to be back at the theater yet again tomorrow night. Weariness ate at her bones, and she wondered dimly where she would find the strength to both work the mill and attend to Duncan's teachings.

Except, God, she was actually starting to think that it might be *worth* it.

She touched the simulacrum of the collar around her neck. Even though it felt the same, Duncan had taken away the real one. That meant something, even if it didn't change the circumstances of her life one whit. And on top of that, he was offering to let her read his books.

"You should take one or two of these with you," he'd said, gesturing at a bookshelf as Mina prepared to leave. "I usually ask my students to read these, if they can. They discuss the fae for the most part, their powers and their natures. They will help you understand a little bit about yourself, I think."

She'd hesitated, torn between desire and practicality. "I don't know that I can. For one thing, books aren't allowed in the mill. The overseers don't want us distracted from the work. Although some of the girls tear out pages of Scripture so they can hide them in their pockets."

"Absolutely not!"

"Um, no, I guess not. I can't take any books home, anyway. Abby will see them and want to know where they came from. And I can't imagine explaining all this to her."

Duncan gave her a troubled look. "No. Best that you don't mention this to anyone. We'll set aside a few nights for you to read while you're here, then."

Mina drew in a deep breath of cigarette smoke and tried not to be too elated. But after so many years of sameness, it was hard not to get excited over the sudden changes in her life, especially when they contained something so wonderful as books.

She started across Squatters Bridge, and then stopped at the peak of the arch, halfway between both banks. Folding her hands on the cold stone of the railing, she leaned idly over, peering into the river below. The peat-laden water looked like liquid night, the faint orange reflection of her cigarette lost in the restless pull of the river.

A silver ripple caught her attention, moonlight reflecting off the disturbance created by something moving under the water. Mina peered at it curiously, expecting to see a fish surface to snag some bit of floating debris.

Instead, the gray head of a horse broke the waves.

For an instant, she thought it was one of the innumerable carcasses that ended up in the Blackrush each year. Then the head moved, baleful white eyes coming to rest on her for a moment. The enormous nostrils flared, sending up a sudden spume of water. Mina blinked, and then realized that she was only seeing the animal out of her left eye, the one that could see through glamour.

With a slow, ominous movement, the horse head sank once again out of sight.

Duncan stared into the darkness of his unlit hearth and tried to suppress a shiver of dread. He had worried that it had been a mistake to offer his teaching to Wilhelmina Cole.

Now he was almost certain of it.

She was strong. God, but she was strong. She had picked up on the spell for the wards so easily, reaching out to the stones of the hearth and making their solidity and hardness her own, building the ward into a shield to conceal herself from all prying eyes.

He'd next asked her to try dampening a single flame, a basic exercise for any unseelie faeling. She'd put out every gaslight in the entire theater. The restless tides of the Blackrush flared in her eyes, as if she was something ancient called up from the cold mud of the river bottom.

His first instinct had been right. She was dangerous already. And the more she learned, the more dangerous she might become.

He shifted himself into his wheelchair and rolled thoughtfully into his bedroom. In the closet lurked a battered trunk, which held his most personal of possessions. He lingered over a lock of red hair, raising it to his face in a futile attempt to catch the scents of rainwater and flowers. Then he set the hair aside and drew out a half-crumbled book, so old that it had been hand-copied from the original long before the advent of the printing press.

Faelings had been more common in that time, before the bulk of the fae had withdrawn so far from humanity. This particular book had been written by a faeling living in Grynnyth. It told of a small community of others like him who had been drawn together by a half-fae woman.

The tale the book related was terrifying. The author had begun in bitter opposition to the woman, convinced that she was somehow using her power to steal the will of her fellow unseelie faelings, thus reducing them to mere puppets. The text referred to her as a *dyana*. The word had no equivalent in Niunish; roughly translated, it meant: "that which stands in the middle and draws all inward."

The author had somehow managed to uncover a charm that rendered him immune to the *dyana*'s influence. He fought against her for many years, until at last the charm was destroyed. The book ended with lavish praise of the *dyana*; the author himself could not conceive why he had once stood against her.

The story was frightening in its implication that, no matter how much a faeling hated a *dyana*, without protection he would be little more than her abject slave. *But is it true?* Duncan wondered uneasily. In his youth, he had believed. Had believed with all the fervor a priest reserves for God.

Or perhaps it had only been Aerin that he believed in, not the stories after all.

Aerin had been so sure, so *sure* that she was an unseelie *dyana*. She was going to use her powers for the betterment of their people, by unshackling them from the Seelie Court's terror. And Duncan had never questioned her certainty.

And if Aerin had been proved wrong, then surely the entire story was nothing but a myth, for he could not imagine that anyone else might possess such a power if she had not.

But.

He sighed, took his glasses off, and rubbed wearily at his eyes. He didn't want to admit the possibility that love had blinded him to Aerin's true power. He didn't think that he could have made that kind of mistake, no matter how infatuated he had been. But in all his years, he had never seen anyone else strong enough to fit the book's description.

Not until Wilhelmina Cole walked through his door.

Duncan opened himself to that extra sense, the one that had led him to her in the first place. The bond that he had formed between them should have faded by now. But if he breathed just right, he could still scent the rich darkness of her, could still feel that little tug just behind his breastbone that told him where she was with deadly certainty. There was no reason he could fathom for it to still be there, unless she had somehow unconsciously strengthened it, making it a permanent leash between them.

And what if your suspicions are right? he asked himself bleakly. What if this uneducated, angry factory slave can do what even Aerin could not, and make herself master of all the unseelie faelings in this city? What will you do then? Kill her?

He closed his eyes bleakly. *Let me be wrong. Please, God, let me be wrong.*

CHAPTER FIVE

"You saw the *aughisky*," Duncan confirmed the next evening, when Mina told him about the strange horse swimming in the Blackrush. "Its kind is mentioned in several old texts. Apparently they come onto land and linger around riverbanks and pond sides, using their glamour to disguise themselves as ordinary gray ponies."

"But it already looked like a gray horse," Mina objected.

Duncan cocked an eyebrow at her. "True. But most people would be hesitant at approaching a monstrous horse with glowing white eyes and carnivore's teeth. The easiest glamours to maintain are those closest to reality. At any rate, as soon as anyone mounts a disguised aughisky, it rushes into the water. The unfortunate rider is drowned and devoured. Children are particularly susceptible to the trick, I understand. I suspect that this one is responsible for a number of the partially-eaten bodies found in the river."

Mina suppressed a little shiver of dread. She was curled up in the overstuffed chair in Duncan's sitting room, feet tucked beneath her. A cup of tea, brewed by the ever-cheerful Bryan, steamed in her hands. "I thought those were just stories to sell papers. Or else drunks falling in the river and getting eaten by fish."

"Many are, undoubtedly. I suspect that this aughisky has adapted to living in the city by being a bit stealthier in its movements. It probably knows that it just has to drift up and down the river looking for intoxicated men."

Mina stared down at the leaves floating in the bottom of her cup. She wondered what message they spelled for her tonight. "I thought...that is, I didn't think there were any true fae in Dere."

Duncan gave her a look of surprise through gold-rimmed spectacles. "And whatever gave you *that* impression? Oh, there aren't many, that's true. Most of the fae fled centuries ago, when the city first rose, seeking wilder places in forests and glades. But a few found living among humans to be to their taste and have adapted quite well. You may see them from time to time, near the river or the market. *Don't* go near them under any circumstances. They're dangerous, and they're strong, and they don't care if you're the offspring of one of their own."

Mina smiled crookedly. "Don't worry. I think the Hounds are bad enough—I don't want to meet up with anything worse."

Duncan smiled back and seemed to relax, as if she had just relieved him of some burden. "I'm glad to hear that. Perhaps you would like to begin with Bryan tonight?"

"Sure." Eagerness flashed through Mina, and she rose quickly, dusting off the faded black clothes that she would fight in. The magic was new and still a little scary, but this—this she understood.

Bryan grinned at her excitement, took a second staff from beside his, and handed it to her. Its weight and heft felt good in her hands.

"Let's get at it, then," he said.

~*~

Duncan sat quietly in the shadows cast by the heavy draperies. Bryan and Mina had not heard him over the clack of the staves, the muffled grunts of their own breathing. They moved like actors upon the stage, illuminated by the dusty glow of the footlights, lunging and parrying.

The staff flew from Mina's hands, clattering away over the stage to land near the faded backdrop. Mina swore and turned to retrieve the weapon.

"You're doing well," Bryan called encouragingly. "You've got strength and agility. It'll take a while, but I think you'll really get good at this. Maybe we should stop for tonight."

Mina bent and picked up the staff. "No. I've *got* to get this right." A look of rage transformed her fox-pointy face, and her mouth tightened into a hard line of suppressed fury that left Duncan's heart cold. Then she turned back to Bryan, her features smooth and unremarkable once again. "Let's go over that last one again."

~*~

"She's driven, I'll give her that," Bryan said later, wiping sweat off his brow.

Duncan nodded, glancing automatically towards the door through which Mina had recently departed. "Yes." He hesitated, uncertain. "Perhaps we should introduce her to the others. It might help her to know that there are others like her besides ourselves." *And, if my other suspicions about her are correct, it might help for her to know that they are people just as real as she is. Then again, dare I bring them into her sphere of influence?*

It was a risk—a big one. But surely he would know if she tried to bespell them. He unconsciously touched the amulet hanging about his neck, hidden away beneath the worn and patched shirt. Some of the ingredients were prohibitively expensive, and he'd only had the means to make one. The thought of being unable to protect his students as well galled him.

Of course, all his ideas about Wilhelmina Cole might just be paranoid fantasies on his part, which seemed rather likely, no matter how strong she might be.

"So you're going to tell her about the Seelie Court, then?" Bryan asked.

Duncan remembered that look of rage he'd seen on her face, when she'd thought no one else was watching. What was she so angry about? Her lot in life? The danger that made it necessary for her to learn how to defend herself against ravaging Hounds? Or something else?

"Not yet," he hedged.

Bryan shook his head in obvious disapproval but said nothing.

~*~

Mina fished in her pockets, searching for any scrap of coin. It was a lovely Saturday afternoon, which she had managed to beg off from Duncan with the very legitimate excuse of needing to tend to the more mundane things in her life. This morning before work, she and Abby had eaten the very last grains of their oatmeal, and no food of any kind remained in the apartment. It would be another week until they were paid.

Abby had only sighed and slumped dejectedly. "I think we're going to have to get credit at the company store," she said.

Mina had frowned angrily. "Those usurers? We'll never get out of that hole once we climb in."

Abby's dark eyes flashed suddenly. "Really? Maybe you should have thought of that before you wasted half your pay on cigarettes and alcohol! We need that money for food, damn it!"

Mina winced, knowing that Abby's accusation was just. Although she hadn't had the opportunity to go back to the tavern since the night the Hound had attacked her, she had not exactly slaked off in terms of cigarettes. In fact, she had caught herself smoking even more than before, trying to soothe nerves frayed by the images of unseen pursuers.

"Then it's up to me to remedy things," Mina said quietly.

"No." A line of concern formed between Abby's dark brows. "Mina, please, don't do anything foolish. We can borrow from the company."

"Don't worry, I'm not going to be on my knees in some alley."

"Are you going to do something illegal, then?"

Mina hesitated. "Not what you're thinking. Trust me, all right?"

Abby continued to frown. "Are you going to ask this man of yours for help?"

"I don't have a man."

"Then where have you been going every night this week, huh?"

"I told you. I just need some time by myself. To think."

Abby clearly didn't believe her. "Are you using a preventative, at least?"

Mina rolled her eyes. "There isn't a man! I'm not going to get knocked up again! Trust me!"

Abby shrugged. "All right."

Now, Mina scowled at the memory as she made her way towards the small open market that peddled to those living in Iron Circle, the section of Dere where she resided. The area was mostly comprised of tall tenements packed with factory workers who dwelt there at the pleasure of their employers. The omnipresent pig herds ran through the garbage-choked streets, ignoring the occasional growls of the feral dogs that also roamed the alleys and byways. Homeless men and women huddled in doorways or sold trinkets that they had scavenged from the trash. But at least, Mina thought sourly, they hadn't ended up in debtors' prison, never to see the light of day again. Though whether or not they would think the trade a

fair one, she didn't know. At least in prison you were fed and had a roof over your head.

The market was small and crowded, sandwiched between an abandoned courthouse and several rows of large townhouses, which had been broken up into tenements. Vendors sang or shouted their wares:

"Pepperpot! Pepperpot! Get it while it's hot!"

"Scissors to grind! Knives to grind! We grind anything!"

"Hot corn! Lily-white corn!"

A teamster tried to navigate his cart through the narrow aisles, upsetting a stand of dried fruit and sending chickens flying. A guttersnipe took advantage of the opportunity to dart in and begin stuffing the fallen wares into his pockets. A moment later, he was running from a stick broom that the vendor began laying indiscriminately on him and the teamster alike.

Mina took a deep breath, smelling the scents of cooking food and rotting vegetables, of beer and piss, dung and spices. She slipped one hand into her pocket, fingering the small stones she had picked up on her way there from the factory. Nervousness tightened her belly and made the disguised chain around her neck weigh heavy as a real collar.

Truthfully, she didn't know whether this would even work. Duncan had only begun to show her how to cast glamour. What if there was something she didn't know? What if something went wrong?

Don't do anything to attract attention, Duncan had warned again and again. If her spell went awry, then it was likely there wouldn't be anyone in the entire market who didn't know what had happened by the end of the day.

It's worth the risk. I know what I'm doing.

Taking a deep breath, she stepped up to the first vendor, a wizened old woman selling sacks of flour brought in from some small mill outside the city. The woman fixed sharp eyes on her and thumped the nearest sack, so that a small white cloud rose up into the air. "Finest meal in Dere," she swore in a voice like a crow cawing. "As white as anything to be found in the royal kitchens!"

Mina rather doubted the truth of that statement, and said so. They haggled back and forth for a while, until finally settling on a price. Her belly twisting itself into knots, Mina dug the stones out of her pocket, laying glamour over them as she did so. Copper flashed in the afternoon sun as she counted out the false coins for the woman and accepted the small sack of flour in return.

After about an hour's shopping, she hoisted her purchases in her arms and started back towards the apartment. Leaving the market, she took the route along the Blackrush, breathing in the stinking scent of the garbage-laden waters. She wondered if the aughisky slept in the depths during the daylight hours.

"Hello, child. Been trying out your powers, I see?"

Mina stopped, heart pounding at the sound of the silken voice. Looking frantically about, she spotted a tall man standing in the shadows of a bridge. "I don't know what you're talking about."

He laughed softly. "Don't insult me." He moved out of the deeper shadows, as if to give her a better look at him. He was dressed all in black, archaic clothes that had gone out of style centuries before. Their darkness contrasted sharply with the long curls of his golden hair. His features were strikingly handsome—but were by no means human.

She swallowed against a sudden lump in her throat. "I've been warned not to talk to fae."

"Have you, now?" He grinned, revealing small, vicious teeth. "Perhaps whoever warned you feared what I might have to tell you, eh?"

She felt cold even in the painful blaze of summer heat that surrounded her. "I won't let you trick me."

The man chuckled. "As you will. But ask yourself what it is that they aren't telling you." The fae turned away, then glanced rakishly back over his shoulder. "And then ask yourself what they're *afraid* to tell you."

And with that, he was gone, as if the cool shadows beneath the bridge had simply swallowed him.

~*~

Mina thought she would tell Duncan about the strange encounter that she'd had that afternoon. But instead she found herself watching him over the pages of the book he had her reading, wondering what secrets might lurk in his blue-gray eyes. *Ask yourself what they aren't telling you*, the fae had said. On one level, she recognized that she'd be a fool to listen to the soft words of a creature that most likely had nothing good in mind for her. Or, if it troubled her so, she should simply confront Duncan and ask him if there was anything he had held back.

But the words stuck on her tongue. If Duncan and Bryan were keeping things from her, wouldn't they simply lie about it?

She had no experience in these things, she realized bitterly. She had passed her life with the casual acquaintances of orphanage and factory, none of which had ever been close enough to trust. Then William had come along, teaching her that trust was nothing but stupidity and love nothing but lies.

There was Abby, of course. But Abby was so open and, in her own way, innocent, that deception never appeared to occur to her under any circumstances.

Duncan was not Abby. Mina could all but feel the secrets he held close about him, dusty decaying things like the stage curtains of his home. There was much she didn't know about him still: what accident had rendered him crippled, how his family's secret had been discovered, the exact circumstances surrounding his fall from nobility to homeless street-musician.

She watched him while he read, his gray-streaked brown hair like an unraveling scarf over the shoulders of his faded coat. Gaslight limned the profile of his thin, aquiline nose and generous lips, and shadows smoothed away the fine network of wrinkles that framed his eyes and mouth.

It occurred to her suddenly that she wanted very much to trust him.

He glanced up, as if feeling the weight of her gaze on him, and Mina hurriedly looked back down at her own book, embarrassed.

"Did you have a question?" he asked mildly.

She looked up, shocked. "What?"

His brows quirked together, but he only gestured at the ancient text she held in her hands. "Did you have a question about the manuscript?"

"Oh. Uh, no."

Duncan continued to watch her for a moment, until the silence that stretched between them felt uncomfortably heavy. Then he shook his head, as if dismissing a thought. "I have asked the other unseele faelings to come here tomorrow night, so that you can meet them."

She blinked. "Meet them? There are more?"

He gave her an impatient look. "Of course there are more. I have taught faeling students for thirty years in this city. A few have even survived."

Mina winced at the bitterness in his voice. "Oh. I'm sorry."

"No matter." Duncan sighed, removed his spectacles, and rubbed tiredly at his eyes. "I think that it would be good for you to meet them, and they you. I have done more than teach, Wilhelmina. I have tried to build a community of sorts. We must all rely on one another if we are to survive. My students help each other in any way that they can. They take care of one another. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Good." He gestured vaguely towards her book. "Perhaps you should finish that before you go home tonight."

She nodded and bent her head back over the faded pages. And she suddenly wondered whether or not Duncan trusted *her* at all.

~*~

The next night, Mina walked briskly past the market, on her way to Mummies Street. The dim stars of summer were just emerging from the blue-black sky, and a faint red glow lingered in the west. The heavy blanket of heat that held the city in its grip had lifted only slightly, and Mina wondered nervously whether or not this would be a fever year.

She remembered the last one far too well: the smell of the corpses in the streets, the reek of smoke from the fires that burned to chase away the miasma of sickness, the deathly silence that hung over the city. The factory had closed, along with every other place where people congregated in large numbers, leaving workers without the means to either get food or pay off their indentures. She had been terrified that the constables would come to take them all to prison long before the mill opened again. But it seemed that, in the season of sickness, even the police were reluctant to be out and about, and the danger had passed her by.

She shivered a little despite the heat of the evening. Perhaps Duncan knew a spell to keep away the fever. That would be useful.

A faint step on the pavement of the deserted market square caught her attention. Startled, she pivoted on her heel. To her right eye, nothing was there. But to her left, a man stood behind her. For a moment, she thought it was another fae, come to torment her like the first. But some gut-deep instinct told her otherwise, and the hair on her neck stood straight up.

The man was pale as a corpse drained of blood. His hair might have been blond, but it bordered close enough on white that she couldn't tell in the darkness. A white tunic embroidered with silver hung over his spare frame, completed by white pants and boots. Blue eyes stared at her, but the look in them was as dead as the expression on his slack features.

Mina took a step back, and then whirled as she heard a second sound behind her. Another man, almost identical to the first, appeared from behind the stalls. A third emerged and a fourth followed; from his

hands dangled silver leads, attached to collars around the throats of two enormous Hounds.

I can't let them circle me, Mina thought with an odd clarity. She dove for the open space where the two halves of the trap had yet to close. For an instant, she thought she would make it through. Then one of the men whipped up the blunt end of a bronze-tipped halberd, catching her hard on the chin. Explosions of light flowered briefly in her vision, and she felt the ground swing up to slam into her body.

Then hands were grabbing her. She screamed, trying to twist away, but they held her tight. Cold iron kissed her wrists, and she heard the dry click of manacles snapping into place.

CHAPTER SIX

"Would you care for more tea, Fox?" Duncan asked. "It would be no trouble for Bryan to make."

Fox looked up from where she was repetitively knotting and unknitting a tangle of string between her fingers. He thought that she might have been attempting cat's cradles, but it was difficult to tell. Fox's mind was labyrinthine on her best days.

She had appeared shortly before noon, an expensive shawl of plum velvet wrapped around her waif-thin shoulders. Her mahogany hair had come unbound, and a comb glittering with jewels hung from the snarled elflocks.

"I'm here," she'd mumbled, mad eyes wide.

Duncan didn't bother to ask how she'd known he had sent for the other unseelie faelings of the city. Fox's powers were odd and unpredictable at the best of times. He also didn't bother to point out that she was a good eight hours early for the meeting.

Nor did he ask how she had slipped away—any questions about her home served only to upset Fox into incoherence. Most likely she left a changeling behind. If his guesses were true, and the family kept her locked away with only a hired nurse for company, the substitution wasn't likely to be noticed for a very long time. Possibly never.

Fox had spent the day hiding with him in the theater, her legs folded up in the ashes of the hearth as she swayed back and forth, playing with her string and muttering to herself in a singsong voice. Bryan's cheerful, "Hullo, Fox" had roused her momentarily as the day darkened to evening, but she had immediately retreated from them again.

Bryan came in and leaned against the wing-backed chair that enfolded Duncan's thin body. "What are you making, Fox?" he asked.

"I see her," Fox whispered, staring at the tangle of red, white, and black threads. "I see her in my little web."

"Who?"

"The queen."

Duncan and Bryan exchanged uneasy looks. "Rhiannon?" Duncan asked.

Fox shook her head in annoyance. "No." She leaned closer, peering at something only she could see. "Look out for the pretty boys. Run away!"

Duncan tried to think how to best pose his question. Fox could be frustratingly literal at times, or else give an answer totally unrelated to any question. "Fox, can you describe this girl to me?"

Fox gave him a puzzled look. "You know what she looks like," she said reprovably.

Intuitive dread gripped Duncan. "Mina?"

But Fox only looked confused. She had never met his newest student. "A young woman," Duncan tried again, starting to feel desperate. "Probably wearing a man's shirt and pants. Hair cut short."

Fox nodded soberly. "That's her. She did something bad. Now they're going to make her stay in the house with the pretty windows."

Duncan met Bryan's worried gaze. "The Seelie Court. They must have found her somehow." His hand curled into a fist.

"Then we've got to do something!" Bryan exclaimed.

For a moment, Duncan hesitated. Sense argued staying put, Bryan's thoughtless gallantry aside. Mina was certainly not the first unseelie faeling to run afoul of the Court; all those who had gone before her had been lost. The Court did not willingly give up its victims, and to go to her rescue would most likely end in three deaths rather than simply one.

Aerin. What did he intend to do, he asked himself bitterly. Remain in safety while another young woman died? Perhaps he would put a sketch of her up beside Aerin's portrait, make of the mantelpiece a shrine to his cowardice.

"Mina is my student," he said aloud. "I have some responsibility to her. Fox, can you take us to the place you saw?"

Fox's lower lip pouted out. "Hounds are there. I don't like Hounds."

"I know, my dear. I promise that you won't have to go near the Hounds, all right? Just show Bryan and me where they've taken Mina."

Fox thought about it for a moment, then nodded. Bryan ran to get his staff and coat, and Duncan made to shift himself into his wheelchair.

Not again. They took Aerin, but I'll be damned before I let them have Mina as well.

~*~

Mina slowly became aware that she was lying on something cold and hard. A gritty surface dug into her cheek, and her muscles were cramped. She tried to move, but the heavy drag of iron held her down. Startled, she opened her eyes and discovered herself lying on the floor of a tiny cell. Iron manacles laced together her wrists, ankles, and throat.

Where the hell am I? Her brain moved sluggishly, trying to sort back through memories that had been reduced to a hazy fog. She had been walking through the market on her way to Duncan's. She'd heard a noise behind her and turned around. There had been strange men and Hounds...then things got confused.

Her heart went cold. Hounds. The servants of the seelie faelings who Duncan claimed wanted to kill every unseelie faeling in Niune.

So why wasn't she dead?

Mina tried to sit up, making sure that all her parts worked the way they were supposed to. The iron chains made a hellish amount of racket that must have gotten someone's attention, because the judas in the heavy wooden door shot open at just that moment. Eyes blue as summer stared in at her.

"Hello?" Mina said uncertainly. "Where am I? Why am I here?"

The judas closed again. Mina's shoulders slumped, and she leaned back against the cold rock wall, then tried to scramble up again as the door creaked slowly open. The chains entangled her legs, nearly making her fall.

Two of the pale, bizarre men stepped in. Their faces, blank as snowdrifts, revealed nothing. They grabbed her by each arm. She tried to struggle, but her bonds were too tight and they, too strong. They dragged her from the cell and down a narrow hall into a large room of undecorated stone. Several other guards waited there, all of them with the same bleached hair and eyes.

A man stood in the midst of the automaton guards, a bright splash of color among dreary white.

He turned to face her, and her breath caught in her throat. Through her right eye, he appeared to be a handsome man dressed in the richest clothes she had ever seen. But through the left eye, he was not even human. The bones of his face were misshapen, some oddly elongated and others oddly shortened. His green eyes were without either white or pupil, and his mouth was full of small, sharp teeth.

"What are you?" Mina blurted out.

One of the guards struck her hard across the face. His mailed fist split her lip and left scratches and bruises on her cheek. Reeling, she forced herself to stand upright, determined not to appear weak.

The finely dressed man smiled thinly. "You will not speak unless you are asked a question. Besides, I would have expected that you would know me. I am *very* disappointed that you do not. My portrait appears in the newspapers all the time. Although I suppose it's doubtful that a slut like you can even read."

His portrait? Blinking back the haze that seemed to originate in her pounding head, Mina concentrated on the vision from her right eye. The lovely man of the glamour was indeed familiar. But it took her a moment to put a name to the face.

"You've disguised yourself as Prince Roderick!" she hissed.

He looked at her in surprise, and then laughed loudly. "Stupid cow. I *am* your prince."

Cold fear trickled through her blood. This creature, made human only by a thin veil of glamour, could not be the true Prince. He was lying to her for reasons she couldn't imagine. He had to be. The creature wearing Roderick's face slunk across the flagstones, until he stood only a few inches from her. For a moment, he looked at her like a man studying something unpleasant in the gutter. Then he reached out and grabbed her chin, forcing her face up. His long nails dug into her skin.

"So, you are indeed unseele. Hard to say how strong with all this iron about." He jerked his hand away, wiped it fastidiously on a handkerchief. Replacing the handkerchief in his pocket, he drew out a cheap brass chain. "And disguised as a factory slave. No doubt to throw us off the track with the iron collar."

Mina recognized the chain Duncan had given her, its glamour now gone. "No, I really am inden—"

The guard struck her again, a brutal blow that drove her to her knees. Tears streamed out of her eyes, and she tasted blood in her mouth.

"Well, well, the unseelie bitch does seem eager to talk," Roderick remarked idly. "The queen doesn't believe that there are more of you in the city. But you're obviously too stupid to have survived this long on your own. There must be more unseelie faelings. You will tell me everything about them."

She bit her lip, more scared than she could ever remember being. "There isn't anyone else. Just me."

Roderick let out a bored sigh. "Don't insult me, little gutter bitch."

Mina drew in a long, shuddery breath. The fingers of her two guards seemed to drive into the flesh of her arms like pincers. Iron weighed heavy on her body and combined with the agony in her skull to sap her strength. "There was one. He taught me how to survive."

"Where is he now?"

"Dead. He was an old man. I swear it."

Roderick's fire-green eyes narrowed. "He must not have taught you very well. Trying to pass faery gold in the market—that was very, very foolish. Almost as foolish as lying to me now."

"I'm not lying!"

Roderick smiled, revealing fangs. "Somehow, I just don't believe you, sweetmeat."

He stepped back and made a negligent gesture. Two of the guards vanished back down the hall, only to return moments later, dragging a small boy with them. His arms and legs were stick-thin with hunger, and the burden of the iron manacles seemed great enough to break his bones. He stared about frantically, his eyes huge with confusion and terror.

"The Knights found this one begging outside the city gates today," Roderick said. He tapped his lips thoughtfully with a finger that had too many joints. "Just another unseelie by-blow. He was small enough to be of minimal danger but large enough to be entertaining, so I had him brought here."

Roderick snapped his fingers. Another door opened, and a guard led in a pack of snarling Hounds on silver leashes. When the animals caught sight of the boy, they went mad, baying and slaving. Roderick nodded, and the handler released them.

They were on the child in a moment. White fangs tore away an ear and a hunk of meat from his skull, revealing the bone beneath. That was all Mina had time to see before the Hounds bore his screaming form to the ground. A few moments later, his shrieks stopped, and a tide of blood rolled out around the Hounds' white paws.

Her stomach turned, and she vomited helplessly on the floor.

Roderick laughed. "You have a woman's delicate constitution, I see. Remember what happened here. Lie to me again, and I will do something far more unpleasant to you. Take her back to her cell, and let her think over her options."

~*~

"She knows something," Roderick said insistently. "I'm certain of it."

Rhiannon sighed and leaned back in her chair. She'd still been up when Roderick had returned to the palace, wild and flushed with his triumph. Unlike him, she'd always loved the night. It was in her nature.

She did not love being proved wrong, however, and it irked her that Roderick had been right about the

existence of unseelie faelings in her city. "Perhaps."

"I want to try the food."

"Roderick, you know how much effort it takes to create faery food."

"But if we do it, she will be ours. She can uncover every unseelie faeling in Dere—maybe in Niune!"

A shadow moved in the doorway. Rhiannon glanced at it, and then let out a low growl of annoyance at the thin girl standing there, half in light and half in shadow.

"Why are you up, Dagmar?" she demanded.

Dagmar shrank back a little. Her eyes—one green, the other brown—glinted faintly in the dark. Her hair was disheveled and hung tangled over her dress, the fine silk of which was creased and torn. Dagmar had been an experiment; one which Rhiannon was beginning to think had failed. The girl looked like something constructed of incongruent parts and, like Roderick, could only be seen in public under heavy glamour.

Of course, Rhiannon could only be seen under glamour as well, but that had to do with the fact that she was not who everyone thought she was, and not because her inhuman heritage showed so badly. A shame, really, that she'd had to take on the likeness of her dowdy stepsister, when her own face and body were so beautiful.

"No reason," Dagmar muttered. Rhiannon sighed and wondered if it wouldn't do to put Roderick to stud with some human woman, or perhaps another seelie faeling. But that would mean inventing another bride for Roderick, Dagmar's fictitious mother having been killed off at her birth. It might be better to fake her own death, let Roderick assume the throne, then dispose of their daughter and take her place. Rare half-fae failed to age with the passing of time; since Rhiannon was fortunate enough to possess that gift, she could take the throne again in another twenty or thirty years.

Dagmar turned and ran, as if seeing her mother's dark thoughts written on the air.

Rhiannon sighed and turned to her lover. "If you are so certain that the girl knows something, then go ahead."

Roderick nodded and smiled. "Will you help me prepare the food?"

"If I must." She lingered a moment after Roderick had left. The night wind moaned outside, and she closed her eyes. Unseelie faelings roamed her city, and the knowledge of it snagged like a thorn in her heart. Decades ago they had refused to acknowledge her right to rule them, and she had exacted a terrible vengeance that continued to this day.

All of them except one, she reminded herself, and the ache in her heart grew suddenly into one of profound grief. Raising her eyes to the finery that draped the room, she wondered, not for the first time, if her struggles had been worth the reward.

~*~

Mina huddled in her miserable cell, her body curled protectively. Her face hurt where the guards had struck her, and she focused on the pain in an attempt to drive the screams out of her mind. But nothing would blot out the memory of the child's horrible death. The stink of blood and released bowels clung to her skin.

How could they have so much contempt for us that they would do that to a child?

She should never have tried passing faery gold in the market. The glamour would have faded in time without her to maintain it, and of course the vendors had complained to the constables that someone was stealing their money and replacing it with pebbles. And of course word of such an odd crime had reached the wrong ears. Duncan would have warned her against doing something so stupid. She'd known it at the time.

But there were things Duncan hadn't told her. Then again, perhaps he didn't know about the inhuman faeling pretending to be Prince Roderick.

God, she *hoped* he was just pretending.

After what seemed like hours, a slot in the bottom of the cell door opened and someone slid a plate of food inside. It wasn't much, but a fresh-looking loaf of bread and an apple seemed better fare than she would have expected a prisoner to get. But despite its appetizing appearance, her stomach roiled at the smell, and she let the food sit untouched.

Mina closed her eyes and tried to find a comfortable position, not an easy thing when bound in chains on a hard stone floor. Eventually, she managed to doze despite her fear. At one point, she thought she heard voices murmuring on the other side of the door. The judas opened and shut again. "She'll be hungry enough soon," someone said. Footsteps retreated, and Mina dropped back into a troubled half-sleep.

Something—a sound or sensation, she didn't know which—brought her to sudden wakefulness. Startled, she opened her eyes and looked towards the cell door. Nothing about it seemed to have changed. Wondering if she imagined things, she started to settle back onto the floor, when the rear wall of the prison began to slowly bow out.

She stared incredulously as the wall stretched like a cloth backdrop pushed out by a hidden actor. The stone parted suddenly, and a foot emerged, breaking the surface like a fish rising up from the depths of a lake. A moment later, Bryan stepped out, Duncan cradled in his arms.

"I told you she was here," Duncan snapped, keeping his voice to a whisper.

"You sent us to the wine cellar the first two times, old man," Bryan hissed back.

Mina gaped at them both. "You—how did you find me?"

"Put me down," Duncan ordered. Bryan carefully sat him on the floor. "Mina, my dear, are you all right?"

"Oh, so now it's Mina," she said shakily. "I didn't realize I had to be in danger of my life before you'd quit using Wilhelmina."

Duncan pulled a worn pouch from the inside pocket of his coat and spread it out on his lap. It contained a large number of bronze picklocks. "You'll know better next time, then. Can you move your chains to where I can reach them? Without making too much noise, that is."

She tried to hold still while he worked, but her body wanted to start shaking with a mixture of reaction and relief. All five locks clicked open in short order. Mina carefully laid the chains aside and managed to stand up without falling. "Where did you learn to pick a lock? It doesn't seem like something they would teach you at university."

Duncan flashed her a grin. "It isn't. But I like to be prepared for any situation. Bryan will take you outside now. Hold tight to him and don't let go, unless you want to find yourself buried alive. Presumably he will

then return for me. Don't get lost, please, Bryan."

"I ought to leave him here," Bryan muttered, *sotto voce*. He put an arm tightly around Mina's waist and drew her close against his side. He smelled vaguely of candles and cooking. "Closing your eyes will make it easier for you," he advised.

She did so. He took a step forwards, drawing her with him. She instinctively stiffened when the surface of the stone wall brushed against her body and face. But it felt more as if she was pressed against a rough sheet instead of solid stone. Then earth closed around her. Her heart leaped in panic, insisting that she couldn't breathe. Wet dirt covered her face, her ears, closed in tight behind her. She was lost in the ground, buried alive, suffocating.

Bryan's arm remained firmly around her. She was aware of him walking, aware that her own body was flailing forwards somehow. She bit her lip hard, forcing herself not to give in to panic. Then they were going up, climbing the earth as if it were a wide ladder, and the blessed air touched her face again.

Mina collapsed on the ground, gasping wildly. Bryan patted her shoulder for comfort but was immediately gone again. Only a few minutes later, the ground rippled like a disturbed pond, and he emerged with Duncan in his arms.

"Are you all right?" Duncan asked worriedly.

Mina ran both hands back through her short, spiky hair. Oddly enough there was no dirt in it, as if something about Bryan's magic had insulated them from the ground. "I...I guess. I think I would have preferred climbing out over the walls, though."

"There aren't any walls," Duncan pointed out dryly.

Mina blinked and looked around her. The fetid roil of the Blackrush heaved and churned only a few feet away. Behind her was the skeletal ruin of the Cathedral of the Mother, which had burned in a spectacular fire nine years ago. Moonlight touched the shards of stained glass remaining in some of the windows, making them glow with faint color.

"I—I thought they'd taken me to a prison somewhere," Mina said uncertainly.

Bryan dragged Duncan's wheelchair from its hiding place in some brush and carefully deposited Duncan in it. Duncan gripped the wheels and turned himself, aiming a dark look at Mina. "Obviously not. And while we walk back to the theater, you can think of an explanation as to how they found you in the first place."

"I passed faery gold in the market."

His ascetic face darkened with fury. "What! Haven't you heard anything I've said to you? Do you think this is all some kind of game?"

A part of Mina quailed before his anger, but she'd be damned if she'd let him see such weakness.

"Of course not!" she snapped back. "All right, I admit it was stupid! You don't have to yell at me. But I want to know who the hell that man was who interrogated me tonight. The one disguised as the crown prince."

Duncan's face went bleak. "He wasn't disguising himself as Prince Roderick. That's who he is."

An uncomfortable feeling shot through her, a mixture of betrayal and fear. "I think you need to be

explaining some things, Duncan RiDahn! Why don't you start with why you didn't tell me the ones who sent the Hound after me are the bloody royal family!"

"What else have you done, Mina? Should Bryan and I be fleeing for our lives? Tell me that!"

"Stop!" Bryan stepped in between them, hands spread out in a pacifying gesture. "I don't think the doorstep of one of the hideaways for the Knights and Hounds is the place to be having this argument, do you?"

Duncan glowered at him, and then abruptly propelled himself off down the street. Mina sighed and followed, Bryan at her side. "I think I've really messed things up," she confided wistfully.

"Nah. The old man's just mad because you're right. He should have told you. He has a bit of a problem admitting when he's wrong."

"I'd noticed that."

"But, you know, he doesn't have to admit it very often," Bryan went on. He glanced at her briefly, only the whites of his eyes showing in the darkness. "There's a reason for that. Keep it in mind."

She nodded, chastened. "I will."

CHAPTER SEVEN

"It began with the Grynithian invasion." Duncan sat in his favorite chair in front of the cold hearth, his fingers steepled before him. He had tugged the clip from his hair so that the long brown strands hung loosely about his face, the silver in them gleaming in the gaslight.

Mina sat on the hearthrug, a cup of tea cradled in her hands. Her face ached fiercely where the Knights had struck her, and the taste of blood lingered in her mouth. Bryan perched on his stool by the chimney, watching them both, as if afraid he'd have to break up a fight.

"And before then?" Mina asked.

"As far as I know, the RiLlyn clan was perfectly human in every way," Duncan replied. "But then Grynith invaded Niune. King Stephen was killed and his head put up at RedBridge for all to see. His young daughter, Matilda, escaped into exile in Hundslan."

"I know all this. I did have *some* schooling."

Duncan pulled off his glasses and rubbed tiredly at his eyes. "Quite. But no one knows exactly what happened next. We suspect that while in Hundslan, Matilda somehow stumbled across knowledge of the fae. I believe that she deliberately sought one out, hoping to get its powers for her child. Perhaps she even struck a bargain with it, although there's no guessing what she might have offered such a creature.

"At any rate, her daughter, Catherine, was claimed as the offspring of Matilda's husband, a Hundslan duke. But she was in fact seelie faeling. Once she grew to womanhood, she raised an army and returned to Niune. She claimed that her powers came from God as a sign of Her approval of the true ruler of Niune. It encouraged her followers and demoralized the Grynithians, until at last the invaders were driven out, and Catherine was crowned Queen of Niune.

"But she had a small problem, you see. There were others like her out there, the offspring of fae and

human. They would know that her powers were not from God but from her inhuman blood. And the ordinary people of Niune would never stand for a half-fae monarch, if they ever learned the truth."

"So she began to hunt the unseelie faelings?"

Duncan nodded. "Yes. But remember that *any* faelings would be dangerous to Catherine's rule. Catherine...had extraordinary powers. She sought out every seelie faeling she could find, peasant or noble. When she found them, she had them brought to her...and she *altered* them."

Mina felt dread settle into her stomach. "Altered them...how?"

"The Hound that attacked you was once as human-looking as yourself. It had human blood in its veins. All of them did. As did the other servitors Catherine created, the Knights."

Mina remembered the terrifying sameness of her guards, their fearful lack of expression. "I think I've seen them."

He gave her a look she was unable to read. "I see. That is the fate of anyone unlucky enough to be born seelie faeling, Mina. As for the unseelie faelings, there was nothing Catherine could do to make them serve her, so she simply ordered them killed.

"Needless to say, things did not end there. Catherine struck the same bargain her mother had, so that the child she bore was only one-quarter human. Rhiannon followed her mother's teachings, and once she was wed, she also took a seelie lover, so that Roderick is barely human at all."

Mina shuddered and closed her eyes. "I saw."

Duncan's eyes narrowed. "And what did he say to you, Mina? What have you done?"

"Nothing!"

"You said he interrogated you."

"I didn't tell him anything. I didn't tell him about you. You have to believe me. Don't you think I'd warn you to run if I had?"

He looked at her coldly. "And did you eat anything while you were there?"

She frowned at the odd question. "No. They put some food in my cell, but I was too sick to eat."

"Are you certain?"

"I think I'd know, damn it!" she snapped. "Now answer my question—why did you lie to me?"

"I've never lied to you."

"You didn't tell me that the seelie faelings hunting us are actually the royal family. That doesn't fit my definition of honesty. What's your game, Duncan? Tell me that. What do you want from me?"

He glared at her. "I've never done anything to harm you. Why are you so quick to believe the worst?"

"Because this has been too damned good to be true! You take me in, offer to teach me, and for what? Not for any gain that I can figure!"

"So you think everyone is just out to get something from you? Is that it?"

"Yes! People just don't do things out of the goodness of their hearts! Not that I've ever seen."

Silence fell between them. Bryan watched nervously, wondering if they were going to start throwing small breakables at one another.

"You should have told me," Mina said at last, her voice calmer. "You shouldn't have let me find out like that."

Duncan looked as if he wanted to shout something. But when he finally spoke, he matched her composure. "What did you tell them?"

"Nothing that can lead to you. I swear."

Duncan's jaw tightened. His earrings caught the gaslight and sparked unexpectedly from the shadows of his long hair. "Very well, then. I believe you. And I will admit that perhaps I should have told you the identity of our tormentors at the beginning. Bryan wanted to tell you, but I thought it best to wait, to give you a chance to acclimate to your new view of yourself."

"Why? What did you think I was going to do?"

Duncan didn't say anything for a long time. His blue-gray eyes went to the portrait on his mantelpiece and stayed there. Mina followed his gaze, studied the picture of the young woman with her classically beautiful features and her fiery red hair.

"Who is she?" she asked finally, when Duncan failed to speak.

Duncan's shoulders slumped suddenly. "She's the reason I'm here," he said at last. "The reason behind my teaching. Her name was Aerin. I met her when I came to Dere to attend university. I knew at the time that there was a risk in coming here. My mother had inherited faeling blood from her mother, so I grew up knowing what I was. I'd been trained in the use of faeling magic since I was a child, and I felt that I was savvy enough to avoid the depredations of the Seelie Court, as we called the royal family.

"I was seventeen years old that spring. The first week I was in Dere I saw this...incredible girl in one of my classes. There was a fire about her that drew my eye, so that I spent the rest of the lecture staring at her instead of paying attention to the instructor. I even left class a few minutes early so that I would be waiting by the door when she came out. She walked right up to me, as if she had expected me to be there. She'd seen me watching her, of course, but there was more to it. Up close I could feel her power like wind on my face, and I realized that she was an unseelie faeling like myself. She just...smiled—devil-may-care—full of life, mischief and promise.

"Aerin was...like no one else. She had such life, such vitality. Almost anything could set her to laughing, sometimes, and the sound was like bells ringing."

Bryan rolled his eyes discreetly where Duncan couldn't see. Mina was already getting the feeling that she wasn't going to like this perfect little Aerin one damned bit.

"Aerin was from a very wealthy family," Duncan went on, oblivious to both of them. "She was brilliant, beautiful, and cultured. That next year with her was the happiest time of my life. I abandoned my studies to spend every waking and sleeping moment with her. We would sit at a cafe and argue about life, or take long walks in the public gardens, or throw breadcrumbs into the Blackrush. We were going to get married and spend the rest of our lives in a whirlwind of talking and laughing and making love.

"But by early summer she seemed troubled. When I asked her what was wrong, she would turn in the direction of the palace and not say anything. She was worried about the Seelie Court, that much was

clear, so I asked her to leave Dere and go home with me, where we would be out of harm's reach, so long as we kept quiet.

"And if I don't want to keep quiet?" she asked me. "What if I want to sing, dance, and practice my magic? What if our children do too? How can we even talk about getting married when our children will have to be afraid for their lives?"

"It scared me. I did everything I could to reassure her, but it wasn't enough. Then one day she told me that she knew what we had to do. If we were to live the life we wanted, then we would have to get rid of the threat of the Seelie Court.

"She spent the next month planning. She went to every unseelie faeling in the city and told them about our assault, cajoled or coerced them into agreeing to go with us. And finally, on a night shortly after Midsummer, she led me up the avenue towards the palace.

"I knew immediately that something was wrong. None of the other unseelie faelings had kept their promise to come. Not one. We stood alone on the tree-lined street, not knowing what to do.

"And then the Seelie Court came."

He closed his eyes a moment, as if to blot out the memory. "They were everywhere. There were at least fifteen Hounds, maybe more, and Knights to match. I don't know how they found out we would be there. They came boiling down the street and I...I knew that we were going to die, and I...

"I ran."

Duncan hunched over in his chair, refusing to look at either of them. "I ran. In the defining moment of my life, I proved a coward. I fled and abandoned Aerin to die."

Mina bit back the anger that had been building throughout the account. "For God's sake, you were seventeen years old, Duncan. You had thirty Knights and Hounds bearing down on you! What in hell were you supposed to do?"

"I should have stayed with her!" he cried, banging his fist against the armrest of his chair. "*Her* courage did not break—she faced them all! I should have stayed at her side...should have protected her. Instead I ran, and I've paid for that mistake every day of my life since then.

"I didn't get far—not even to the next side street—before a woman flanked by four Knights stepped out into my path. Rhiannon. She had the cruelest smile I've ever seen. I stopped, panicked...and trapped.

"Running away, are we?" Rhiannon asked. "We can't have that." Then she lifted up her hand towards me and squeezed. Searing pain shot all the way from the base of my skull to my toes, and my legs collapsed. I tried to get back up, but nothing seemed to be working right, and I could only lie there while the Knights advanced.

"That was when Aerin attacked. She had been fighting all that time, but she had still seen Rhiannon's assault on me. She hurled her magic against Rhiannon and the Knights, distracting them from me. The battle retreated off down the street.

"I don't know how long I lay there, waiting for a Hound or Knight to come and end my pathetic life. Eventually, however, a dark figure crept from the concealing shadows of a house. It was one of our erstwhile friends, who were supposed to meet us for the attack on the Seelie Court. He grabbed me under my armpits and dragged me away.

"I spent the next few days recuperating at his house. I think I hoped that whatever Rhiannon had done to me was temporary, and that I would regain use of my legs. Obviously that was ridiculously optimistic. I realized that I would have to leave the city and go home, a cripple as well as a coward. That was when I received word that my family was dead and—in the apparent absence of any living heirs—our lands seized by the crown.

"I don't know how the Seelie Court found out about my family. Perhaps someone recognized me during the battle; or perhaps I was betrayed, whether willingly or beneath the irons and knives, I know not. Over the next year or so, almost all the faelings died or disappeared, so I think someone must have given their identities to Rhiannon. I was one of the few who escaped detection, although I can't imagine how I managed it. I was in black despair, and sometimes it seemed as though it would have been better if the Seelie Court had found me.

"I won't go into the dreary details. I survived by begging...scrounging in the trash. The memory of what happened haunted me day and night. I saw Aerin's face before me all the time. She died because of my cowardice, yet had the greatness of heart to save me—there seemed no way to assuage my guilt.

"Eventually, other unseelie faelings appeared in Dere, wandering in from surrounding cities in search of work. Many of them had no idea how to take care of themselves, or how to hide from the Seelie Court. And it occurred to me that, though I had killed Aerin, I perhaps could save other lives by finding students and teaching them to survive. And so I've spent the last thirty years trying to make up in some small way for my mistakes.

"When I saw you, Mina...I don't know. Your anger, your impetuosity, reminded me of Aerin. I didn't want to be responsible for the death of a second young woman. I was afraid that if I gave you a specific enemy, you would immediately rush off to battle. So instead I kept the truth from you. And that is the whole of my sorry story."

Mina sighed and it hurt. She didn't know why, but it did. "They should put your image in the Cathedral of the Martyr, Duncan RiDahn. You've wasted your life agonizing over something that wasn't your damned fault."

The look he gave her told her that line of reasoning was no good. *Fine*. "I'm not stupid enough to challenge the Seelie Court. Not now, not ever. I know my limits, all right?"

He hesitated, and then nodded. "I'm glad to hear that. And I hope that you'll listen to reason when I tell you that you have to leave Dere."

Her head jerked up. "What?"

"They'll be hunting for you now, Mina. The Seelie Court may not be able to find you easily with your wards up, but they do know that you're here in this city. Surely you don't think that they will just let a powerful unseelie faeling run around loose?"

Sudden fear gripped her. "I can't leave! I have a job! What would I do?"

"You *must* leave. Don't panic...I'll go with you. You can pose as my...nursemaid." The distaste with which he spoke the word was more than evident. "A few of my students have left Dere over the years and founded households in safer locations. I'm sure I can convince one of them to put us both up, at least until we find some more permanent arrangements for you."

Mina drew her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms around them. "But I can't leave, Duncan. I—I've never been outside the city in my life. Everyone I've ever known is here."

He gave her an unexpectedly gentle look. "I understand." He patted her hand awkwardly. "But your life is in danger, and the easiest way to remove the danger is to get out of the immediate reach of the Seelie Court. It's almost dawn. You can sleep in my bed tonight, and I shall take the divan in here. We'll leave tomorrow morning. Bryan can look after things in my absence."

"Can't I at least say good-bye to Abby? She'll be worried."

"I'm afraid not."

Mina nodded unhappily.

Duncan shifted to his wheelchair and rolled off towards the back of the theater to change the bed linens for her.

Mina sat and stared at Aerin's portrait for a long time. "How much did you know?" she asked Bryan.

He shifted uncomfortably. "Most of it. What did you think?"

"I wish Aerin were still alive so that I could punch her in the nose."

"Mina!"

"I mean it!" She gestured angrily at the portrait. "The woman was an idiot! What kind of fool would not only go up against the Seelie Court, but also do it at Midsummer during the height of their power, and with only one other person to back her up? And it's Duncan who's got to pay for her stupidity! He's wasted his life moping over what happened, when she more or less committed suicide the hard way!"

Bryan sighed and shrugged. "I wouldn't suggest telling him that."

"No. No, he can't see her for what she was. He's set her up in his mind as some kind of perfect goddess who could do no wrong. But I don't care how much fun she might have been in bed—she obviously didn't have much of a brain. Duncan deserved better."

"Yeah." Bryan stood up and started for the door. "But if things had gone some other way, maybe you and I would be dead right now, because there wouldn't have been a Duncan in Dere to show us how to survive."

She scowled at her toes. "Maybe. Good night, Bryan."

"Guess I won't be seeing you again anytime soon, huh?"

Mina looked up at his dark face, felt a real twinge of sadness. She'd miss him. "Yeah. Probably not."

"Good luck, then."

"Thanks. I'm sure as hell going to need it."

~*~

That night, Mina found herself enmeshed in dreams...

She was walking down a wide boulevard that she didn't recognize. The shops that lined the street offered expensive silks, imported perfumes, gourmet provisions, and diamond-encrusted jewelry. The people who passed her seemed oblivious to her presence, which was probably just as well, considering that they didn't look the types to enjoy having a factory slave dropped into their midst.

The swirl of activity flowed around a cafe at the corner of the boulevard. Curious, Mina drew closer and saw that all the sidewalk tables were empty except one.

They sat on opposite sides of the table, as still as if they were caught in ice. One of them was a man much younger than Mina, his elbows propped on the table. With a shock, Mina recognized the aquiline nose, generous lips, and gray-blue eyes—it was Duncan. His long hair was thicker and a darker shade of brown than it was in the present, and no spectacles shielded his eyes. He held in his hands what appeared to be a cat's cradle of red string. But as Mina drew closer, she realized that the strands were in fact finely spun glass that had cut his fingers to the bone. Blood ran down the translucent strands, dripping slowly into a teacup on the table.

"Duncan!" she cried, reaching to grab his shoulder and shake him loose from whatever spell had overtaken him. But before she could touch him, his companion was suddenly up and between them. Her green eyes and red hair were far too familiar.

"Leave him alone!" Mina snapped, trying to shove Aerin away but failing.

Aerin smiled—a devil's smile. She leaned closer, ran one finger along the side of Mina's face. "*Dyana*. The dark queen with no mercy," she whispered.

And laughed.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The next morning found both Mina and Duncan thoroughly grumpy and out of sorts.

Duncan, who looked as if he had not slept particularly well on the divan, brusquely told Mina to go to the prop room and find herself something marginally less conspicuous to wear. She managed to find a brown skirt and an unbecoming gray shirt that, while certainly not the height of fashion, weren't so out of date that they would cause comment. A long wig covered the distinctive cut of her short locks, and an old pot of makeup hid most of the bruises on her face. Despite the warmth of the day, she fastened a scarf about her neck to conceal the scars left behind by eight years of wearing an iron collar.

Abby's probably starting to worry about me now, she thought, as she abandoned the boyish work clothes and bowler hat that were all she had worn for years. The skirt felt alien around her legs. *Maybe I can send her a letter to let her know that I'm all right*.

She shut out the thought of her friend's inevitable concern as best she could. There was nothing to be done for it now.

Her thoughts wandered while Duncan outlined the plan for her escape. The odd dream of the previous night returned with surprising clarity, tugging at her thoughts. *The dark queen with no mercy*, Aerin had said. But had she been referring to herself—or to Mina? And what had been the nonsense word that she had spoken?

It was just a dream. But the weight in her mind felt more like truth. That frightened her, for reasons she didn't fully comprehend.

"And then we shall fly off on the backs of winged pigs," Duncan said mildly.

Mina started. "Uh, what?"

He gave her a reproving look. "One might think that saving your life would be of sufficient interest to hold your attention."

"Sorry. I was just thinking about a dream."

"At my age, I have come to realize that all dreams are painful self-delusion. I advise you to forget it and concentrate on the matter at hand. I may not be a gallant knight sweeping you away to safety, but I fear that I'm all you have right now."

She blinked, surprised at the bitterness of the comment. Something had certainly set him in a foul mood. "I'm sorry, Duncan. I truly appreciate your help. After what I did in the market, I wouldn't have been surprised if you had just decided to wash your hands of me altogether."

He looked as though he was going to ask her something. But instead he shrugged and said, "Let's go, then."

Mina picked up a leather valise that held some of Duncan's things—all her possessions would remain behind in the apartment with Abby. Not that she had anything worth bringing, anyway. She didn't even have anything that would do Abby any good.

She desperately hoped that her friend would be able to find a new roommate quickly. The sudden loss of Mina's income would be a crushing burden on her. *I'm sorry, Abby. I really messed everything up this time, didn't I?* If only she had thought more about consequences, or had done things differently. But wishes were worthless; there was only today, right now, to worry about.

She followed Duncan out the widened side door. Like most of the doors around the theater, this one had a leather strap dangling from the handle. He caught hold of it as he passed, then used it to pull the door shut behind him. It occurred to Mina that this was probably the only convenient way for him to close doors, given the width of the wheelchair and the danger of tipping it over by leaning too far.

Once outside, she gave Duncan the valise. As she was supposed to be posing as his nursemaid, she pushed the wheelchair up Mummery Street towards the nearest cabstand, where they would hire a coach to take them to the railway station. Duncan sat in the chair and sulked, and she wondered if her disguise didn't account for a great deal of his bad mood. She was beginning to realize that he despised even the slightest suggestion that he was unable to do absolutely everything for himself.

They left Mummery Street for more populated thoroughfares. Mina kept a close eye on her surroundings, half expecting a band of ghastly Knights to leap out of every alleyway. After a while, however, the people around them impinged on her thoughts. Although they moved out of the way of the wheelchair, and a few smiled or nodded at Mina, most avoided even looking at Duncan. Except for a few children, who gawked from a street corner as if she pushed a circus freak down the street.

Mina's fingers tightened angrily on the handles. "Doesn't it bother you?" she finally blurted.

Duncan didn't trouble himself with the contortion it would have taken to face her, nor was she surprised that he knew at once what her question referred to. "It shouldn't, I suppose. I may not exactly be inconspicuous in this chair, but few people could describe me later even if they had to." His mouth tightened. "Even if my family hadn't died in the purge after Aerin's death, I sometimes wonder whether I would have had the courage to return to them. I couldn't have inherited like this, so the estate would have passed to my sister. Fenella would have liked being an heiress, I suspect. But I would probably have ended up shut away on the upper floor by myself, with a nursemaid to tend me. No sense in trotting out the cripple to disturb the guests."

"That's stupid!" Mina said angrily, and then realized that he might not appreciate her slander of his dead relatives. "I mean, why would they have done that? You're smart, you're funny...you can talk about anything and make it interesting. I'd have thought you'd be the center of attention at any gathering."

"Er, um, that's very kind of you," he said uncertainly. Then he straightened, as if relieved. "Oh, look, here's the cab stand!"

Odd, she decided. She'd never seen Duncan get flustered over anything before. But she forgot about it in the flurry of activity that followed. First they had to hire a cab, and not a tiny hansom too small to accommodate the wheelchair. Then the driver had to assist her in hoisting Duncan into the cab and shoving the chair in afterward. By the time they were finished, Duncan had once more lapsed into sullen silence, and she left him alone to sulk.

Although Mina had lived in Dere all her life, she had never been to the railway station. The huge building towered up into the sky, decorated with gleaming brass figures and an enormous clock that hung directly over the main entrance. The air reeked of acrid smoke and coal dust. A train groaned out of the station, trailing sparks and smoke behind it. Mina froze, staring at the iron behemoth, as women around her held up parasols to ward off ash and the occasional stray cinder.

"I didn't think it would be so *big*," she managed to say when Duncan threw her a questioning look.

"Ah." He shifted the valise into a more comfortable position on his lap. "Yes. Its size represents a great deal of iron. That could help us, I think. I would imagine that any minions of the Seelie Court would want to stay as far away from this place as possible."

Unfortunately, Duncan was wrong.

They joined the crowds flowing into the station. A tired-looking woman tried unsuccessfully to control several grimy children chasing each other around her skirts. Pigeons swooped overhead, and a few women unfolded their parasols against any accidental stains. A rustic-looking man sat in the center of the floor, surrounded by several crates of squawking chickens, forcing everyone else to go around him. A refined gentleman in a tall black hat strode through the crowd, a handkerchief held to his nose. The noise of so many people crammed together was prodigious—Mina would have to shout if she wanted to say anything to her companion. The smell of coal and fumes was even stronger inside than without, and she hoped that they wouldn't have a long wait.

The press of humanity around them blocked Duncan's sight, so it was left to Mina to find a sign pointing to the ticket booth. As she stood on tiptoe, casting about, a figure standing close against one wall caught her eye. Actually, it caught her left eye—to the right, there was nothing there at all.

"Oh, hell," she hissed, her blood going instantly cold. The Knight's pale countenance was turned away from them, scanning the people waiting in line for tickets.

"Mina, we're blocking the doors," Duncan pointed out testily, unable to see the Knight from his lower vantage point. Mina swallowed hard, turned around, and wove them back through the crowd and out the doors, into air that suddenly seemed close and choking.

"Knight," Mina hissed, once they were well clear of the noise of the station.

"Damn."

"Do you think it was waiting there for me?"

"Yes."

That made her heart clench in her chest. She glanced nervously over her shoulder, but no ghost-pale Knights showed in either eye. "What—what are we going to do?"

"There is a possibility that I'm mistaken, that the Knight had nothing to do with you. We'll try leaving the city through one of the gates, and hiring a stage once we're clear."

But that route proved blocked as well. A team of Knights and Hounds loitered about Ridersgate, and another at Prayergate. They did nothing but stand and watch, their pale blue eyes scanning everyone who passed through the wall dividing the old inner city from the newer settlements outside.

Mina was trapped in Dere.

~*~

They went back to the theater, since there was no other option. A thin woman sat on the street outside the side door, her fingers knotted in a string cat's cradle that reminded Mina uncomfortably of her dream. The woman was dressed far too richly to belong in this part of town. Her green gown looked to be made of expensive silk, and the plum shawl wrapped loosely around her shoulders was velvet. Jeweled pins were stuck at random into a tangled mass of brown hair. Her face, though smeared with dirt, was pretty in an odd sort of way. She looked up when she heard them approach, and the glittering intensity of her green eyes made Mina think of madness.

"Saw you," the woman said, unraveling the string from about her fingers. "They're looking for you. Nasty doggies, mean Knights."

"We know," Duncan said tiredly. "Come in, Fox."

Another student? Mina wondered. It didn't seem likely. But Fox hopped up and waited for Duncan to banish the Locking on the door, then ran inside in a way that suggested familiarity.

"Fox is an old student of mine," Duncan confirmed in a low voice as they crossed the threshold. "Be patient with her. She can see things far away, or in the future, or in other people's minds. Or perhaps all at once—it's never been very clear to me. Unfortunately, her talent has been active since birth. You can imagine the effect of such visions on the mind of a child. I don't know what her real name is, but she obviously comes from one of the wealthier families. I suspect they keep her locked away most of the time."

Mina shuddered. Still, Fox was lucky not to have been sent to one of the madhouses that ringed the outskirts of Dere. One of the mill girls had a brother in such a place. She had visited him once, and her stories had been enough to give Mina nightmares for a week.

Fox had sat down on the edge of the hearth, heedless of the ashes and her own fine dress. Her fingers resumed their incessant knotting of the string, and Mina saw that her knuckles were swollen from overuse.

Mina dropped into one of the chairs, pulled off the brunette wig, and buried her face in her hands. "What am I going to do now?"

Duncan drew in a deep breath, and then let it out slowly. "You'll simply have to wait it out. Keep your head down, keep quiet, and don't do anything to draw attention to yourself. They can't watch the gates and the station forever."

Mina put a hand to the ring of scars that the collar had worn around her throat. "Then you'd better glamour another chain for me," she said glumly.

"You can't mean to simply pick your life back up as if nothing has happened. They're looking for you, Mina."

She spread her hands apart. "What else can I do? They don't know where I live—at least, I don't see how they could. And they thought the collar was nothing but a disguise of some kind, as if they couldn't imagine a faeling actually *working*."

"Not in a factory or mill. I was amazed when I first saw you. Most of us could never have tapped into our powers with so much iron around."

She shrugged uncomfortably; trying not to think too much about the things she had done at the mill. *William's body, hitting the floor.* "So they won't look for me there. I'll do my best to keep quiet. Like you said, they can't hunt me forever."

Duncan's face settled into grim lines. "Be careful, Mina. Please."

She stood up, intending to get her normal clothes. "I made a bad mistake, Duncan. The world doesn't often forgive such things. I've got to live with whatever consequences come of it. If I'm lucky, it won't be fatal. But I'm not ready to bet on that yet."

~*~

Mina walked home slowly, taking the route that kept her closest to the Blackrush. Despite the aughisky in the waters, the river made her feel safe in a way she couldn't define. Her unseelie nature making itself known again, she supposed.

The sun was going down, and the streets were almost deserted as people retired early to prepare for tomorrow's work after a day of leisure. A torn newspaper blew across the cobble-lined road. "Queen Rhiannon Gives Speech to Adoring Crowd!" the headline proclaimed. Mina kicked it into the polluted water.

As she rounded a gentle curve in the street, she saw that she was not the only person stirring abroad tonight. The tall fae from the market loitered on the riverbank, clearly waiting for her. She stopped in her tracks, blood going cold when she saw the darkness of his eyes focus on her.

"What do you want with me?" she demanded, her voice shaking.

He examined his fingernails idly, picking delicately at a cuticle. The nails were very long and looked sharp as knives. "I was right, wasn't I? Your friends weren't telling you everything."

"Answer my question!"

He glanced up and smiled at her. "My interest in you? A whim, perhaps. You intrigue me, my pretty faeling. I haven't seen anything like you in a very long time." He turned away and looked down the river, in the direction of the palace. "I am curious to see how it will all end."

Mina's hands balled into fists. "I don't believe you."

"Believe what you will. It is nothing to me. Why should I care about the opinion of a girl who doesn't even know herself?"

She narrowed her eyes in suspicion. "What do you mean?"

Fine boots crackled in the dying grass along the riverbank. He paced to the edge of the water, looked

into it thoughtfully, and then turned around with another devastating smile. "What do you want, Mina? What do you really want, in the depths of your heart? You can have it. You can have anything. You only have to truly want it."

His words chilled her, and she made an abrupt sign against evil. "What are you, some sort of cheap tempter? Some imitation devil?"

He laughed unexpectedly. "I am the worst kind of devil, Mina—the kind that tells the truth. They say that angels are liars, but I wouldn't know about that. The fae pay a *teind* to hell, not heaven." He bowed extravagantly, the black lace of his shirt cuffs almost sweeping the muddy bank. "You may call me Camhlaidh. It's not my true name, of course."

"Of course," she said dryly.

"You have the power to change things. But you must reach out and take it."

She took a step back, shaking her head. "Keep your flummery. I'll not listen to you."

His eyes narrowed dangerously. "Then listen to her." He pointed to the shadows beneath the nearby bridge. A woman sat in the weeds, her brown dress torn and tattered, her long hair trailing into the river. She was washing something, alternately rinsing it in the befouled waters of the Blackrush and beating it against the algae-slimed rocks that formed the bridge's footing. Something white and long, and stained dark with old blood.

"She's the *bean-nighe* of Dere," Camhlaidh said. "You have heard of her kind?"

Mina swallowed. "They were mentioned in one of Duncan's books. The *bean-nighe* washes the shrouds of those who will soon die."

"Yes."

Mina stood still for what seemed like a long time. She knew that it would be a mistake to do what Camhlaidh wanted. He could have nothing good in mind for her. But curiosity pulled at her like a riptide in the ocean, and she took one step, then another.

The woman turned slowly to look at her. Her face had the pallor of a corpse, and her eyes had sunk back into her head. Blood ran down her legs and feet, soaking through her wretched dress.

A feeling crackled along Mina's skin, a whisper of power that made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. She took a breath, and the air was like needles in her lungs.

"*Bean-nighe*," she said, and her voice shook, "what is the name of the one whose winding sheet you wash?"

The *bean-nighe* smiled, and it was the ghastly grin of something dead.

"Wilhelmina Cole," she said.

~*~

Rhiannon's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean she's gone?"

Roderick shifted uncomfortably in his chair midway down the enormous dining room table. "She disappeared. Just...disappeared, that's all." He glanced up defensively. "I set a watch on all the exits from the city. So far none of the Knights or Hounds have seen her leave. She must still be somewhere in

Dere."

Rhiannon pressed her fine lips together, her taste for the delicate sauces on her plate suddenly gone. Across from Roderick, Dagmar shifted in her chair, parti-colored eyes bright with madness. For an instant, Rhiannon was reminded of a hound that has scented its prey. But Dagmar said nothing, only watched and listened.

"How did she get out of the prison?" Rhiannon asked Roderick, her tone deceptively mild.

"I don't know!" snapped Roderick. "If I'd known, I would have taken precautions against it! She was completely bound in iron—she couldn't have used magic. But the door was still locked, so she couldn't have gone that way either."

"She obviously had help, then," Rhiannon mused. Her fork stabbed a tender slice of meat. "Damn you for losing her."

Roderick stiffened, looking affronted. "I'll get her back."

"Do so. You said she was wearing a glamour shaped to look like the collar of an indentured worker. Start with the factories."

Roderick shook his head. "A waste of time. It had to have been a disguise. No faeling would ever choose to live surrounded by so much iron."

"Perhaps that's why no one has found her before now. And Roderick?"

"Yes?"

"Find her—but find the rest of them as well."

He smiled now, beautiful and inhuman. "So you admit that I was right."

Her nails dug up little strips of varnish off the table. "Just do as I say."

CHAPTER NINE

The meeting between Mina and the rest of the unseelie faelings, postponed by her abortive dash for safety, was held the next evening.

Mina hastened across town, hoping to arrive at the theater before any of them, as if laying first claim to familiar ground would somehow give her an advantage. She met Bryan in the street outside, carrying a heavy tin of tea that he had brought from his aunt's store. Duncan only waved irritably at the kitchen in the back of the theater, as if irked at being reminded that he didn't have the resources to procure his own tea. Mina hid a grin behind her hand and wondered if Duncan was as surly to people who tossed coins into the little cup by which he made his living. Perhaps it was just as well that he played the violin; as an ordinary beggar, his attitude would have driven him out of business.

She settled into her familiar chair, and then shuffled it over closer to his. He gave her a look of surprise and set aside the book he had been reading. "Nervous?"

She shrugged, and then nodded. "Yeah."

"Don't be. These are your own kind."

"I suppose. Are they good people?"

Duncan smiled ruefully. "Some are. But they are all unseelie faelings, like you. I've always encouraged my students to look out for one another despite any personal differences."

They began to drift in after that, one at a time or in small knots. In all, there were perhaps twenty of them, and it surprised Mina that so many would have dared risk living in Dere. For the most part, they seemed like average people. If not for the whisper of power she felt from them, Mina would never have known them to be anything other than purely human.

"Oh, Duncan!" squealed a shrill feminine voice from the hallway. A moment later, a curvaceous redhead burst into the room. She was dressed in something pink and frilly, which exposed a generous amount of cleavage. "It's been far too long!" She flounced over and unceremoniously deposited herself in his lap.

Mina sat up straighter, nervousness forgotten. Her hands tightened cruelly on the arms of her chair.

"Hello, Janine," Duncan said with an uncomfortable smile.

"Really, I hardly see you at all anymore!" the woman nattered, her breasts dangling more or less at his eye level.

A sudden, unexpected burst of anger cut through Mina, though why it should have done so she didn't know. Abruptly, Janine stood up and stepped away from Duncan, looking suddenly ashamed. "I'm sorry," she said to no one.

Mina settled back in her chair, heart pounding. Duncan cast Janine an odd look, obviously confused. "Er, quite all right."

"Is dear Janine being a slut again?" asked a smooth, warm voice like darkness spun into velvet.

Mina looked up and found herself staring at what was probably one of the most beautiful men she had ever seen. His black hair was pulled back into a tail, revealing finely sculpted features and a sensuous mouth. He moved with a lithe, careless grace, like the ripple of a cat's shadow. Eyes of the deepest, darkest blue she had ever imagined met hers, and he smiled a little.

Mina felt his power, like a whisper of musk and incense, and it occurred to her with an odd little shock that he was half-fae as well. There was something erotic about that tingle of power, like the light dance of fingers up her back.

No. She denied the feeling angrily, and it subsided, leaving her clear-headed once again.

"This is Michael," Duncan said. For some reason, he sounded rather displeased about it.

Michael took her hand and leaned over it. "You must be Duncan's new student. He says that you are promising."

"He's said nothing at all about you," Mina replied.

A faint spark of anger flared in his eyes at that. "Really." This time, his smile was brittle. She felt his power push against her wards, not hard enough to be a challenge, but enough to be a test. Surprised, she met his eyes and realized that he was used to being the strongest unseelie faeling in Dere.

The star pupil, afraid of being supplanted.

She pulled her hand away and settled back in her chair. *To hell with such games.*

Mina only wanted to live.

~*~

"You did it, didn't you?" Camhlaidh asked a few hours later.

Mina had half-expected to see him loitering under one of the bridges along the Blackrush, but his words startled her nonetheless. "Did what?"

The fae was nothing but a lean shadow against the reflection of gaslight off the restless water. The wind lifted his long hair and brought to Mina the rank smell of the river. "You wanted, and it happened."

Janine. She had wanted the girl *away* from Duncan, and it had happened.

A slow, cold fear rose up in Mina, as though the river had entered her veins. "No."

Camhlaidh chuckled softly. "Don't lie to either of us. It doesn't do any good."

"How do you know these things? Why do you care?" Mina demanded furiously.

"Does it matter?"

"Yes!"

"Too bad." He looked away, and there was something subtly inhuman in his profile that struck a chord of kinship in her. "Keep it up. You might yet escape the fate the bean-nighe saw for you."

Mina closed her eyes. "I don't even understand what I did."

"Don't you? Then let me make it clear to you. You can have whatever you want from those pallid little feelings you met tonight. You only have to will it."

She shook her head and took a step back. "No. That would be wrong."

His voice was like quicksilver sliding over her skin. "The strong decide what is right and what is wrong."

A bitter bark of laughter escaped her. "You say that to *me*? When I have *this* around my neck? I'll be damned if I believe that forcing us to slave for the factory is right just because they have power and we don't."

"Then you aren't going to use your power?"

"No."

"Then you'll die."

"No!" She glared at him, hating his mockery and his certainties. "I'll go to Duncan. He'll know what to do."

Camhlaidh threw back his head and let out a long peal of laughter. The gaslight snagged on his sharp animal's teeth. "What an idealist! How do you think your friend will react to the fact that you can make him do things against his will? Do you think he'll *trust* you after that? Do you think he'll want you anywhere near him?"

Mina stood very still, acutely aware of her heart beating in her chest. Whatever his intentions, Camhlaidh was right about that. She thought of the looks that Duncan and Bryan would turn on her once they knew

the truth, and her heart twisted painfully. She couldn't risk it, not now, when for the first time in her life she had a chance at...at what?

"Go to hell," she hissed, baring her teeth. Then she turned and ran.

~*~

Mina tried to forget the fae's words. Camhlaidh wouldn't even tell her why he had an interest in her—why should she believe anything he said? Perhaps *he* had been behind Janine's abrupt change of heart. Perhaps the fae was only trying to trick Mina into believing that she had some vile power that filled her with shame and terror.

Somehow, she couldn't make herself believe it.

Her fear of something terrible hiding within herself only compounded the stress of knowing that the Seelie Court was actively hunting her. Each day was fraught with dread, a nightmare of constantly looking over her shoulder, waiting for a Knight or Hound to appear. Her belly clenched in knots all the time, and it was hard to eat. Abby worried that she was sick and pleaded with her to go straight home after work and rest.

Instead, Mina flung herself into her training with Bryan and Duncan. Duncan clearly perceived her stress and did his best to distract her by making the lessons enjoyable.

"We will work on your use of glamour today," he announced on Saturday. He was ensconced in his favorite chair, his withered legs propped up on a hassock.

"I can already cast a glamour well enough to pass faery gold," Mina pointed out dryly.

Duncan frowned at this reminder of her disastrous deception. "Yes. But a coin is one thing. They are relatively simple, and you did mention that you used pebbles to give them weight. I want you to practice something a bit more complex."

"All right." She folded her legs under her in the chair and leaned against one of the wings. The faded, threadbare upholstery smelled of dust and candle smoke.

"Good." He thought for a moment. "Would you like a cup of tea?" A delicate porcelain cup appeared in his hands and he held it out. Taking it from him, she felt the wash of heat from the liquid within, and her nose caught the distinctive scent of bergamot.

She laughed in delight at the realism. The cup vanished, and Duncan settled back with a smile. "Now, you give me something in return," he said.

She considered a moment, then pulled the solidity from the stones of the hearth, the gleam of light off the gold rims of Duncan's spectacles, the smoothness of glass from the lenses. A gold pocket-watch formed in her hands, although it took longer for her to get the weight and feel of her illusion. Nevertheless, she passed it to him with a smile, keeping its form with a thread of power.

"Very good." His smile of approval brought a sparkle to his eyes, and she found herself grinning irresistibly in return. "Here—have a pair of gloves."

"*Thank* you, sir. Please accept a lace handkerchief as a token of my esteem. You'll notice I've had it monogrammed with my initials."

"I'll carry it next to my heart, naturally. I would be honored if you would take a dozen roses from my

hand. The head gardener grew them in the hothouse at my request."

The roses even had a fragrance. Mina breathed deeply and glanced over the bouquet at Duncan. They were both grinning like idiots. "No one's ever given me flowers before. A bottle of good wine to celebrate with, perhaps? Of course the label has to remain blank, given that I have no idea what a good bottle of wine would be."

"Ah. Understandable. Will you have some chocolates?"

The dark treasures nestled in their satin-lined box looked good enough to eat. "Ah," she said with a wicked smile. "They're said to be an aphrodisiac."

"Mina! Will you help me with the tea?" Bryan said at her elbow.

Mina jumped and looked at him guiltily. "Oh! I didn't know you were there."

"Yes! Well! Come help me with the tea!"

Mina looked at him in puzzlement. "God, you're awfully worked up about the tea, aren't you? And when was the last time you needed help? Oh, all right, stop looking at me like that."

She stood up and followed him back to the kitchen, where a battered kettle steamed happily on top of the stove. The stove was small and short, and Mina wondered how long it had taken Duncan to find one where he could reach things on the top.

Bryan glanced back down the hall, as if worried that Duncan had followed them, and then turned to her. "Were you flirting with the old man back there?"

Mina blushed furiously. "What? Of course not!"

"Are you sure?"

"I think I'd know."

Bryan looked at her doubtfully. "Listen, Mina...I don't want to interfere or tell you what to do. But the old man's had a rough time of it, I think. I mean, he's in a wheelchair and all, but he's still a man."

Mina rolled her eyes. "It had come to my attention."

"Had it? Why do you think Janine flirts with him the way she does? She sees him as sort of harmless, like it doesn't matter. Like he wouldn't care, so she doesn't have to worry about any repercussions."

Mina narrowed her eyes, feeling anger rise in her blood like the floodwaters of the Blackrush. "What are you trying to tell me?" she asked softly, so that her voice wouldn't carry any farther than Bryan's ears.

"That men have their needs? That I should be ashamed of being a woman, because if some man gets horny it's my fault, and so I should have to do something about it?"

Bryan looked alarmed. "Of course not! I was only asking you to be nice to Duncan. I just didn't want you to, you know...lead him on."

Mina almost laughed aloud. "Lead him on? Me? *Look at me!* I'm a damned factory slave. How the hell could I lead someone like Duncan on?"

Bryan looked at her quietly for a long moment. "You haven't had good luck with men, have you?"

William's body, hitting the floor. "None of your damned business."

Bryan sighed. "I'm sorry. Never mind. Just forget that I said anything."

"Damned right," she muttered, snatching the tray with the teacups from him. She marched back down the hall and into the sitting room. Duncan, oblivious to everything, looked up with a bright smile as she entered.

"I had a wonderful idea for tomorrow!" he announced. "Why don't we all go to the park?"

~*~

"This is a terrible idea," Mina opined as they walked down the broad street in the sunlight of early afternoon. Duncan wheeled alongside her, seeming irrepressibly cheerful. Bryan wandered on the other side, squinting in the sun. Fox had appeared that morning before they had left the theater, and now skipped happily down the street, clutching her knot of string to her breast as though it were a child or a secret.

"It's a wonderful idea," Duncan corrected. He stopped wheeling for a moment to adjust the rather sad-looking hat that perched on his head like a dead animal. "You need to relax."

"I'm being hunted!"

"We aren't going to the palace, we're going to the park. Dere is a very large city, Mina—

there aren't enough Knights and Hounds to patrol every inch of it. Any search for you will have to be random at best. I don't see that going to the park is any more dangerous than going to work or walking down Mummers Street."

The park they headed for was a small one not too far from the theater, a spot of greenery with a few benches and a short boat dock leading out onto the Blackrush. It was a hot summer day, which meant that most mortals not cursed with unseelie blood thought it a fine opportunity to go outside. Most of the people in the park looked to be working class. Young ladies and their beaux promenaded along the gravel pathways, while others sat on the benches and whispered soft lies to one another. Some children played with a ball on the grass, laughing and shrieking.

The faelings drew a few odd looks. Between Bryan's dark skin, Duncan's wheelchair, Fox's half-ruined finery, and Mina's slave collar, they had to be by far the strangest-looking group there. *Don't mind us, just the annual meeting of the Losers Club*, Mina thought sourly. God, but they were a pathetic collection. How could any of them hope to elude the Seelie Court?

After a while, Bryan drifted off to talk to some young women by the park's small, nondescript fountain. Duncan cheerfully fed breadcrumbs to the pigeons, while Fox sat on the grass beside him and went back to her world of string. Mina ambled over to the Blackrush and started skipping stones over its troubled surface.

She wondered if she should have told Duncan about seeing the bean-nighe. He might not have been so eager for this outing if he knew she was going to die.

It's not set in stone, Mina told herself fiercely. She didn't know that for certain, of course. Duncan's books warned about putting too much faith in prophecy, and she extended that warning to the bean-nighe's death-sight as well. Whether it was valid to do so...who knew? She had to believe she had a chance to survive. Otherwise what was the point of anything?

I wish none of this had ever happened, she thought. *I wish I was normal, I wish there was nothing*

in my veins but human blood. I wish...

That I had never met Duncan? Or Bryan?

It was a lie. Damn it all to hell, but that was a lie, even knowing that death was coming for her because of it.

Even that was an assumption, of course. The death the bean-nighe had foreseen might have nothing to do with faelings. A fall into the machinery at the mill or an explosion of the cotton dust in the air—those would kill her just as quickly as a Hound. Hell, she might fall under a hansom cab on the walk home tonight.

The soft crunch of wheels sounded on the gravel path. Duncan came up beside her and looked out over the water. "I hope you aren't too angry," he said unexpectedly.

"About coming here? No. It was a good idea."

"Perhaps you would have rather spent the day with your friends, though."

"I thought I was." She threw another stone, watched it skip a few times and sink out of sight. *Just like life*, she thought. *You get thrown out with no one asking if it was what you wanted, you touch the world or other people a few times, and then...you just disappear. Gone.*

For the first time in a long while, Mina thought about her mother. Really thought about her, instead of just fighting off the memory of her death. Her hard life had made her hard in return. Sometimes it had seemed that she blamed Mina for her circumstances, as if the baby was just as guilty as the sire that got her.

"I'm glad you aren't angry," Duncan said finally. "It seems to me that you are angry a great deal of the time. I suppose you've a right to be."

"Maybe." Another stone left land for water. "Or maybe none of us has. Maybe we should just take what life gives us like anyone else."

"I don't believe that. We should struggle to change, to make our circumstances better. I wouldn't teach otherwise."

They went onto the dock. Mina sat at the very end, her legs dangling over the dark water. It occurred to her that the death coming for her might be the aughisky, lurking about, waiting to drown foolish young women who put their feet within its reach...

They talked for a while. Just talked, about things that had no life-or-death importance, while the sun got more and more westerly. Duncan spoke of his childhood home at Dahn—how the fog would hang over the meadows in the mornings. Mina remembered one or two funny stories from her days in the orphanage, mostly pranks the girls had pulled on one another, which made him laugh. The sun went down, and the stars came out. Mina sighed and leaned her head against the armrest of the chair beside her. After a few moments, she felt Duncan's fingers touch her hair, very lightly. The unexpected pleasure stole a small sigh from her.

"Why do they do it, Duncan?" she asked after a while, as the faintest stars of the Hunter finally became clear in the sky. "The fae, I mean. Why do they make us? Don't they even care?"

He thought about her question. That was one of the things she liked about him, she realized—he always seemed to consider her words carefully, as if she might say something important. Crazy that, to think a factory slave like her might have something insightful to say to a university man like him.

"I don't know," he said at last. His fingers touched her hair softly, rhythmically. "Perhaps they do it for the same reasons as mortals. Out of love, or lust. Perhaps they have motives beyond our understanding. I often wonder what becomes of the faelings sired by humans on fae women. Are they outcasts as we are? Or are they something more? The fae have a long-standing reputation for stealing human babies and leaving changelings in their place. But I've never heard that anyone knows what they do with them."

She sighed. "It must have been my father. He must have been fae. That's all I can think."

"I believe you're right. You're too strong to be anything less than half fae."

"Half fae, half human." She shook her head under his fingers. "You know, when I was growing up, I always dreamed that my father was a lord. My mother was a serving woman in a fine manor somewhere, you see—for the RiKenn family, I believe. She got pregnant with me and was turned out for immoral behavior. It didn't seem such a leap of the imagination to think that the lord was the one who knocked her up."

"I'd tell myself that the real reason she lost her job was that my noble father had fallen wildly in love with my mother, but his wife was jealous and made her leave. Of course my father hadn't known until it was too late. I told myself that he had looked and looked for us, but just couldn't find us. But someday, after I grew up, I'd go home. The jealous wife would be conveniently dead, and the lord would have no other heirs, because he'd never loved anyone else but my mother. He would welcome me with open arms, and I'd spend the rest of my life with servants and carriages and beautiful dresses. Stupid, huh?"

"Not at all."

"I used to dream that my father was noble. Now I dream that he was human. I think that's sad."

Duncan sighed. "Our dreams become smaller and more desperate as we get older, I think. The world strips more from us, until we'd trade anything just to get back what we once had."

"I wish that I knew my father. I mean, I wish that I knew why he did it. If there was any other motivation than plain lust."

"He may have been in love with your mother. If she never told you what happened, then you don't know that for certain. They may have loved one another very much."

Mina looked up at him sadly. "There's no such thing as love. I figured that out a long time ago. There's just lust and stupidity, with a few pretty words like 'love' to gloss them over."

She stood up abruptly, wrapping her arms around herself. "It doesn't matter why he did it—why any of them do it. The result is always the same. We're winter's orphans, Duncan. And, for us, spring will never come."

~*~

Duncan sat at the end of the dock and listened to Mina's retreating footsteps. Sadness took him. She was so young to be so hard. It didn't seem right, or fair.

He breathed in deeply, smelling the rank odor of the Blackrush, the cleaner wind that blew over it. God, but he was a fool, to sit on a dock and talk about love with a pretty woman half his age. Stupid, insane, completely mad.

He had thought it a bad mistake to take Mina on as his student. Now seemed like a good time to admit the truth of that to himself. But, try as he might, he couldn't regret it. Not even when she made him feel as

though he was hurtling down a hill with no way to brake.

CHAPTER TEN

During the weeks after the trip to the park, Mina's training continued apace. Over time she seemed to forget her fear of the Seelie Court and relax once again.

Only one thing happened during that time to disturb Duncan. And it disturbed him deeply.

"Damn it!" Mina swore furiously from her seat by the hearth.

Duncan looked up curiously, wondering what had set her so on edge. "What's wrong?"

Mina sat almost in the ashes, her head bent over a knot of tangled string laced around her fingers. Her short blonde hair gleamed faintly in the gaslight, her bowler hat having been tossed unceremoniously onto the mantelpiece, where it crowded Aerin's portrait. At his words, she looked up, and the expression on her sharp, feral features was troubled.

"This!" she exclaimed, thrusting out her string-entrapped hands. "Fox showed me how to use the string to see things far away. But I can't seem to get the knack of it. I must be doing something wrong. Could you show me how?"

Duncan suppressed a smile. "I'd love to, Mina, but I'm afraid I couldn't even if I understood how it works. That sort of thing is maiden's magic."

She frowned, a little line springing up between her dark eyebrows. The bright sun during their day at the park had brought up a scattering of freckles on her nose, which delighted Duncan for some reason. "So only women can do it?"

"Correct," he confirmed. "In fact, only women who have never been pregnant—those who are maidens rather than mothers—can cast the spell."

Mina stared at him for a moment, and to his surprise he saw anger flood her brown eyes like something rising from deep waters. Then, with a furious snarl, she flung the string into the ashes of the hearth.

"Is something wrong?"

"Damn it!" she shouted suddenly, standing up and aiming a kick at the hearthstones. Then she turned abruptly away, wrapping her arms around herself and biting the knuckle of one finger. "Fuck," she added in a small voice.

"Mina?" Duncan asked, becoming truly worried. "Are you all right?"

She sighed and dropped her arms. "Yeah. I'm just mad, I guess. It's just that I could really *use* this spell. I thought I might be able to keep an eye out for the Hounds and the Knights with it, somehow."

Puzzlement filled him. "I don't understand. Are you...have you borne a child?"

She wouldn't look at him. "Not to term."

"Oh." A sudden, horrible fear trickled into his stomach. It didn't sound as if her experience had been voluntary. "I...that is, would you like to talk about it?"

Her mouth twisted bitterly. "No. I'd rather keep your respect, if it's all the same to you."

"Nothing you could tell me would take that away."

"You don't know that." Her eyes narrowed suddenly, and for a moment she looked dangerous. "You don't know anything about me."

The words hurt. "You don't have to say anything if you don't wish to, and I would never pry. But if you would like to speak of it, then I'm prepared to listen and not judge."

Mina shook her head and looked away. "Like I said...."

"All right," he said, trying to remain calm through building anger. "But I meant what I said. I'm here if you need a friend."

She nodded mutely and went to pick up a book she had been studying, her unhappiness evident in every movement. Duncan tightened his grip on the chair and sincerely considered asking her for the bastard's name so that he could hunt him down and kill him.

Oh, yes, you are certainly the picture of the gallant protector, he mocked himself bitterly. An old man who can't even walk! Mina would just laugh at you if you offered, and rightly so. I am the worst kind of fool.

Besides, Mina doesn't need a protector. Not anymore.

Things had not gone for her as they should have. They had made her tough and strong as stone. The darkness of experience infused her magic and turned her already great power into a treacherous weapon.

But there were still vulnerable spots under the armor. There was still something soft in her. Nothing weak, but perhaps something gentle.

Perhaps, if his worst fears were right and a *dyana*'s power lurked hidden in her, there would be some hope for them after all.

~*~

Mina smoked the first cigarette of the day while she fixed breakfast for herself and Abby. At this time of morning, it was noticeably darker outside their window than it had been during the full strength of summer. Not much, but a little.

She wiped the sweat from her brow as she stirred the porridge. Something banged loudly against the wall behind her, and she winced. Their neighbors had been fighting since dawn, and she strongly suspected that the mouse-like wife was once again being beaten to within an inch of her life. One of the older sons had been yelling earlier, shouting at the father to stop, but he was still too young to have an adult's strength. Very possibly it was his head that had just rebounded off the wall.

Abby dragged over and sat down at their table, looking glum. Camilia hadn't come around for a while, and it had been weeks since Abby had last gotten word from her lover. Mina strongly suspected that Camilia was in the midst of negotiations for a husband, and wouldn't allow a rendezvous with a female factory slave to threaten her prospects. Perhaps Abby could be convinced to blackmail Camilia, once her immediate heartache had faded.

Mina glanced at Abby's sad face and decided probably not. Which was too bad, because they could surely have used the money.

The row next door finally quieted down during breakfast. Afterwards, Mina and Abby headed out and down the stairs, stepping around the battered and half-conscious body of the rebellious son. Mina shook her head and wondered why people bothered to even have children if they were only going to do this. Maybe they just wanted someone else to share their own misery.

For once, they got through the counting house well before the gates were to be shut. Mr. Parsim glared at them, his thinning hair lank with sweat against his sloping brow. The near-windowless building with the thick brick walls was not the best place to be in summer; Mina thought Parsim deserved every moment of suffering he got. Perhaps he could look upon it as a preview of his afterlife.

The coughing overtook her on the stairs, stronger than normal. "What the hell are they doing in the carding room?" she choked out. Abby, who was also coughing, only shook her head. The omnipresent cotton dust had settled into every crack and crevice in the mill, and Mina wondered what their lungs must look like after constantly breathing the stuff.

Mina threw the lever that started her looms and watched the white thread transform into an endless bolt of cloth. The roar and clangor of the mill rose up around her, isolating her with her thoughts. For a while her mind drifted, dragged intermittently back to reality whenever one of the machines required tending. Something prickled at the back of her mind, however, distracting her thoughts. Uneasiness had settled in her gut for some reason, and she found herself glancing back over her shoulder without cause, irrationally afraid that someone was coming up behind her, his approach muffled by the din of the looms.

Silly, she told herself firmly, but the thought lacked conviction. Perhaps she was being foolish. Perhaps fear of the Seelie Court and the bean-nighe's prophecy had finally worn her nerves to the point of breaking.

Perhaps. But when it came to magic, Duncan had warned her to be wary of any unexplained feelings or hunches.

She worked until she could stand it no longer. Throwing the clutch on the looms, she left her narrow alley and found Jacob. "I don't feel well!" she yelled into his ear over the roar of the machines. "I just need to step outside for a moment!"

He glowered at her. "Don't take long, girl! Fainting spells aren't going to pay your Contract!"

As if I didn't know that, Mina thought resentfully. Hunching up her shoulders, she slipped out of the weaving room and into the stairwell. A yellowed poster on the dank bricks reminded her that books were not allowed in the mill. She ripped it off in a sudden fit of anger and flung it on the litter-choked steps.

She went down two turnings, then stopped and listened. The continuous rumble of machinery sounded through the brick wall and throbbed beneath her feet. There came a faint scuffling sound, as if a foot had dislodged some of the trash littering the stairs, followed by a soft snuffling. The hair on Mina's neck tried to stand up, and she had to restrain the impulse to flee back up the stairs. Instead, she took a deep breath and eased her way as quietly as she could to the next landing.

They were on the landing below, visible only to her left eye as she peered around the corner. Pale-eyed, blank-featured Knights stood amidst their summer-glowing Hounds. They had stopped on the fourth-floor and seemed to be waiting for something. After a moment, the door swung open, and another Hound emerged. Its fur bristled on its back, and it growled softly.

They're searching for me, Mina thought, her heart threatening to beat through her ribs. *They're going floor-by-floor. Prince Roderick saw the slave collar on my neck—he must have decided that it*

wasn't a ruse after all.

She had to escape. But the stairwell that was her only exit was blocked. That left hiding and hoping to hell that they didn't find her. Trying not to breathe, she slipped back up the stairs, heading for the attic.

Duncan, Bryan, I need you, she thought in despair. I don't know if I can do this alone.

The door at the very top of the stairwell let Mina out into the attic. The close air was dark and ferociously hot. Old boxes and equipment lurked in towering piles all around her, turning the enormous room into a treacherous maze. Dust coated everything, and spider webs dangled from the ceiling. Despite her short height, she had to duck beneath the ponderous beams of the rafters.

Don't look up here, she willed the Hounds desperately. Leave when you don't see me below. Just leave.

She ran among the piled boxes until she came to a narrow crevice between stacks. Hunching down, she forced her body into it, until the shadows covered her completely.

Seelie faelings might not be able to see well in the dark, she reasoned, and if so the ruse might protect her.

For a long time there was nothing but the muffled rumble of machinery from below. Mina's heartbeat slowed a little, and her breathing evened out. It might have worked. After all, why would the Knights bother to look in a deserted storage attic, when they had no reason to believe that she would be hiding from them?

Something scraped softly against the door. Mina held her breath, not daring to move even the tiniest amount. Hinges squealed slowly. Claws clicked softly on the wooden floor, accompanied by the snuffling of a scenting Hound.

It can smell me.

She held herself motionless in her hiding place, still hoping that it would somehow pass her by. The *click-click-click* of claws grew louder, closer, following either her scent or the footprints she had left on the dusty floor. A long nose appeared around one corner of the boxes, followed by a canine head with piercing blue eyes.

Mina lashed out with a spell, shoving the Hound back into an unsteady tower of wooden pallets. She flung out one hand, calling her staff, and it was there, settling into her grip. Frost rimed the polished wood, making it slippery. She snatched shadow from the dusty rafters, wrapping herself and her staff in it. When the Hound snarled and lunged, she was ready with a weapon of shadow and cold. Physical bones crunched, and she felt the magical bonds that held together the Hound's unnatural flesh weaken before her onslaught. She drew in a breath, breathed out ice and snow and the darkness of winter. The Hound bit ineffectively at the staff...and died.

Mina jumped over its body and started to run. At this close distance, her pursuers would have sensed the magical skirmish, wards or no wards. Her only hope was to somehow get around them and away, before they began a battle in the middle of the other workers.

After that, she didn't know what to do, except head for the Blackrush and pray that the water gave her power.

Duncan carefully picked up the lens of the telescope he had been tinkering with. The glass had not been ground quite right, and he was attempting to fix it. If he did the job correctly, he would be able to show Mina the planets this weekend. It seemed something she might like, and it would be pleasurable to talk to her about something unconnected to faelings and magic.

Despite her lack of education, Mina had a natural intelligence that was quick to pick up almost any topic he cared to introduce. Her hunger to learn was something that he had only dreamed about with other students, and Duncan thought it would do no harm to expand his teaching into a wider area than he had before attempted.

A bit of philosophy as well, perhaps? he wondered, as he began polishing the lens with a soft cloth. God knew that it wouldn't hurt. The world had not done much to teach her ethics, as evidenced by her attempt to pass faery gold in the market. And, given her potential for destruction, that worried him more than a little.

Something moved in the corner of his eye, and a faint breath of power kissed his cheek. Startled, he looked up but saw nothing out of the ordinary. The sitting room was quiet. Tame shadows clustered in the hearth, and the lamps were dark. The ashes lay still in their bed, disturbed by no unseen wind. So it took him a moment before he realized that the problem lay not in what had been added to the room, but in what had been removed. The corner between chimney and wall looked lonely and bare, Mina's staff gone from its usual resting-place.

Mina had called her staff to her.

Fear thrummed suddenly in his veins, and the lens fell unheeded from his fingers to shatter on the floor. It was the middle of the day—Mina should have been at the factory. She should have no reason in the world to want a weapon with her.

But she did.

Duncan steadied himself and reached for the link he had formed with her the first time he'd had to track her. Against all reason, it was still there, like a sleeping animal nestled comfortably behind his breastbone. He touched it lightly and felt the reciprocating tug, pulling him north and east, towards the factory district.

"Hold on, Mina," he murmured, snatching up his hat. "I'm coming."

~*~

The coachman bundled Duncan out of the cab just as Bryan ran up. Duncan swore furiously, and then yelled to get his student's attention. Bryan stopped and stared, his eyes wild. His hair had come out of its tail, and he still wore a white apron tied over his clothes.

"Do you feel it? What the hell is it?" Bryan gasped. He was shaking hard, as if he had run the distance from his aunt's shop.

Duncan turned and looked up at the mill towering over them. The brick edifice was dank and dreary, its walls dark with soot. Tall windows stood open on each story, but he doubted they let in much of a breeze. A wide stream rushed past, emerging from a large building growing off the main one, and Duncan remembered Mina saying that Hobb Mill depended on a waterwheel to turn its main drive shaft.

"Mina needs our help," he said. "I suspect that the Seelie Court has finally found her. We need to get in there somehow."

"Mina said that they lock the main gate."

"Then take us through the wall."

"But every Knight or Hound in there will feel that!"

Duncan's hands tightened on the wheels of his chair. "I know. It might draw some of them off of her and onto us."

Bryan's mouth set in a grim line. He gripped the chair's handles and shoved them both through the brick wall with a ripple of darkness. They found themselves in a large, deserted courtyard; weeds grew out of cracks near the mill's foundation.

"Go on," he told Bryan. "Go on, damn you! Find her and get her out of there! I'll draw as many as I can to me."

"Will you be all right, old man?"

"Go!"

Bryan surrendered and ran for the single doorway. A man emerged from the building that guarded the gate behind them, yelling at Bryan and demanding to know who he was and how he had gotten in. Duncan ignored the commotion, instead aiming himself towards the structure that housed the waterwheel. The stream there might lend him some strength, if he found himself backed into a corner.

A single door barred his way into the building. He didn't even bother trying to get it open. Instead he reached for the stream, found its memory of winter ice, and flung it into the door. The old wood groaned, then burst into splinters as ice forced its fibers apart.

Mina could have done it without flinching. But the act took real strength out of Duncan. He swore, knowing that he would have caught the attention of Knights and Hounds well and good now. Fragments of the door tried to hinder his wheels, but somehow he got over the doorframe and inside.

The building was a dark slot just wide enough to house the waterwheel. The only light leaked through the destroyed doorway behind him. The wheel itself was titanic, stretching far up into the darkness above him. A huge iron drive was harnessed to it, rotating as the rushing stream pushed the wheel. The air smelled old and dank, and slime clung to the wet wood that dipped into the stream, and then rose again through shadow.

Shapes darkened the doorway. A Hound and Knight, Duncan saw. He withdrew farther into darkness, while the pair hesitated to enter a place so against their natures.

Come on, he thought. Come and get me, see if you can finish what your queen began.

The Hound entered first, huge paws snapping a last piece of wood. Its fur glowed softly in the shadows, and it sent up a low growling that stood the hair up on Duncan's arms. The Knight followed, drawing a bronze sword from the sheath on his hip. The weapon's glow showed an androgynous face surrounded by hair lank and limp as waterweeds. No thought or expression showed behind his hot, dead eyes.

The two split apart, trying to come at Duncan from either side. He held himself very still, not attempting to keep an eye on both, using only his magical sense of them to track their approach. The feel of them was alien, vastly different from any unseelie faeling, and he wondered if he would get any clue of their intention before they attacked.

The Hound lunged. Duncan flung his arm at it, and cobwebs and slime became a net of shadows that entangled its silver body. The Knight gave him no time to finish the Hound, throwing fire from his sword

and setting the arm of Duncan's coat ablaze. He smothered it with wetness from the air, used shadows to devour the next strike.

His arm hurt where fire had touched him, and his breath came hard. His enemies could drain him this way, playing with him, forcing him to use up his meager strength until he had none left. The thin remnants of fae blood in his veins would let him hold them off for a while, but ultimately his humanity would prove his downfall. He had to do something decisive to end things now.

The shadow net around the Hound disintegrated. The animal howled its triumph and charged Duncan again. He shifted the chair back quickly, felt one wheel catch on the stone lip of the stream channel—and then went over backwards into the water. He caught a confused glimpse of the waterwheel turning above him, then felt the rushing stream catch his body, dragging him with it. He flailed out wildly, his fingers brushing over slime-slick stones before they found purchase. Tightening his grip in the narrow crevices in the rock, he levered himself up so that his head was above water.

He was on the opposite side of the stream from the seelie faelings now. They both stared at him, clearly confused. Duncan gasped and moaned, laying his head against the stone curb. Let them think him more badly hurt than he was.

The Hound approached the stream's edge, ears pricked forward. It put one paw into the water, then jerked it back, shaking its foot as if it had been scalded by acid. The Knight advanced, wading into the stream before turning back and issuing a sharp command. Whining uneasily, the Hound followed him into the stream.

"Thank you," said Duncan.

The stream froze instantly, solid ice that bit into his too-human body. The drive shaft let out a scream of tortured metal as the waterwheel jammed. Fittings tore loose, and something broke with a resounding snap. The drive fell, clanging against brick and ice, dragging a good part of the waterwheel with it. Snow swirled madly through the air, everything going to frost and rime, and the remainder of the waterwheel groaned and began to slip sideways, cracking ice and bringing up dark water.

Hound and Knight both sent up a howling like the souls of the damned. The Knight jerked at the hand that held the sword, but it was frozen in the ice. Duncan's own legs and lower torso were in agony, but God, it was worth it, he had them—

The Knight's sword let out a hiss as it burned through the ice. The Knight lifted his arm and flung the blade, so that it struck the frozen stream at the base of the waterwheel. The ice shattered with a terrible crack, reverting to cold black water.

And the enormous waterwheel ceded the battle and toppled.

~*~

Two Knights rushed up the stairs as Mina came down. She slammed her staff into one, sending him sprawling. The other slashed at her with a venomous-looking sword, which she parried desperately. She reached into bricks that had once been clay, molded them around his feet and left him entrapped. Her next blow caught him on the chin, snapping his head back and breaking his neck. Leaving him to fall awkwardly on the stairs, she sprang over the body of his companion.

The baying of Hounds broke out from somewhere beneath. Mina readied herself, brought her staff down in an arc as she rounded a turning, and nearly flung Bryan back down the stairs.

She gaped at him. "Bryan! What the hell are you doing here?"

"I don't know!" he shouted. "We've got to get out of here!"

Footsteps sounded from below, whether human or faeling, Mina could not tell. She swore and dragged Bryan through the nearest door, out onto the fourth floor. Spinning machines hummed and sang, their startled operators turning to look as she and Bryan sprinted past. One of the overseers started yelling, and Mina wished that she had thought to glamour herself.

Then a sudden booming shock reverberated through the mill.

Machinery screamed, belts snapped, and the drive shaft nearly shook free of its moorings. Everything stopped at once, the endless voice of the machines silenced for the first time that Mina could remember.

In that silence, it was easy to hear the creak of the door opening. Mina turned and saw a Knight standing there, looking directly at her. He lifted his sword, and to her horror she saw flames running along its edge.

"No!" she screamed.

He made a whipping motion with the sword, and the flames burst free.

The air itself exploded.

A wall of heat and light and pain punched into Mina, flinging her back. Darkness and cold wrapped her instantly, shielding her from the flames even as they stole breath from her lungs. She struck something hard and sharp, and then hit the floor, another body beneath her. Half-blinded and deafened, she rolled to one side and discovered that it was Bryan.

Fire was everywhere: igniting pools of machine oil, devouring cotton thread, and racing along the wooden floors. Screams filled the air, and burning bodies thrashed in agony. There was a gaping hole in the wall where the Knight had been.

Mina staggered to her feet and was instantly overcome with coughing. Thick black smoke filled the air, obliterating even the light of the flames. She felt Bryan grab her hand, leading her through the maze of burning machines and charred bodies, past the tumbled rubble of the wall. Feet pounded on the stairs, and she saw other workers fleeing the fire, taking the only way out they had.

Bryan started to pull her into the press of bodies, but she jerked back. "No! I have to make sure Abby's all right! She was on the top floor!" Mina shouted above the roar of the flames.

"Don't be stupid! You'll get yourself killed!"

She tore away from him and battled her way up the steps. The fire had spread quickly, and smoke and flames boiled from the upper stories. Mina wrapped darkness around her, shutting away the smoke as best she could.

She emerged into the chaos of the upper floor. Driven back by the smoke coming up the stairwell, the weavers had fled to the far walls, or else opened windows and climbed out on the ledges. Flames were already eating at the floor, and Mina saw one of the heavy looms suddenly plummet through, disappearing into the fiery hell beneath. Bodies lay piled near the doorway, where some of the girls had been overcome by smoke. Mina paused long enough to check that none of them was Abby, then started in among the looms, praying that the floor didn't give way and drop her.

No dark magic would save her if that happened.

She found Abby crouched in front of one of the windows, walled in by flames and half-smothered by smoke. Burns showed on her face and arms, and tears of terror had made tracks in the soot around her eyes. Making sure that she had her darkness close about her, Mina stepped through the flames.

Abby's eyes grew huge at the sight of her. She had to look terrifying, Mina realized, cloaked in cold shadows and walking through fire. She reached out her hand to her friend.

"Abby! It's me! I can get you out of here! Come on, there isn't much time!"

Abby remained frozen by the window. "Mina? How—what—" she stopped, overcome by coughing.

"Come on, damn it! Come on, or we're both dead!"

Abby lunged at her, grabbed her hand, and hung on as if to life itself. Mina wrapped her arms around her friend, shielding them both from the fire as best she could. Somehow they made it back to the stairwell and down.

Mina banished her protection just before they emerged into the courtyard, so that no one saw anything more frightening than two girls miraculously saved from the flames. Hands grabbed them, bundling blankets around them and offering water. Mina stumbled with exhaustion, then turned and looked back.

The entire mill was in flames. Black smoke poured into the sky, blotting out the sun. There came a huge groan as one of the machinery-laden floors gave way, followed by a booming crash and an uprush of flame. A girl screamed and leapt from the top floor. Her body made a sickening thud when it hit the courtyard.

Abby made an animal sound of grief and fear. Mina put her arms about her friend, leading her away from the madness. The fire brigade was trying to put out the blaze, but it was clear to everyone that keeping the sparks from spreading the fire to any other buildings would be the best they could hope for. Men dragged away the bodies of those who had jumped from the upper floors to escape the flames, stacking them up in one corner to await transport to the morgue.

They emerged from the crowd watching the scene. Mina glanced back again and saw to her surprise that the building housing the waterwheel had been destroyed as well. Wooden planks and chunks of ice floated in the stream. One fragment bobbed to the surface...and she recognized the smashed wreckage of a wheelchair.

Sudden terror gripped her, worse than she had felt even in the heart of the flames. Bryan had been on the stairwell. Could Duncan have been far behind?

Men were standing around the stream, dragging something out of it. She caught a glimpse of pale skin and long, gray-brown hair. One of the men leaned down as if to check a pulse, and then shook his head. The rest lifted the body and began to carry it towards the rapidly accumulating pile.

"No," Mina whispered.

Then she was running heedlessly across the courtyard. "No!"

Bryan struck her from the side, arms wrapping around her waist and dragging her to a halt. She fought him blindly, screaming. "No! That's Duncan, Bryan, it's Duncan, and they're taking him away!"

"Don't make a scene, Mina!" he hissed, trying to drag her back. "We have to get out of here while we have a chance, before any more Knights or Hounds show up!"

"But they're taking Duncan! They've made a mistake!"

"He's dead, Mina!" Bryan's own voice cracked. "He bought us a chance to get away. We have to take it."

She shook her head, trying to deny the evidence. Then Abby was there, looking scared and worried and confused. She turned from Mina to where men were tossing Duncan's body on top of the others, as carelessly as if he were nothing more than a piece of wood.

"I'm sorry, Mina," Abby managed. "Was that your friend?"

In response, Mina leaned her head against Bryan's shoulder and cried.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"It doesn't seem possible," Bryan said, wiping at his eyes with the back of his hand. "We were supposed to meet tonight. I think he was going to make me read some horrid scroll. I just...it isn't possible."

They had gone back to the theater, not knowing what else to do. But every object, every scent, every texture was an agonizing reminder of what they had lost. There was Duncan's violin propped in its case near the corner. There was the last book he had been reading, lying in a chair with his place carefully marked. An odd scattering of glass made walking treacherous near the large table, but Mina didn't have the strength to clean it up.

She shook her head, feeling numb. "What are we going to do?"

Bryan went and leaned against the chimney. "Oh God, I don't believe it. He can't be gone." He closed his eyes. "My Dad died when I was just a kid. Even when he was alive, he was mostly down at the pub—didn't pay much attention to me. Duncan...he may have been bossy and weird and insufferable, but at least you always felt like he knew you were there. Like he respected you." He sniffled suddenly. "I'd give anything to have him here, lecturing me about keeping my wards up."

"I'm sorry about your friend," Abby said. She had followed them silently, perhaps in the blind hope of getting some sort of explanation. Mina hadn't had the heart to send her away. "I really am. But I need to know what's going on. I *saw* you in the fire, Mina. What did you do? What happened at the mill? Are we in danger?"

Mina sighed. She felt so tired. Her clothing was a ruin of soot and small burns. Heat had penetrated her cloak of darkness, leaving the skin of her face and hands reddened and raw. Bryan and Abby were in little better shape, and it occurred to her that they should at least attempt to wash. But any action seemed an impossible effort.

"We're in danger, Abby," Mina agreed numbly. "Bad trouble. I wanted to tell you before, but I thought that you would be safer if I kept you out of it. My...my secret isn't pretty. You might not like what I have to tell you."

Abby rose to her feet and came over to where Mina sat. She put her three-fingered hand gently over the back of Mina's own. "I know *you*, Mina Cole," Abby said quietly. "You helped me when I needed it most. You saved my life today. Nothing you can tell me can change that."

"Maybe." Mina drew a deep breath. "Remember a few months ago, when the new girl was dragged into the machinery? Remember how the belt broke?"

Bryan left halfway through Mina's meandering tale. Seeking solitude for his grief, maybe, when every sentence brought back poignant memories of Duncan. Abby sat silently through it all, but the look on her face was one of worry and compassion, not condemnation, and for that Mina was infinitely grateful.

She didn't think she could bear losing Abby as well.

When Mina had finished, Abby shook her head thoughtfully. "It seems hard to believe," she admitted. "I knew that something strange was going on with you, but...if I hadn't seen what you did tonight, I would think your story came from too much bad whiskey."

"I wish it wasn't true. I wish it was all just a bad dream."

Abby glanced down, and then put one hand on Mina's shoulder. "I'm sorry for what happened tonight. I wish that I could have met Duncan. Did he know you loved him?"

Tears welled unexpectedly in Mina's eyes. *It's not true*, she wanted to say. She felt as though she had been walking through a dark wood and had stepped in the jaws of a hidden trap.

"Of course he didn't know," she replied bitterly. "I didn't even know it myself."

~*~

Cold was the only thing Duncan knew. Cold everywhere: enveloping his body, smothering his senses, and turning his blood sluggish in his veins. His heart beat slow and faint, but every pulse sent spikes of pain through his chest. His mind was fogged about with an icy mist, hiding the immediate past and scattering thought.

It had been almost forty years since the last time he had done this. Then he had been young, strong, and surrounded by faeling family members ready with blankets and hot water to help him revive. *Use this only in desperation*, his mother had counseled. *It's a last-ditch effort, a final attempt to confuse your enemies into leaving you for dead. Never use it if you don't have to. There's too fine a line between slowing your heart with cold...and actually stopping it.*

She was right, he thought deliriously. His heart faltered, and not even the thin, infrequent breaths that he had been drawing stirred his lungs now.

He was dying.

Except that something disturbed the icy darkness about him—something pulled, nagged and called him back from the well into which he was slowly sinking. Duncan tried to ignore it, but it was insistent, latching onto him with a terrifying strength and refusing to let him fall.

Someone wanted him; someone needed him—that much he comprehended. He thought for a confused moment that it was Aerin, before remembering that she was dead, and that she'd never had such power over him. He thought of iron and collars, but words failed him. There was nothing but the demand that he rise.

He fought to draw breath, unable to break free of the insistent call. It hurt; his lungs felt raw and stiff. His heart lurched about erratically, sending pain through his chest and arms. Gradually, sensation returned to his fingers and toes, a tingling like a thousand tiny teeth biting his skin.

He was cold. God, he was cold. The faeling part of him could stand it, but it was killing the human. Bone-deep shivering racked him; his teeth chattered. Somehow, he managed to open his eyes. There was nothing but a blur that might have been a ceiling. His spectacles were gone, he realized, along with

the rest of his clothing. He lay naked on a cold, hard surface. The stench of roasted flesh and smoke filled the air, accompanied by an undercurrent of death. Nausea twisted his stomach, and he turned his head and vomited weakly.

I can't come to you, he thought dizzily. God, I can't even move.

But the call refused to acknowledge as much.

He didn't know how long he lay there, half-waking and half-dreaming. Chills bit his flesh, and darkness beckoned, but the summons he felt refused to let him slip back into unconsciousness. After what seemed like an eternity, he heard the scrape of a door, wood on stone. A shape came between him and the light, and he blinked blearily up, for a moment thinking that the call had brought his summoner to him instead.

"Poor Duncan," Fox said sadly. "Poor little girls, all burned up. I can see their ghosts trying to get free."

"Fox," he managed to whisper. "Help me."

She bent over him, her brunette curls brushing his face. "I came to get you," she confided. "I dreamed of fire. I saw them put you here in the cold, and I didn't think you'd like it."

"Please," he whispered, closing his eyes from weakness.

He heard the squeak of wheels. Fox gripped him beneath his arms, dragging him off the table he had been laid out on. His body hit the floor hard, sending pain racing along every nerve. Then she was pulling on him again, hoisting his unresponsive body up. A wooden edge scraped skin from his side; then he fell a short distance, to find himself lying on splintery wood that smelled unpleasantly of mussels. Fox maneuvered his legs inside and flung a heap of coarse blankets on him. The surface he lay on tilted and began to move.

It's a cart, he realized. A small handcart, like the ones vendors pushed down the roads while calling out their wares. He wondered where she had gotten it.

"I have to go..." he managed to say. "I *have* to..." But strength failed him, and he closed his eyes to darkness, buoyed only by the certainty that the one who called him would not allow him to fall.

~*~

"What are we going to do?" Mina asked quietly.

Bryan had returned and settled himself on his stool by the hearth. He looked wretched, his eyes rimmed in red, his curly hair ragged around his face.

"I don't know," he said wearily. "Go on as best we can, I suppose. Maybe we should make an inventory of what's here, in case there's something that can help us. Not that we're likely to understand half the books without Duncan explaining every other word, but we should try."

"But what about *us*?" Abby asked. She sat on the divan, a shawl from the prop room swaddled about her shoulders. "I mean, Mina and me. The mill burned down—we don't have jobs anymore. And we're living in company housing, on company credit—where are we going to go, how are we going to eat?"

Mina rubbed tiredly at her eyes. "We'll have to find work somewhere else."

"I hope we can."

Someone knocked sharply on the outer door. Bryan and Mina exchanged surprised looks. "Who the

hell?" Bryan muttered, taking up his staff before he went to the door. Mina picked up hers and followed him, Abby behind her. The way this night was going, Mina more than half expected to find a battalion of Knights waiting in the alley.

But it was only Fox, dressed in her usual soiled finery. Her mad eyes almost glowed in the darkness of the alleyway. "Brought him to you," she said cryptically and tried to push a mussel-seller's cart through the door.

"What are you doing?" Bryan demanded, exasperated. "What is this?"

Fox glowered at him. "Bringing him to you," she repeated. She pulled aside one of the blankets heaped in her cart, exposing a pale face.

Mina felt as though her heart had stopped. Grief tightened fingers around her throat, cutting off her breath. Duncan looked old in death, the lines around his eyes and mouth deeply etched. His face appeared oddly vulnerable without the gold-rimmed spectacles.

"He was in the death-place, with the burned girls," Fox confided.

"You brought his body back," said Bryan, voice hoarse. He put his hand to his mouth, as if to hold back a sob. "Th-thank you. We'll—we'll see that he gets a proper burial, instead of ending up an unknown corpse in potter's field. At least we can do that for him."

Duncan's eyelids fluttered, revealing crescents of white. Mina gasped and dropped down by him, staring frantically at his face, telling herself that it was nothing more than some last spasm of a dead body.

"D-Duncan?"

He blinked slowly. His lips worked, and he breathed out something that might have been her name.

"Bryan!" she shouted, even though Bryan was right beside her. "He's alive, he moved!" She managed to find a hand beneath the blankets, and then drew in a distressed breath. "He's like ice."

Bryan touched him with a shaking hand. "You're right. Oh God. All right, we need to get him warm. I'll draw a hot bath. You make some tea."

"I'll get it," Abby interposed. "Mina, stay with him."

Mina didn't argue. She wrapped both her hands around Duncan's, brought his fingers to her lips, and tried to blow warmth into his cold flesh. "Stay with me, Duncan. Don't you even think about dying now."

He swallowed convulsively, and then licked his lips. "M-Mina?"

"Yeah, it's me. No, you haven't died and gone to hell, just the theater."

"I heard you calling," he whispered nonsensically. His eyes fluttered open, then closed. "Cold."

"I know. We're going to help you, all right? Just hang on." She blinked back sudden tears. "What happened to you? I saw the men check your pulse—they thought you were dead."

"No. Kn-Knight 'nd Hound. Tricked 'em. Take the cold, make ever' thing slow down. Think you're dead. Dangerous."

"So I see." Mina tenderly brushed his long hair out of his face. "Don't you *ever* do anything like this again, Duncan RiDahn, or I'll make you wish you *were* dead. Hear me?"

He managed the ghost of a smile. "You all right? Hurt?"

"I'm fine, everyone's fine." Footsteps came down the hall, and she turned to see Bryan's worried face.

"I've got the bath ready," he said. He bent over the cart and lifted Duncan out, blankets and all. "We're going for a little trip, old man, just over to the bath. Got some nice warm water for you."

Mina rose with him, still holding Duncan's hand. "I'll help you."

Bryan rolled his eyes at her. "Think about it, Mina. You'll kill the old man with embarrassment."

"But—"

"I'll call you if I need you."

Bryan left, bearing Duncan with him. Feeling a relief greater than anything she had ever imagined, Mina wandered back to the sitting room. Fox crouched on the hearth, making her endless cat's cradles.

"Thank you," Mina said.

Fox looked up. "Here." She fished about in her shawl for a moment, then withdrew two things and pressed them into Mina's hands. The first object was Duncan's spectacles. The right lens had been cracked, and the frames were badly bent.

The second was nothing Mina recognized. It was a small leather bag, tied tight with a piece of red string and adorned with an odd assortment of feathers and tiny bones. The whole dangled from a long string, as if meant to be worn as a necklace.

It probably was nothing of Duncan's, but instead merely something that had caught Fox's eye. Mina shrugged and put it on the table with the spectacles, where Duncan could find both later on.

Abby came in, bearing a tray laden with tea. "I've already taken a pot to Bryan," she said. "But I thought the rest of us might as well have some too." She took a long look at Fox, clearly baffled. "Um, is she one of you as well?"

"Unseelie faeling? Yes." Mina shrugged, intending to convey that Fox was as much a mystery to her as to Abby.

They dozed in the sitting room as the night marched on into the small hours. Bryan came with infrequent reports. Duncan had soaked and taken tea, and at length revived enough to start complaining about the inconvenience of having to replace both spectacles and wheelchair. There then ensued an argument over whether or not Duncan should be put straight to bed, which predictably ended with Bryan bringing him into the sitting room and putting him on the divan.

Duncan looked terrible. Bruises ringed both eyes, and his face was drawn and haggard. The lack of any healthy color in his cheeks was accentuated by the dark dressing gown Bryan had bundled him up in. Someone had taken his earrings, Mina noted with a flash of annoyance.

"Um, this is my friend Abby," Mina said by way of introduction.

Duncan managed an elegant nod, despite the fact that he looked on the verge of collapse. "A pleasure. I've heard a great deal about you."

Bryan started to put a comb to Duncan's still-damp hair.

"Here," said Mina, figuring that Bryan had done enough for one night. She stood behind the divan, slowly combing the tangles out of Duncan's long hair, trying not to pull too hard. Gaslight shone off the silver streaks amidst the brown. Duncan simply closed his eyes and relaxed.

"Tell me what happened, Mina," he said without bothering to open his eyes. "Start at the beginning, and leave out no detail. I particularly want to know every spell you cast."

"You should be in bed."

"Just tell me."

She shrugged and did as he asked. When she was done, he sighed heavily. "It sounds as though the Seelie Court found you through a random search of the factories, not because they truly knew you were there. You should be safe for a while."

"Maybe." She set the comb aside. "I hate this."

Duncan reached up, and she gave him her hand. The lack of strength in his fingers frightened her. "I know," he said gently. "Don't despair. We have beaten them once, and we can do so again, if necessary. Eventually, they will tire of looking for you. I still have hopes of getting you out of the city."

She didn't think his optimistic words had much to do with reality at the moment. They might have defeated this attempt, but what about the next one? Looking at the worn faces of her friends, she thought that they would be in serious trouble if the Seelie Court came at them again anytime soon.

"I'm very tired," Duncan said. "You should be safe in your apartment for the nonce."

Mina made a wry face. "Yeah. The landlord won't have kicked us out of it yet." She stood up and beckoned for Abby to follow her. "I'll come by tomorrow to check on you."

~*~

"You see," said Camhlaidh, "you used the power to save yourself today."

Mina had sent Abby on to the apartment, with a promise that she would be in soon. Dawn was not far off as she made her way through the streets to the bridge where she had last seen the fae. Newspaper boys already hurried through the streets, lugging heavy stacks of the early edition to their corners. Mina had glimpsed the blaring headline "Deadly Fire" surmounting an artist's rendition of the burning mill.

"I saved myself by calling Duncan and Bryan to me," Mina said quietly. "But I almost got Duncan killed in the process. I *can't* do this anymore. Not ever again."

"I'm glad to hear that you are a creature of such restraint," Camhlaidh said, and she knew that he mocked her.

"You don't think I should stop using the magic."

"You see only evil in your power. But what if I told you that you saved the life of your Duncan? Ah, I see you didn't realize that. The little spark of his life was fading away—

done in by his own spell. That makes me question his credentials as a teacher. But you wanted him alive. Your need shored up his will."

"Why should I believe you? Why should I believe anything you tell me?"

Camhlaidh's eyes glowed out of the darkness like two red coals. "You're a smart girl, Mina. I'm sure you'll come to your own conclusions."

And then he was gone.

~*~

Mina realized that she was dreaming when Duncan stood up to greet her. It was a beautiful fall day in the park, with the trees shedding their leaves in a blaze of red and gold. He had been sitting at the base of a tree, doing nothing that she could discern.

"Mina," he said, not as if he had expected her, but as if he was glad to see her.

She came over and took his hand. He led her back to his seat beneath the tree. A bottle of wine came from nowhere, and he poured her a glass. She took it and drank; it tasted like strawberries and flowers.

"You scared me today," she said, once she had drained the glass.

He looked at her quizzically, as if she had said something shocking. The look was so characteristic of him that it made her laugh. Her inhibitions went the way they sometimes did in dreams, and she leaned over and kissed his cheek.

"Ah," he said, sounding relieved. "It is just a dream, after all."

It seemed such an odd thing for one of her own dreams to say that she laughed again. He poured them both another glass of wine and put his arm around her, so that she could lean her head back against his shoulder and watch the sun go down in contentment.

~*~

Duncan blinked to wakefulness. For a moment, his surroundings made no sense, so vivid had the dream been. Then he realized that he was alone in his bed, in pain but safe for the moment, and felt a sharp pang of disappointment.

The dream had seemed so real, so unlike the vague shadows that usually filled his nights. He wondered briefly if it had been more than a simple dream. He'd come across references to such things in his reading, tales of faelings whose closeness and affection for one another resulted in the sharing of dreams.

But then he remembered that the dream-Mina had kissed him, and knew that the dream had been his alone. Like so much else in his life, it had been just a fantasy.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Mina awoke after only a few hours of sleep. Factory bells were tolling from somewhere in the city, but none of them now called to her. She sat up slowly, her entire body stiff. The skin of her face and hands still ached from the mild burns she had sustained. Abby moaned softly on her own pallet, and then rolled over to stare at the ceiling. Mina wondered how many more times either of them would have the luxury of that poor, squalid sight.

The building around them was unnaturally quiet. Mina got up and started to make breakfast, wondering how much of the silence came from the fact that those who had tenanted the other apartments were now dead. Abby finished dressing and sat at their table, staring at Mina in open curiosity.

"So it wasn't all just a dream. You really do have strange powers."

"And the royal family after my hide," Mina reminded her wryly. "You might want to look for another roommate once we manage to find work somewhere."

Abby sighed and touched the iron collar around her throat. "No. You're one of the few good things that's happened to me since I became indentured. Besides Camilia, that is. I'll have to let her know when we move."

Mina poured their usual oatmeal into two bowls and carried it to the broken table. "Do you think she would be willing to help us?" she asked matter-of-factly.

Abby bit her lip. "I'll ask her. If I can get word to her."

Damn Camilia, anyway, Mina thought uncharitably. The woman had enough money to get Abby out of that collar.

"So," Abby said after a long pause, "that was Duncan?"

Mina glanced at her suspiciously. "Yes."

"He was older than I expected."

"Duncan is *not* old!"

Abby held up her hands in a gesture for peace. "Just a comment, Mina, don't get upset. So...you're interested?"

"I guess," said Mina, wondering where this was going.

"You got a preventative?"

Mina felt her face go red. "What? No!"

"Why not?"

"They're damn expensive, for one thing."

"Not as expensive as being unable to work because you're carrying! I'm trying to look out for you, Mina."

Mina took a deep breath and tried to quit blushing. Abby certainly knew how to get to the point. "I appreciate your concern, I do. And I think there might be spells for that kind of thing, though I haven't exactly gotten up the nerve to ask Duncan how to work one. But I don't think I'm going to be needing anything in either case."

Abby's eyes widened. "Because of his injury? Or whatever the reason is that he can't walk?"

"God! I don't know! I hadn't even thought of that! It's just that a man like Duncan isn't going to be interested in an ignorant factory slave like me. He went to the *university*, Abby. He's got a noble name, even if he doesn't have the money to go with it anymore."

Abby looked skeptical. "He does?"

"All right, so the theater doesn't look it. Duncan's a little eccentric. Trust me."

"But what does that have to do with anything? You're young and pretty. Or you would be, if you'd let your hair grow out. Maybe you could take some of his."

Mina made a face at her. "And since when are you an expert on what's attractive in men? Besides, it takes more than young and pretty. Do you remember Nicole talking about how her mama used to be a chambermaid in one of the wealthy houses? These noble families will hire women to sleep with their sons. I think they call them 'companions' or something. Anyway, these women have to have fine manners, they have to be able to talk about current events, recite poetry, whatever. Men like Duncan, even their whores have to be able to quote the *Lay of Belari*."

Abby didn't seem convinced. "If you say so," she said skeptically. "But I wish you would reconsider the preventative, just to be on the safe side."

Mina shoved her oatmeal away, suddenly depressed. "I wish I had to worry about it, Abby. Let's take a walk."

They left the apartment and followed the route they had taken every day for eight years. Newspaper boys stood on the corners, yelling out the headlines: "Terrible Fire Destroys Hobb Mill! Cotton Dust Explosion Suspected!" "Hundreds Burn to Death in Mill Fire!" "Rescuers Still Search for Bodies at Site of Hobb Mill Disaster!"

And it *was* a disaster. Although the outer wall and gate were still intact, little remained of the building within. Mina and Abby found perhaps twenty or thirty other workers standing in the courtyard, staring up at the ruins of what had been all their livelihoods. The building itself appeared to be totally gutted, nothing left but a brick shell turned black from heat and soot. The air stank of smoke and burned flesh. A few men moved around the edges of the ruins, perhaps still looking for the bodies of those who had not survived.

"I wonder...I wonder if Julia made it out," Abby whispered in horror. "Or Catherine, or Nigel, or Jacob."

"They say everyone from the fifth floor up died," said one of the other girls standing near them. "They say the smoke was too bad in the stairwell for them to get out." Her voice broke into a sob, and she covered her face with her apron.

Mina turned away, feeling a mixture of sickness and rage. All their friends, women they had worked beside for years, gone.

"The Seelie Court did this," she whispered to Abby. "Damn them to hell. Maybe Aerin had the right idea after all."

~*~

"*This* is the result of your hunt for the unseelie faelings?" Rhiannon demanded. She leaned forward, so that she sat on the very edge of her throne. Her eyes were like thunder, and her right hand balled into a fist.

Roderick stood at the foot of her dais, his green eyes bright with fury. "*You* became obsessed with finding her," he snapped back. "You were the one who ordered me to search the factories until she was located!"

"And you can't tell me whether or not she's even dead!"

"She *is* dead. I assure you."

The Queen of Niune sat back and chewed delicately at a fingernail. Roderick's pride and stubbornness

had seemed attractive when he had first come to manhood. Now it seemed childish and galling. Perhaps lying with him had been a mistake. Perhaps everything she'd done in the last thirty-five years had been mistaken.

Dagmar's high, sweet voice rang over the throne room. "And what of the humans who worked with the faelings? Almost two hundred of them died in the fire."

Rhiannon turned in annoyance and found her daughter standing behind her in the small door that let out onto the dais. Dagmar's hair, a bizarre admixture of white and black, hung about her elfin face like that of a madwoman who had not seen a comb in decades. Her parti-colored eyes flashed with an odd sort of rage mixed with disdain.

"What of them?" Rhiannon snapped. "They are my subjects. It is their duty to live and die as I wish."

"They *were* your subjects. Most of them were probably loyal to you. To us."

Rhiannon made a dismissive motion with her hand. "Go away, Dagmar. These are things that you would understand if you had been out in the world as I have."

"And why can't I? Oh yes, that's right, because I'm an abomination. Your failed experiment."

"Get out," Roderick snarled, eyes narrowing.

Dagmar gave him an odd little smile, turned, and left.

~*~

"They're monsters, Duncan. Monsters!"

Duncan gave a tired sigh and rubbed at his eyes. He looked awful this morning. Lacking a wheelchair, he lay on the divan, still wrapped in a dressing gown. "I understand your rage, Mina," he said soothingly.

She kicked at one of the stones making up the cold hearth. "You don't understand, Duncan. You can't! Almost two hundred people died yesterday because of them! All because I happened to be there!"

"You can't blame yourself," he pointed out.

Mina stopped pacing, trembling with fury. Reason wasn't something she wanted right now. No matter what Duncan said, she had brought herself to the attention of the Seelie Court—her actions had begun the chain of events that ended with the fire. "I do blame myself. But I blame them more. Not only can't they let us live in peace, but they don't care if anyone else lives either!"

"I'm not insensitive to what you're going through."

"Yes, you are!"

"Must I remind you that I've lost people I cared about as well," he said sharply.

Mina glowered at the portrait on the mantel. *Oh, yes, the precious Aerin.* Of course, he had lost his family as well, but she was not in the mood to consider that at the moment. "But this was more than just faelings against faelings."

"I know. And to be honest, I don't understand it. The Seelie Court has never done anything like this before. They have always been very careful to keep their activities discreet."

"Is that what burning all those people to death was? *Indiscreet*?" She kicked the hearth a second time for good measure. "Damn it, Duncan, what will they do next?"

"I don't know. But I know what we will do. We will keep our heads and not do anything foolish."

"We have to do something! We can't just stand by and let this happen!"

Duncan's eyes narrowed. "And just what are you proposing?"

Mina sighed and shoved her hands back through her short crop of hair. "We need allies. Allies strong enough to stand up to the Seelie Court. There are unseelie fae in this city, I've seen them. If we could contact something like the aughisky—"

"Absolutely not!" Duncan yelled, slamming his fist hard against the table. Mina jumped, shocked at his vehemence.

"But if we could—"

"No! No, no, and no!" He stopped, made a visible effort at controlling his anger. "You will not go near any fae, Wilhelmina Cole. They are dangerous, and they do not care about you. And you will not talk about 'standing up' to the Seelie Court, either. If you try anything against them, they will surely kill you, and probably the rest of us as well. Do you want Bryan to die? Or Abby?"

"No. But—"

"No objections." He scowled at her. "If I ever hear such talk from you again, you will leave this place and never return. I have better things to do than waste my time on silly girls with a death wish. Do you understand me?"

"Perfectly." She folded her arms across her chest, furious and defensive. "It was only an idea."

"Then respect me as your teacher, and listen when I say that it was a bad one."

Mina nodded unhappily. "I'm listening. I won't do anything, I promise."

"Very well, then." He settled back. "See that you don't."

She turned away. "I should leave. Abby and I have to find new jobs. Hobb Mill won't be rebuilt, and the apartments for the company workers will revert to the landlord at the end of the week. We have to find work before then. And with everyone else who survived the fire out of work as well, competition will be heavy for whatever jobs are available."

Duncan sighed. "I'm sorry. For everything. Come back tonight, if you have time."

"I will. I might as well make the most of my opportunity to learn now, in case I end up spending the next ten years in debtors' prison."

~*~

Duncan listened to the sound of Mina's departure and forced himself to relax. Debtors' prison indeed! It made him angry, just as the collar around her neck made him angry. Well, he would not see her imprisoned, no matter what he had to do to prevent it.

He reached into a convenient drawer and pulled out the book he had been reading on Mina's arrival. It was a book on faeling *dyanas*, and he had hidden it from her as if his suspicion was a shameful secret.

His hand went involuntarily to the amulet hidden beneath his robe, and he felt like a traitor. But at the same time, he was deeply glad that Fox had managed to save the charm along with his spectacles.

Nothing seemed certain anymore. Something had called him back from the edge of death the night before, when he had been briefly deprived of the amulet. And Bryan could give no real explanation as to why he suddenly decided to rush over to Hobb Mill in the middle of the day.

None of which meant that Mina was a *dyana*. Some faelings could at times sense things out of the ordinary—Bryan might have known that Mina was in danger through some intuitive power of his own. And as for Duncan's experience...he had been dying. Everything from the time he had waked in the morgue was nothing but a blur, and it was more than possible that he might have hallucinated the whole thing.

But if it had been real...then someday, Mina would discover the control she could exert over other unseelie faelings. What she did with that realization would determine the lives of every unseelie faeling in the city, perhaps in all of Niune. And the world had not prepared Mina to understand mercy. Or kindness. It had taught her only that those with power ruled over those without. If she was what he feared, now was the time to make the hard choices, before she came into her own. Before she became unstoppable.

If she wasn't already.

The day that Mina decided that her power was an excuse to become like the worst of her own abusers was the day his students lost any pretense to freedom. Mina as a *dyana* could do almost literally anything she wanted with them.

She wasn't safe, damn it all. He had sensed that from the first day they met. She could so easily turn into something terrible. She was a threat to every unseelie faeling. And Duncan was the only one in any real position to stop her.

When Aerin had spoken of being a *dyana*, it had seemed beautiful and grand. He'd been too young and in love to see the threat. He'd already been her slave in every way that counted—it had never occurred to him that others would not hunger after such enslavement.

There was only one way to be sure Mina was not a threat to their kind. His power could not hope to stand up to hers—but it didn't need to, either. A little poison in her teacup would do just as well. She might not even realize what had happened.

He closed his eyes. It hurt too much to contemplate. Realistically, he knew he could never bring himself to do any harm to Mina, no matter what the provocation. He supposed that this meant he had failed his own kind, taken the coward's path yet again.

That left only one option. To be kind to her, to try to be her friend, and perhaps in that way give her some reason to stay her hand when the time came. It might work. Might at least persuade her to talk to him when she discovered the power in herself, and thus give him some warning of what was to come.

Or it might not. And then they would be no better off than the hapless seelie faelings, whose bodies and souls the Seelie Court twisted to make the Knights and Hounds. Then Mina would have the war she wanted.

And Duncan didn't know that it mattered who won.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

That afternoon, Mina and Abby started their search for a new job. They walked down to the segment of town largely dedicated to factories, where Hobb Mill had once stood. Its burned-out hulk stared hauntingly from over the brick wall as they went past.

They began with other textile mills, hoping that their experience would serve them in good stead. The first two simply turned them down—there were no openings available, although Starnes Textiles was planning on expanding their work force next month.

"Too late to help us," Mina said regretfully. The rather sad-looking overseer nodded sympathetically. His mill had in fact lost a golden opportunity—if the fire had coincided with the expansion more closely, they could have employed the survivors of Hobb Mill and found themselves with trained workers, rather than the unskilled, newly-indentured that they were likely to get instead.

Their third stop was Gothin Wool Unlimited. The accountant let them through the gate and counting house, and then called a small boy to fetch the overseer. After a long time waiting in the clattering shadow of the mill, the overseer finally slouched out the main doors. Mina and Abby quickly stood straight, facing him nervously. He eyed them both insolently, lingering on Mina.

"Are you a boy or a girl?" he finally asked, derision edging his tone.

Mina bit back a smart reply. She had dressed in a shirt and trousers for so long at Hobb Mill that no one had even thought twice about it anymore.

"I worked at Hobb Mill since I was eight," she said, deciding to ignore his comment. "Started as a bobbin doffer, worked up to spinner, then dresser. I've been on the looms since I was sixteen."

Abby offered him her own list of qualifications. His eyes on her were avaricious.

"Well," he said, scratching his chin thoughtfully, "I do have a few openings. I want to make sure that I only give them to quality girls, though."

A chill went through Mina. "What does that mean?"

"It means you come back here looking more like something sweet, and you might have a chance." He shifted his eyes back to Abby. "As for you...come inside, and we'll talk about it."

Mina stared at him, the knowledge that she could hurt him very clear to her in that moment. She could set a chill in his bones that would eat away the marrow. She could blind his eyes forever with darkness, or fray apart the muscles in his arms. She could make William's death seem like a quick and merciful act.

Instead she grabbed Abby by the arm and dragged her towards the gate. The overseer spat on the pavement behind them. "Go on, darling, see how uppity you are in prison! There's plenty of other Hobb girls looking for work!"

Once outside, Abby tugged on Mina's arm to slow her. They sat down on a curb a few blocks away, Abby staring at a puddle rain had made in the street and Mina smoking one of her last remaining cigarettes.

"Maybe we shouldn't have been so hasty," Abby said at length.

Mina turned to her friend in surprise. Abby looked small and forlorn, her shoulders hunched beneath the thin cotton of her blouse. Her black curls straggled about her face and shoulders, and Mina thought she

would not have been out of place on some wild moor.

Mina put an arm around her friend's shoulders for comfort. "Don't say that, Abby. He was a pig. There's nothing he could have offered us that would have been worth it. I *know*, remember? I slept with an overseer to get the job at the looms, and I wish to God I'd just stayed a dresser, no matter how hard the work was or how much worse the pay."

Abby nodded miserably. "Yeah, I remember. But, Mina...we're in real trouble. It's the end of the month. Hobb Mill won't be paying our contracts. All the work we did this month is just gone, so far as anyone is concerned. If we don't find jobs within a few days, they'll send the constables after us for defaulting on our contracts. I don't want to go to prison!"

"And you think I want to spend the next decade locked in a cell somewhere? It won't happen, Abby. I'll find a way."

Tears glittered in Abby's eyes. "I don't see how."

Mina sighed and shoved her hands through her hair. She had power, but what good did it do her or anyone else? She might be able to use glamour to fool the constables for a time, but that didn't give her a life. How would she find a job under such false pretenses? She didn't think she could magic up a convincing contract, and any employer would get suspicious when he was unable to contact the fictitious institution where she was supposedly indentured. She might try masquerading as a free woman, but again, it wouldn't get her work. She didn't know anything but the mills, had no skills beyond tending machinery. The factories only hired the cheapest labor available, and that meant orphanage children or indentured workers.

"I'll think of something," she said, hoping she sounded confident. Perhaps she could ask Duncan for advice. But what did he know about trying to find a job?

But Bryan...Bryan worked somewhere. His aunt's store...on Candle and Basket Lane, that was it. Maybe he could put in a good word for her somewhere, find some work for her and Abby. It was worth a shot.

~*~

The shop turned out to be a large, airy dry goods store that looked to do an excellent business. Mina stood on the street outside, peering up at the sign that proclaimed "Jacqueline & Daughters, Dry Goods," and feeling profoundly out of place. The people passing by on the sidewalk were dressed well, if not fancily, and they had a look of health about them that one simply didn't see in the ghettos around the factory district. She felt as though her collar stood out like a brand. Abby shifted nervously at her side, clearly having the same thoughts.

Well, they had walked a long way to get here, and it was at least worth asking.

Mina took a deep breath and pushed open the door, which rang a small brass bell set above it. The store itself was neat and clean, with rows and rows of shelves, its wares set on them in an orderly fashion. Bolts of cloth in an array of beautiful colors nudged up against reams of lace, hats, and shoes.

Before she had a chance to take in more than a glimpse of the amazing variety around her, Mina became aware that someone had moved out from behind the main counter. She turned and found an enormous black woman bearing down on her like the prow of some great ship. The woman was strikingly beautiful even in middle age, her hair swept back away from her face in a series of severe braids knotted into a bun. The look in her dark eyes proclaimed that she didn't think two factory slaves had any business

whatsoever in her establishment.

"Can I help you ladies with something?" she asked in a rich voice that would brook no dishonesty.

Abby shrank back against Mina's side, her eyes wide. Mina cleared her throat nervously. "Um, yes. Um, we're here to see Bryan Shopper."

The woman glared at them, as if certain they could have no honest purpose with Bryan. "My nephew isn't available right now."

Mina flinched. "Could we wait for him?"

"He won't be available for some time."

"Maybe we should go," Abby suggested weakly.

At that moment there came the sound of boots on stairs. A discreet door opened, and Bryan himself emerged into the shop. "Mom ate all of her soup today, Aunt Vivian," he was saying. Then he stopped, clearly surprised to see Mina.

Vivian gave him a severe look. "These two girls say they know you, Bryan."

Bryan looked vaguely embarrassed. "Um, yeah." He came up and motioned at the door with his head. "We can talk outside."

"I'm not paying you to flirt, Bryan," Vivian warned him. "The floor needs sweeping, you know."

"It'll just be a minute," he promised, beating a hasty retreat out the door. Mina and Abby followed.

Once outside, Bryan sighed and pulled out the red cloth that kept his long hair from his eyes. "I didn't expect to see you here."

"No." Mina shuffled her feet, only now realizing that Bryan might be embarrassed to admit that he knew poor trash like her. "I'm sorry. Maybe I shouldn't have come. I didn't mean to make things tense between you and your aunt."

"Things are always tense between us," he admitted. "It wasn't so bad before my mother got sick, when she and Aunt Vivian ran the shop together."

That sounded like the sort of sickness a woman didn't recover from, Mina thought uneasily. She'd never imagined that someone as ostensibly blithe as Bryan might have problems at home. "What about your father?"

"He's part of the problem." Bryan sighed. "He's where all my faeling blood came from. He was sort of a wastrel, I suppose. Couldn't hold a job. Vivian hated him. But her husband liked him for some reason. Uncle Morry was in the military, but was discharged when he lost a leg. He was the one who taught me the staff. At any rate, I think Morry saw Dad as a drinking partner to help pass the time. They were killed coming home from the tavern one night—the constables found their bodies in the gutter, throats slit. Vivian blamed Dad for Morry's death, but because Dad was dead I ended up becoming his stand-in. Then Mom got sick and, well...." He shrugged.

Mina winced. "I'm sorry, Bryan. I didn't know."

He shrugged yet again. "It's all right. So what did you want?"

Mina told him. He heard her out, then shook his head regretfully. "I'm sorry. I don't know what to do to help you. Our shop is doing well, but not so well we could hire anyone else, even if Aunt Vivian would agree to it. Which she wouldn't."

"But what about the other shops around here? Or your vendors? Anything?"

"Sorry, Mina. I want to help, but there's nothing."

Her shoulders slumped. "It's all right. We'll think of something."

~*~

Mina returned to the theater that night as she had promised. Jeremiah, one of Duncan's old students, had brought by a rather decrepit-looking wheelchair which was probably third- or fourth-hand at best, the purchase of which had done away with Duncan's meager savings.

"I shall have to be on the street corner again tomorrow if I'm looking to eat anytime soon," Duncan said glumly. "I suppose a new lens for the spectacles will simply have to wait."

Mina personally thought that Duncan didn't look well enough to stir from bed for the next week, let alone sit out in the weather and play the violin. The skin stretched over his bones seemed nearly translucent, and the lines around his mouth and eyes were more pronounced. Leaning back against the pillows in the big bed, he looked like a bundle of sticks wrapped in a robe and forgotten. For the first time, Mina thought that he looked every one of his fifty-three years.

"Anything I can do?" she asked, anxious. She was perched on a stool at his bedside. Now, she leaned over and peered at him with growing concern.

He shook his head and waved a negligent hand. "No. You must worry about yourself for the moment. But I would appreciate it if you'd keep me company."

"Is Bryan coming?"

"No. He stopped by earlier, for a few moments, to make certain that I didn't need anything. I believe his aunt wants him to do inventory tonight." Duncan coughed weakly, and then managed a feeble smile. "I promise not to try anything inappropriate in the absence of a chaperone."

"Hmm, I don't know, this whole sick-in-bed thing might be a ruse."

"Yes, I often lure innocent young women into my lair. First I dazzle them with the luxurious surroundings. A little fine dining, a hundred-year-old wine...." A sudden fit of coughing bent him double, cutting off his words.

Mina frowned in concern. "That doesn't sound good. Is there anything I can get you? Do you think you need to go to a doctor?"

He shook his head. "No. I'll be fine, my dear."

"If you say so," she said skeptically. Silence settled over them. The small lamp at the bedside draped shadows over the corners of the chamber. The soft gnawing of a mouse sounded from one wall. A book lay on the coverlet, where Duncan had set it down when she entered, and she picked it up. "Shall I read to you?"

Duncan looked alarmed. "Um, no. No, that won't be necessary." He held his hand out for the book.

"I don't mind. Think of it as killing two birds with one stone—you can save your eyes, and I'll continue my education at the same time." She cleared her throat and squinted at the marked page. "Llew swept her into his strong arms and stared at her with his sky-blue eyes. She felt her heart pound as he crushed her breasts against his muscular chest. His—'Whoa, *this* is educational."

Duncan sighed and covered his eyes with his hands.

"What is this thing called, anyway? *Stolen Heart of Flame*." Mina burst out laughing and waved the book at him. "Duncan! This is a bodice-ripper!"

Duncan held his hand out again. "That's enough."

She kept the book out of reach and continued scanning the page. "I never realized you could use the word 'thrust' so many times in a sentence."

"Mina!"

"Shall I keep reading?"

"No!"

She laughed and handed the book back to him. He snatched it away and glowered at her. "I see that I have completely lost whatever small respect you held for me."

"Don't be silly." She leaned over and propped her chin on her fist. "I think it's sweet."

"You're mocking me."

"No. Are you blushing?"

"Of course not." He suddenly took great interest in resettling the coverlet. "Surely you have some studies of your own. If not, I know a perfectly dreadful scroll written in an extremely archaic form of Niunish, guaranteed to drive students mad. Or send them to sleep, whichever comes first."

"All right. I'll get some tea while I'm at it." She stood up and headed towards the door, then stopped and glanced wickedly over her shoulder. "I still think it's sweet."

"Go!"

She laughed and went.

~*~

The rest of the week went by, and month-end loomed up like doomsday. Mina and Abby spent every day looking for work, but found nothing in any of the factories. Friday evening, they headed dejectedly back towards their apartment, feet aching and spirits low. If the street outside or the stairwell within seemed unusually deserted, Mina did not notice. The fire had taken many tenants, and more had moved out as they found work elsewhere.

Mina headed up the stairs, thinking that she might take the time to catch a little sleep before heading over to the theater. She had gotten to the first landing before realizing that Abby was no longer behind her. Startled, she turned around and saw Abby at the bottom of the stairs, her arms imprisoned by a man in the uniform of the city constabulary. A gun was pressed against her temple.

"Don't try anything funny," the constable warned, eyes narrowed.

Mina's heart sped up. For an instant, she considered using her power against the man, even drew in a breath to center herself. But the terrified look on Abby's face stopped her. Even if Mina killed the man, there was no certainty that his finger wouldn't spasm on the trigger and take Abby with him. And no certainty that there weren't more of his ilk outside, ready to catch anyone fleeing the apartments. Faeling magic was no good against bullets.

She raised her hands in a gesture of surrender. The constable motioned her down the stairs, and then marched them both outside in front of him. They took the hall out to the courtyard in the back, where the water pump and the privies were located. A pathetic collection of other tenants waited there, chained together in a long line. The landlord stood nearby, smoking a cheap cigar and drinking something from a bottle.

"Wilhelmina Cole and Abigail Newsfarne," he identified them in a disinterested tone. One of the constables checked them off of a list. Two more approached holding iron manacles.

"You are being charged with defaulting on your Contract of Indenture," the list-holder droned, having obviously repeated the same charge at least a dozen times already.

Mina flinched back from the manacles, but one of the constables grabbed her wrists and held her until they snapped into place. Her skin shrank from the touch of the cold iron, and she felt something fade away inside of her, like a snuffed candle. She found herself chained in line between Abby and a six-year-old girl who had been a bobbin doffer. The girl's wrists were too tiny for the manacles, so the constables had simply wrapped the chains around her arms, the links cutting deeply into her flesh. She made a soft, hopeless sound every time someone moved and pulled the chain tighter.

Mina glared at the constables, hating them. "You're hurting this girl," she called. "At least tie her hands with a rope if you're so worried about her breaking free and wounding one of you."

Someone else in line sniggered at that. The constable in charge spat to one side. "Well, then, she shouldn't have defaulted on her contract, should she?"

"She's just a child—"

One of the junior men wandered over and cuffed her hard. "Shut up."

Mina's ear rang from the blow. She held her head up, determined not to let them see her pain. *Bastards. We'll get out of this soon enough, Abby, I promise. They'll unchain us once they put us in a cell. And once everyone is asleep, we'll just walk out through the wall.*

Except that Abby still wore a real iron collar that might not be able to pass through the wall. *Damn it.* Mina didn't want to abandon her friend, but wasn't certain that she saw any alternatives, either. Once she was free, she'd be able to do something to help Abby. Maybe Bryan and Duncan would be willing to stage a rescue.

She continued plotting while the constables pulled in a few more stragglers and added them to the line. A large black crow hopped around in the stinking middens, picking through garbage and occasionally emitting a loud *quork!* One of the young women in line pleaded to be allowed use of the privy, but the constables ignored her.

Eventually the constables decided they'd persecuted enough people for one day and ordered the line of criminals to start moving. The little girl in front of Mina stumbled at the pace, and blood began to seep from under the chains. Mina managed to pick her up, although it shortened the link between herself and Abby, and between the girl and the man in front of her. No one complained about it, however, and the

girl's frightened whimpers subsided.

As they shambled through the streets, passersby stopped to look. A shadow fell across the face of anyone wearing a collar. Those not so marked looked away in disgust. A few boys ran alongside the line, laughing and taunting. When the constables did nothing to discourage them, they started flinging mud, dung, and rocks at the prisoners. Mina grimly shielded the head of the little girl in her arms. Abby cried out sharply as a rock found its mark. The constables finally chased the boys away when an ill-aimed pat of mud dirtied the uniform of the one in back.

It was a long walk, and Mina was almost glad when the iron-gray prison loomed up in front of them. Bleak and forbidding, the prison dominated everything around it, seeming to leach away color and hope at once. It was an ancient place that had been a fortress in far earlier times. But the high, narrow windows had either been bricked up or barricaded with bars, and two ugly, modern wings had been tacked on either side. A portcullis lifted briefly to let them in, then fell shut with a clang that probably echoed throughout the building. Mina looked up at the overcast sky above the courtyard and shivered, thinking that a decade would pass before many of her fellow prisoners got another glimpse of clouds.

Constables moved up and down the line, separating out women and girls from men and boys. One of them stopped in front of Mina, scowling at her. He smelled of sweat and heavy drink, and unkempt stubble covered his sagging jowls. Mina guessed he must be one of the prison guards.

"What are you, some kind of girl-lover?" he asked, eyeing her clothes.

She smiled sweetly. "No, but I'm sure I would be after a night with you."

He slapped her, hard enough to leave a red mark on her face. The taste of blood filled her mouth, and she spat in his general direction. He grabbed the manacles and jerked them forwards, so that she was pressed up against his bulging belly. Fingers briefly found her breasts. "Maybe we'll see about that," he said and shoved her back so hard she fell. The chains between herself and the girl went taut, so that the child let out a faint scream before falling herself. For that, Mina felt sorry.

The guard let her climb to her feet, and then roughly unlocked her from the chain, only to snap a second set of manacles about her wrists. She was put in line with the other women, and marched inside the gloomy fortress. Dampness made the walls slick, and the air stank of urine, unwashed bodies, and mold. At the end of a confusing series of stairs, they found themselves shoved into a cell already packed with sad, beaten-looking women and girls. The cell was so crowded that there was no room to lie down for sleep. A single, stinking pot was all that was provided for them to relieve themselves.

"You'll be called before the judge in a few days, to be formally sentenced," one of the guards said. "After that, you'll be sent to your permanent cells in the women's wing."

Mina rattled the short chain between her manacles. "Aren't you going to unchain us?"

"That will be after you go to your permanent home. Too much trouble to keep locking and unlocking the things until then."

Damn.

The guards left. Mina sighed and looked around the crowded room. Several of the women appeared sick, and one was sitting in a corner, coughing blood into a strip of cloth torn from her dress. Several of the new arrivals began crying, and one woman started to call frantically for her daughter. Two little girls crouched on the floor and played with dolls woven out of straw bedding.

Mina made her way over to Abby. Abby's eyes looked huge in her drawn face, and Mina saw her shoulders start to shake.

"What are we going to do?" Abby whispered. "Where are we supposed to sleep? Are they going to feed us?" She closed her eyes against tears. "Oh, God."

Mina put her arms around her friend, drawing her close. "Don't worry," she murmured into Abby's ear. "As soon as they take off these manacles, I'm gone. And you can go with me if we can get that damned collar off you."

Abby clutched at her frantically. "Don't leave me here!"

"I might have to. Don't panic—I'll come back, with Bryan and Duncan, I swear. I won't leave you to rot in this place."

Apparently supertime had come and gone before they had been brought in, because no food appeared that night. A few women managed to lie in a pile in one corner and sleep, but for the most part there was only enough floor space to sit, and then only if you were butted up against your neighbor. Mina and Abby tried to lean against one another's backs, but the only sleep they managed to catch came in the form of a fitful doze.

The next morning, guards came to the other side of the bars and shoved a couple of food trays inside. There was not nearly enough for the number of prisoners in the cell, but that apparently was no concern of the guards. Mina managed to get a small crust of bread by elbowing another woman hard enough to knock out her breath. She gave half the crust to Abby and the other half to the girl who had been chained by her in the line. There was just enough water for everyone to have a single swallow apiece, and the progress of the jug around the room was watched jealously enough that no one dared take more than her own share.

At least they don't put us in with the real criminals, Mina thought. Thieves, murderers, and prostitutes were all kept in a separate section of the prison from debtors.

But it seemed a thin piece of comfort.

~*~

"Where did you say you got these again?" the bookseller asked casually.

Dusty sunlight poured in through the wide windows of the bookstore, striping Duncan's hands where they lay in his lap. The air smelled of dust, age, and old ink. An enormous cat the color of fresh marmalade lounged on top of a stack of old books, occasionally swishing its fluffy tail. The hunched, mole-like form of the bookseller crouched on the other side of a cluttered desk.

Duncan's stomach tightened in fear at the question. *Paranoia*, he told himself fiercely. "They were bequeathed to me by my aunt," he said, doing his best to play up his educated accent. "A woman of very eccentric tastes. Unfortunately, the family has fallen on hard times, and as these volumes are of no interest to me, I see no reason to keep them." He paused and gave the bookseller a piercing look. "I understand that some of them are quite valuable."

The bookseller took off his silver-rimmed glasses and began to slowly polish the lenses. "What did you say is the name of your family?"

Duncan's eyes narrowed behind the thick lenses of his own specs. The right one still bore a crack that bisected his vision. "Sir, I have no wish to deal with anyone who does not understand discretion."

"Of course, of course. As it happens, I do have a client interested in merchandise such as you are offering. Shall we speak of terms?"

To Duncan's surprise, the man did not seem inclined to haggle; instead he immediately named something close to the true value of the ancient texts. It raised more prickles of suspicion, and Duncan desperately wished he had the time to leave here and find a merchant he felt more comfortable with. But time was not a luxury Mina had.

The bookseller laboriously counted out the money, which Duncan accepted. As Duncan began to turn the wheelchair towards the door, the bookseller gave him one of the most false smiles he had ever seen.

"If any more of these volumes happen to turn up, don't hesitate to bring them by. As I said, I have a client interested in...folklore."

"I assure you, these are all I have," Duncan lied coldly. "I have no interest in silly superstitions."

He left the store quickly, trundling down the roadway and ignoring the curses of cab drivers as they swerved to avoid him. Bryan awaited him a block away, sitting idly on a bench in front of an ice cream shop.

"Did you get the money?" he asked worriedly, rising to his feet and taking over the task of pushing the wheelchair.

Duncan thought about objecting to being pushed, then relented. He was still tired from his ordeal the night of the factory fire, and honestly wasn't certain whether he had the strength to make it home by himself. "Yes. It should be enough."

"I hope so." Bryan sighed. "Poor Mina. It doesn't seem fair."

"The world does not operate on the principle of fairness, Bryan, in case you have failed to observe that. If it did, none of us would be in our individual—or collective—predicaments."

"True." Bryan seemed to consider a moment, although Duncan could not see his face. "Do you think you would have married Aerin, if things had gone differently?"

Duncan frowned, wondering where this turn in the conversation was leading. "I suppose so."

"Do you think you would have been happy?"

"I don't know. I fail to see the relevance."

"Oh, nothing, I guess. I was just thinking about Mina. How headstrong she can be sometimes. It made me think of some of the things you said about Aerin. I wondered if you thought they were alike."

Duncan's mouth pressed into a taut line. "I fear...I do fear that Mina may be too much like Aerin in some ways. Impetuous. Defiant. She spoke of fighting the Seelie Court, the day after the factory burned. I managed to dissuade her, though."

"Ah. Are you ever afraid that you might be seeing Aerin, instead of Mina as she is?"

"No. Yes. I don't know." Duncan sighed, took off his glasses, and rubbed at his tired eyes. "I have come, over time, to appreciate the ways in which they are different. Aerin was, to be honest, vain and rather spoiled. Everything had to be her way. Mina may want everything to be her way as well, but the reason behind it isn't that she's always been given everything, but that she's had to fight for everything."

And at least she listens to reason. Sometimes."

"There's a smile in your voice when you talk about her."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"Just commenting."

"Mina is my student, Bryan. I am very proud of her, as befits the teacher of a fine pupil. Anything else would be inappropriate. I honestly don't know how these notions get into your head."

Bryan burst out laughing so hard that he had to stop pushing the chair. "Listen to you, old man! I never suggested anything. The 'notion' came out of one of our heads, but it certainly wasn't mine."

Duncan twisted around as best he could to aim a glare at his student. "Don't be ridiculous!"

"I'm not. You're crazy about her...admit it to yourself, if not to me."

Duncan stiffened. "We're being followed."

"Good attempt to change the subject."

"I'm perfectly serious, Bryan."

Bryan's dark face instantly sobered. He bent over, pretending to fiddle with something on the wheelchair. "Are you sure?"

"I have lived the last thirty years only five miles from the Seelie Court. Believe that I've learned to be cautious. I caught sight of the bookseller whose shop I just came from. I wouldn't have noticed him if I hadn't turned towards you."

Bryan's hands tightened on the handlebars until his knuckles paled. "What should we do?"

Duncan's heart raced in his chest. "He's not a faeling—I would have known, being so close. But he may have friends who are. I think we'll be able to escape him with a glamour, for now."

"Then what?"

"We can't go back to the theater. It's too good a resource for us to risk its discovery. You and I will have to go to ground elsewhere, if we can." Duncan chewed on his lip in worry. "Damn it. I think Jeremiah has an extra room where I could stay for a while, although it means doing without any of the conveniences I have at home. You should be fine if you don't stray too far from your aunt's shop."

Bryan's handsome face was grim. "All right. Let's lose the bookseller, then get you to Jeremiah's before anything else goes wrong."

~*~

The next two days stretched into a dreary hell for Mina. The prisoners were fed and given water twice a day. Neither serving ever seemed to contain enough rations for the number of women in the cell. Hunger gnawed in Mina's belly as it hadn't since she was a small child. Thirst tormented her constantly, and it felt as though her tongue had swollen up to fill her mouth. More women began to get sick and cough blood, and she silently prayed that she and Abby didn't succumb to whatever they had.

The cuts the chains had made on the little girl's arms became infected; no surprise, given the filth of a cell

with only one small receptacle for waste. At the end of the second day, the child refused to take any food at all from Mina, and a fever burned her skin. A mixture of despair and rage ate at Mina's heart, and she berated herself for not being a healer. *Duncan* would have known what to do.

Duncan always knew what to do. More than anything, she longed for the comfort of his voice, the light touch of his hand. It occurred to her that she had not been separated from him for so long since they'd first met, and his absence was like a hidden wound.

She wondered if Duncan and Bryan realized what had happened to her. She wondered if it would shame them to have befriended a criminal.

On the third day, one of the guards roused the prisoners by banging a pan on the cell bars. "This is it, ladies!" he yelled. "Time to go see the judge."

The guards opened the door wide enough to let them out one at a time. Those that could walk formed up in a ragged line. Mina didn't know what would happen to those too sick to stand. The women were herded back down through the tangle of corridors, out a small door, across a narrow courtyard, down a hall that pierced the prison wall, and through a door that led into the adjacent courthouse. They went up a skinny stairwell and through a hall that let them out into the courtroom itself.

The judge sat at the front, looking grim in his black robes. Spectators crowded the rough benches that took up the largest part of the room; Mina wondered if they had family and friends amongst the condemned, or if they were simply curious to see the misfortune of others.

The prisoners were herded into what looked like a livestock pen, and the judge glared at them disapprovingly. "You will come forward to receive sentencing when your name is called," he said ponderously. "If you do not respond when your name is called, the bailiffs will remove you, and one year will be added to your sentence. Genevieve Armstrong."

A frightened-looking matron stepped hurriedly to the small gate and was let out. A bailiff took her arm and pulled her to stand before the judge. "You have been charged with defaulting on your Contract of Indenture. I find you guilty of this charge and sentence you to ten years in prison, the remainder of your indenture to be completed once you are released. Bailiff, please remove the prisoner."

Tears streaked the woman's face, and she bowed her head in despair. When the bailiff grabbed her arm, she shuffled away unresisting.

Some were not so meek. One young woman began shouting obscenities as soon as the judge opened his mouth. When the bailiff tried to grab her, she threw an unexpected punch that split his lip open. A moment later, his companions descended on her, striking her with their nightsticks until she collapsed unconscious on the floor.

When Mina's name was finally called, she stepped up before the judge with a feeling of dread in her heart. Until now, she was not officially a criminal. But once the judge passed sentence, her life, as she had known it, was over. Even if she managed to escape, she could never be Mina Cole again. She would need a new, glamour-forged identity at the very least. Possibly she would have to flee the city, supposing that the Seelie Court gave up on its blockade. At worst, she might find herself working in some house of prostitution, her fate the same as that of her dead mother.

The judge peered briefly at his list. "You have been charged with defaulting on your Contract of Indenture," he said, a tinge of surprise in his voice. "Records indicate that the fee for your Contract has been paid in full for the past month and for the upcoming month. You are free to go."

Mina stood like an idiot, her mouth hanging open in shock. The bailiff unlocked her manacles with a snap, and then tugged on her arm when she didn't move. She stepped back in a daze, walked to the rear of the courtroom, and stopped, staring behind her.

"Abigail Newsfarne," the judge called. "You have been charged with defaulting on your Contract of Indenture. Your fee has also been paid for the past month and the upcoming month. You are free to go."

Abby practically ran from the front of the courtroom. "What happened?" she blurted when she reached Mina's side.

Mina shook her head. "I have no idea. Let's leave before they change their minds."

They left the room, following the general flow of traffic until they emerged back into the sunlight. Bryan's tall, dark form loitered at the bottom of the steps. Mina ran down the stairs two at a time.

"Bryan! What the hell—?"

He wrinkled his nose and took a step back. "I guess they don't let prisoners bathe much, huh?"

"What do you think? I've got lice in my hair and fleas in my armpits. Now that we've listed the joys of incarceration, tell me what happened. Did you use faery gold to free us?"

Bryan shook his head. "No. The old man sold some of his books."

Mina blinked, stunned. "D-Duncan paid the fees? For both of us?"

"You're out, aren't you?"

"But he barely knows me," Abby objected.

Bryan flung his arms up. "Then complain to him about it! I think he figured Mina would be upset if he left you to rot. God knows he'd probably chop his own hand off before he risked her bad opinion."

Mina felt herself blush and ducked her head to hide it. "I'm sure that isn't true."

Bryan rolled his eyes. "If you say so. Let's get the two of you to a public bath."

"We don't have any money," Abby pointed out. "Or any clothes."

"Or any place to live," Mina added sourly.

"We have a little money left over from paying off your contracts, along with assorted bribes to bailiffs, judges, and everyone else in Dere. It should be enough for clothes and baths," Bryan said. He waved his hand dramatically in front of his face, as if trying to dispel their stink. "Duncan at least will thank me for it."

~*~

They found clothing at a second-hand shop. Abby chose a faded red skirt and a white shirt with a small ruffle of lace around the neckline. Mina found her usual trousers, shirt, and suspenders, although she caught herself lingering over a pretty dress for a moment. *Silly*, she thought, but the temptation remained.

They bathed at a public bathhouse, then changed into fresh clothing. Afterwards, Bryan led them, not to the theater, but towards another section of town. When Mina questioned him, he tersely explained the events surrounding the sale of Duncan's books. By the time they reached Jeremiah's brewery, Mina was scared not only for herself and Abby, but for Duncan as well.

The brewery was a pleasant wooden building in a modest part of town. Its back was only a few feet away from the Blackrush, explaining much about Jeremiah's choice of location. Huge vats dominated the interior, and the air smelled of yeast and hops. Mina nodded at Jeremiah, an enormous, fat faeling, who waved them towards the back of the business.

They found Duncan ensconced in a tiny room that had probably started life as a storage closet. A small cot, a table, and a lamp were its only furnishings. Duncan sat in his chair, hunched over a newspaper, reading by the light of the lamp. He glanced up with a scowl as they entered, but it quickly transformed into pleasure and relief.

"Ah, Mina," he said, setting aside the newspaper. "I trust you're none the worse for wear? Abby, it's good to see you again."

Mina crossed the room and embraced him. The chair and their difference in relative heights made it awkward, but she didn't care. Up close, Duncan smelled pleasantly of books, ink, and soap. She turned her head and kissed him softly on the cheek. "Thank you," she whispered into his ear.

He gave an odd little shiver and released her. "Er, think nothing of it, my dear."

"I'll be going, as there isn't room for three people anyway," Bryan said from the doorway. Duncan waved him away. Abby hesitated, said something about wanting to feel fresh air on her face again, and left as well.

Mina perched on the cot. The sheets were coarse and smelled of beer, but at least they were clean. "I'm sorry," she said sincerely.

He studied her carefully, the flash of lamplight off his lenses masking his blue-gray eyes. "You have nothing to be sorry for."

"But you sold your books for me! You wouldn't even do that for yourself. You needed those books for your students. And now they're gone."

"Not all of them. A few of the rarer volumes, and a smattering of tomes I thought I could do without."

"And you were right about it being dangerous to sell them." Mina grinned ruefully. "As always."

His smile was more wistful. "I wish I was always right. Or I wish I hadn't been right this time."

"How long will you have to hide here?"

"I don't know. I wish I had my spyglass. I have two lenses that are attuned to one another; you can look through one and see 'out' through the other, no matter where it is physically. I had one jammed into a crack in the wall opposite the theater door, and I kept the other one with me in the sitting room or at my bedside."

"That's how you always knew it was me coming to visit."

"Quite. If I had the second lens, I could at least watch the door and make certain that no one discovers the theater. But of course I saw no reason to take it with me that day." His expression softened suddenly at the dejected look on her face. "Don't fret, my dear. I seriously doubt that anyone, Hound, Knight, or Prince Roderick himself, will discover the theater. Bryan and I hadn't reached Mummery Street when I realized that the bookseller was following us. There's no reason for them to look there. I'm sure that it will be safe to return in a few weeks, once whoever is behind this realizes that I'm not coming back anytime soon."

"But isn't the Seelie Court behind it?"

"They could be. We don't know that for certain. There is a good chance that the bookseller was simply curious, or unscrupulous, and was hoping to find a secret store of valuable books that he could either extort or steal."

"I suppose." Mina sighed and stood up. "I'd better go. Abby and I still have to find jobs. But I wanted to thank you. I don't know how I'll ever repay you, but I promise I will."

He shook his head. "Don't concern yourself. It was a gift, freely given. I expect that I will be here at the brewery for some time to come. Will you come by, if you have the chance?"

She stopped at the door and smiled. "Yeah. I'll come every night, if you want." She hesitated, bit her lip. "I...I really missed you." Then she left quickly and shut the door behind her.

~*~

"And so I have had a careful watch put throughout the entire district," Roderick finished, smiling smugly. "We will track these unseelie faelings to their lair."

Rhiannon frowned and tapped her teeth with a long fingernail. "But you aren't certain the man was a faeling," she said slowly.

"No. But it seems likely, given the books he sold."

"Hmm." She frowned, something nagging at her. She searched the details of Roderick's tale carefully in her mind: a man, not exactly elderly but no longer young, in a wheelchair, selling rare books bearing titles she hadn't seen for over thirty years.

"Do you have any of the volumes?" she asked quietly.

"Of course. I had them added to the library."

"Bring me one of them. *Zylan's Faery World*."

Roderick frowned and tipped his head to one side. "Why that one?"

"It is exceedingly rare. I wish to see it. I don't *need* any other reason. Have it brought now."

The insolence of his look as he left bothered her. She sat impatiently on her throne, hands clenching and unclenching, until a servant brought the book. Snatching it away, she barked out an order not to be disturbed.

Once she was certain that she was alone, she allowed her eyes to fall to the volume. The red leather binding seemed hauntingly familiar, but it was no proof. Instead, she slowly turned the pages, until finally reaching a sheet near the middle marked with a brown coffee stain. A stain that she had made accidentally, tussling with her lover in the garret room they had shared so many years ago.

How had this book—all those books—come to resurface now? An estate sale, the bookseller had said, but it didn't fit with what she knew of the book's history.

The seller *couldn't* have been Duncan. Rhiannon—the *real* Rhiannon—had killed him thirty-five years ago. She had gloated over it in front of her stepsister, whom she had supposed beaten into submission. That had been the final outrage that led said stepsister to kill her and assume her identity.

Duncan had not possessed much power, his blood diluted by too many human ancestors. But he had been loyal. None of those other bastards had stood by her when the time came, and she'd made certain they'd paid for it.

And, perhaps oddly, it had not been easy to forget him in her new life as Rhiannon, Queen of Niune. She had thought of him often while lying alone in bed, and again years later in Roderick's arms. Over time she had come to realize that, without Duncan, her victory had become hollow and meaningless, and that it would have been better if she'd never challenged Rhiannon for the throne.

She would have been happier if she had followed his wishes and settled down to married life in Dahn.

Could her instinct be true? Could her young, laughing, earnest Duncan have become the crippled old man that the bookseller encountered?

And if so...was there any way to turn it to her advantage?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"He's a lovely man," Abby said unexpectedly, as they walked away from the brewery that evening. "I mean, he's very nice. And the look on his face when he saw you! I wish someone would look at *me* like that."

"He was glad we got out of prison," Mina said self-consciously. "He's my friend."

"I think he'd like to be more than that."

"Not that he's mentioned to me." Mina sighed. "We've got more to worry about than my love life, or total lack thereof."

"Yeah." All the mischief drained out of Abby's face, and she took Mina's hand for comfort. "What are we going to do?"

Mina shook her head. She wanted a cigarette badly enough to sell her soul for a single lungful of smoke. "I had planned on having us stay at the theater with Duncan—there was plenty of room, and I don't think he would have minded. But that cocksucker from the bookstore took care of that, didn't he?" She aimed an angry kick at a lamppost. "What about Camilia? Any chance at all that she can put us up?"

"N-No." Tears showed from under Abby's lowered eyelashes. "What about the other faelings?"

"I don't know them very well. I don't even know how to contact most of them. And my impression was that they aren't a very well-to-do bunch, on average." She thought of Michael, dark and handsome.

"And, to be perfectly honest, I don't know that I trust all of them. Or any of them."

"Then what?"

Mina gave Abby's hand a squeeze. "I guess it's the street for us, at least for tonight. Maybe we can find work tomorrow."

~*~

They bedded down beneath one of the lesser-used bridges over the Blackrush, high up above the water where stone and earth met. Mina dragged weatherworn boards and parts of crates from where they had washed up against the nearest pylon, all the time wondering if the aughisky was nearby and what she

would do if it decided on a snack. The flotsam formed a windbreak of sorts and gave them some protection against the slight chill of the night. As for bedding, they made do with a pair of dirty blankets scrounged from a trash heap.

Huddled next to Abby, listening to the slap of water against the pylons, Mina found sleep distant for most of the night. When she finally did snatch some fitful rest, her dreams were filled with Duncan, who held her while she cried.

In the morning, they headed for the waterfront, their stomachs aching with emptiness. They had already learned that the factories were not hiring, and all respectable positions for unskilled female labor seemed filled. That left the district running along Grinder Street, west to Pennywhistle Lane. A favorite of sailors and river rats, it was lined with businesses looking for cheap female workers: bordellos and burlesques.

Mina walked past the warehouses without turning her head. She'd die in the street before she followed her mother's path. *And let's hope that doesn't become a real possibility.*

By going around to the service entrance of one or two burlesque houses, which were for the most part closed during the daylight hours, they quickly learned that *The Sailor's Widow* was looking for girls. It was not, Mina noted dourly, the most respectable-looking establishment they had seen so far. The garish paint on the outside was peeling, like the morning after for a woman who'd worn too much makeup. Broken bottles littered the street, and filth covered the windows as good as shutters.

Before going inside, Mina paused a moment to don a glamour. It was not—she hoped—much of a risk. After all, she wouldn't be wandering the streets with it, where a stray Knight or Hound might spot her. And presumably such creatures didn't frequent bawdy houses. She gave herself long hair, filled out the curves on her body, and changed her men's clothing into a dress. The glamour was not so gorgeous that it would call undue attention, but attractive enough that she stood a chance at being hired. Abby was pretty enough on her own.

A large, bald man, whose nose looked as though it had been broken numerous times, answered their knock on the service door. Mina guessed that he probably served as a bouncer during business hours.

"We hear you're looking for girls," Mina said, hoping that she'd judged her glamour right.

The man eyed them for a long moment, then grunted and went inside, leaving the door open behind him. Mina exchanged a glance with Abby, shrugged, and followed the bouncer.

The interior of *The Sailor's Widow* was dark and poorly illuminated this time of day, although gaslight fixtures along the walls promised something better at night. The smell of spilled beer and sweat seemed to have permeated the crumbling plaster walls. They passed a kitchen that probably served customers at night, and then went down a corridor with a long series of doors opening off it. One of the doors was ajar; glancing inside as they passed, Mina saw two women sitting on a modest bed, chattering like magpies.

The bald man led them into a large, open room filled with small tables and chairs. At one end was an empty stage hung with a cheap-looking purple curtain, and a battered piano crouched like a whipped cur on the floor below the stage.

"Stay here," the man said, and then left. Mina and Abby stood nervously in the room for a few minutes, until a second man entered. He still had most of his hair, and his large belly flopped over his belt.

"Name's Gregor," he said, although whether this was supposed to be his first or last name Mina didn't know. "You girls looking for work?"

Mina swallowed nervously and nodded. Gregor looked at them with the eye of a merchant viewing suspect goods.

"Ever done this sort of work before?"

Honesty seemed the best recourse. "No. We worked for Hobb Mill."

"Mmph. Terrible, that was. You girls were lucky to get out alive." Gregor went to the piano, his gait more of a roll or a waddle than a walk. "Let's see what you've got, then."

"I'll go first," Mina murmured. Her stomach clenched into knots as she climbed the short stairs to the stage. Gregor struck up a tune on the piano, and Mina began to dance.

Don't fall over your own feet. Smile, remember to smile, look like you want to be here. God, it's not even like most of what's showing is even really mine—not the breasts and the ass, anyway. Nevertheless, her cheeks burned with shame. Glamour hid that as well.

When she was done, she put her clothes back on and went to sit on the edge of the stage while Abby took her turn. The need for a cigarette ached in her blood.

At last the music stopped. "Not bad," Gregor admitted, watching Abby idly while she dressed. "Not exactly what I'd call professional, but you'll catch on. And the customers like to see fresh faces sometimes. You're hired. Be back here at six o'clock for the early show."

"We lost our apartment when the mill burned," Mina said. "We need somewhere to stay."

"There're rooms in the back, but they're only for girls who want to do extra after hours."

"No." Mina shook her head emphatically.

"You sure? Pay's not that bad." He shrugged. "We've got a room available if you change your mind."

Mina stood up quickly and motioned for Abby to follow. "We won't."

~*~

The first performance was not quite so bad as Mina had feared. Gregor put them on early, perhaps to give them some experience before moving them to the later, more heavily attended, shows. Mina learned that during the later sets, some of the girls did entire acts featuring several of them at once. These were very popular, apparently, and one of the dancers generously told Mina and Abby that they could join in if they were willing to practice during their off time.

The glare of the footlights in her eyes hid most of the audience when she was onstage, and if not for the murmur of voices from the dark, she might have been able to pretend that she was alone. Barney, the huge bouncer, kept a careful eye on proceedings and made certain that none of the men tried to touch the dancers. If anyone wanted to do that, he had to pay for one of the rooms in the back.

Dinner was available from the kitchen at a discounted rate, and Mina ate ravenously as soon as Gregor had counted out her night's pay. Then, as midnight approached, she and Abby headed back to their bed under the bridge.

"I'm going to talk to Duncan," Mina said quietly, once they were there. "Will you be all right by yourself?"

Abby nodded mutely. She had been uncharacteristically silent all day, and Mina felt her depression like a physical weight. She touched her friend's hand gently, then turned and left.

She found Duncan in his cubbyhole at the Brewery, reading a water-stained romance novel that someone had probably fished out of a gutter. He set it down when she entered, and his welcoming smile transformed instantly into a frown of concern.

"Are you all right?"

Mina perched on his cot bed and folded her hands limply in her lap. "I suppose."

"Were you able to find work?"

"Yeah." She could never, she realized, tell Duncan what she was doing, no matter how badly she ached to share her troubles with him. Associating with a factory slave was bad enough—what would a high-class man such as Duncan think of a woman who took her clothes off in front of strangers? "I, um, that is, we're waiting tables. The place isn't very nice—not in a good part of town or anything. But it's money."

"I see." He frowned at her, still obviously worried. "I hope you'd feel free to speak to me about anything that is bothering you."

"Of course," she lied. "Of course."

As she walked back towards the bridge later that night, Mina felt the slow build of rage in her blood. She stopped in a shadowy area well away from the nearest streetlight and stood silently, her hands starting to shake. The factory fire had been horrible enough. But then there had been the prison, and Duncan unable to go back to his own home, and her humiliation at her new line of work, and Abby dragged down with her...and now this. Now she had to lie to the one person she most wanted to talk to, her best friend, the only man for whom she would have liked doing what she was now doing for strangers....

It wasn't fair. And it was all *their* fault.

Mina turned slowly in the direction of the palace. It couldn't be seen from here, of course, but she felt it like a blight on the landscape. The palace was ringed about with walls, defended by human guards, and crawling with Knights and Hounds. Only someone as deranged and self-centered as Duncan's long-lost love would ever consider assaulting such a fortress.

But.

She turned abruptly and made her way through the streets, until she found herself outside Jacqueline and Daughters, Dry Goods. She passed soundlessly through the door and followed the intuition that told her where Bryan slept.

His bed was in the basement, among rolls of cloth and barrels of dried beans. Undoubtedly his aunt and invalid mother shared the upstairs apartment. Mina could see him clearly even in the near-absolute darkness.

"Bryan," she whispered, putting power into the call.

He started up, then blinked rapidly, trying to focus on her through the haze of sleep that still clung to him. "Mina? What are you doing here?"

"I've come to ask your help," she said, sitting down on the cot beside him. He tugged self-consciously on his sleeping-robe, and she had to suppress a laugh at his modesty. "You know how to contact the other faelings, don't you?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Find as many as you can tomorrow. But only go to the ones you know you can trust, the ones who chafe the most against the Seelie Court's domination of this city. The ones who know how to keep quiet when there's need. And for God's sake, *don't* go to Jeremiah. I don't want Duncan to get wind of this."

He frowned and pushed his hair out of his eyes. "Why not? What are you going to do?"

Mina stood up and looked down at him. "What we all should have done a long time ago. I've had it with the Seelie Court, Bryan. I can't just sit around and simply accept as inevitable whatever hell they make out of my life.

"I'm going to fight back."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Mina stood nervously in the tiny park that she and Bryan had worked out as a convenient meeting place. A small ruin from the oldest phase of the city stood in the center of the green, its tumbled walls making humps among the vines that crawled over it. An owl called stridently from a tree nearby, only to be answered by a second somewhere in the distance: *Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you-all?*

She felt the faelings before she saw them; the faint whisper of their dark power brushed over her skin like a winter wind. Those with the most fae blood had eyes that seemed to gleam in the night, like the eyes of animals, and she wondered if hers did as well. They came behind Bryan, drifting in by ones and twos, until they formed a loose semi-circle before her. Mina spotted Fox among them, her swollen hands for once stilled.

"Bryan said that you wanted to talk to us," said Michael's beautiful voice. There was an edge of mockery in it, as if she couldn't possibly have anything important to say.

Mina swallowed down her nervousness and faced them squarely. "Yes. The Seelie Court has had too much power for too long. Some of you have spent your entire lives running from them. I've only been doing it for a few months, and already I'm sick of it. I don't want to live like this."

Michael shrugged elegantly. "Then leave Dere. Oh, that's right—you can't. They're looking for you."

"Leaving Dere doesn't solve the problem! The influence of the Seelie Court is felt everywhere in Niune. Remember Duncan's family?"

A lean, hungry-looking man by the name of Halston let out a snort of contempt. "So what do you want to do? Attack the Court? Stage a coup? Kill the royal family? Good luck!"

"I'm not a fool," Mina said quietly, struggling to control her anger. "Of course we can't do that. But the problem isn't just the RiLlyns, sitting in their palace laughing at us. It's the Knights and Hounds lurking in the streets. And those we *can* fight, if we're careful."

"You can't fight the Knights and Hounds," Halston objected.

"Like hell! Duncan and Bryan killed a Hound that attacked me. I killed one by myself when it came to the factory, and Duncan got rid of a Knight and a Hound together. We *can* fight them."

"But what would be the point?" asked Janine in her childlike voice.

Mina smiled cruelly. "The point is that there isn't an unlimited number of Knights and Hounds. They were once seelie faelings—the Court isn't creating them out of whole cloth. How many could there be?"

"There isn't an unlimited number of us, either," Michael pointed out dryly.

"No. But the difference is that we are going to be controlling the encounters, not them. Before, they've always hunted us. Now we'll hunt them. Duncan says that there are patrols near the palace, but that's too dangerous. They also go down to the main roads, where they can keep an eye out on people entering the city, looking for faelings." She remembered the little boy Roderick had murdered in front of her—surely that was how he'd been found. "Plus, we know that they're guarding the main ways in and out of the city, looking for me. We know where they are—if we go to them, with enough force that the battle will be one-sided in our favor, we can kill them."

Michael watched her with arrogance in his deadly blue eyes. "And what good do you think all this will do?"

"I think it will give us a better chance than we have now. The fewer the Knights and Hounds there are, the safer we all are."

"I'm with Mina," Janine said unexpectedly. "I'm tired of hiding all the time, worrying about being dragged off by Hounds at any moment! I could have gotten hired with the Royal Theater Company, if not for fear of being spotted. Instead I'm stuck working in mediocre little acting troops. Even then I have to keep out of spotlight, letting others play prima donna so that I don't attract too much attention to myself. Maybe the Seelie Court *should* pay."

"What does Duncan have to say about all this?" Halston demanded.

"Duncan doesn't know about it. We can't tell him. If he knew, he'd be furious."

Bryan shifted uncomfortably. "Doesn't that make you think there might be something wrong with your plan?"

Mina sighed and ran her hand through her short, spiky hair. "Duncan wouldn't be able to see anything beyond his own personal tragedy. Hell, he didn't even want to tell me about the Seelie Court in the first place, because he was too afraid that what happened to his damned girlfriend would happen again."

"And it looks like he was right."

"I'm not attacking the palace, damn it! I'm not Aerin!"

"I don't like this," Halston announced. "I don't like not telling Duncan." He took a step back.

No! Mina's heart contracted. "You can't tell him."

"I'm going to!"

"You can't." Almost without thinking about it, she put force behind the command.

She felt Halston's will for a moment, like some small creature squirming against her palm. She pushed it away, down into the earth. Something drained out of his pale eyes, and he relaxed suddenly. "Of course. I can't go to Duncan."

Oh God. Mina's heart pounded in her chest. She hadn't meant to do that. She had promised herself that she wouldn't use the power.

I had to. He made me. He would have gone to Duncan.

"So, are you with me?" she asked quietly.

Murmurs of agreement came out of the darkness. Bryan sighed and shrugged. "Why not."

Only Michael failed to respond. She looked up at him and saw the anger in his handsome face. He didn't like that the others were acquiescing to her. He clearly believed that, if anyone was going to be in charge, it should be him.

Afraid? she asked him silently, taunting. He either caught her thought or read her look, for his nostrils flared in sudden anger.

"I'll agree to give your little idea a try," he said haughtily, as if he expected it to fail but was going to humor her anyway.

Mina smiled, and if a knife had suddenly come to life and been capable of expression, it would have had just such a smile. "Wonderful. Let's get started."

~*~

The faelings crouched in a narrow alleyway near one of the main roads running into Dere. On the other side of the old city wall was an enormous town of temporary shacks, tents, and huts, which shifted and changed from day to day as unemployed people from the country made their way to the city, believing foolishly that there was some chance for them there. Even at a distance, Mina could smell the stench of human waste, sweat, and garbage emanating from the camp.

A young woman named Petunia claimed to have seen a Knight and Hound team going to the camp one night, perhaps in search of faelings making their way into the city. It seemed as good a place to start as any.

They sat in breathless silence while the moon crawled away towards the west. *We might have already missed them*, Mina worried. *They might not come here every night.*

A pale shape moved down the road, drawing abreast of the alleyway. Even from a distance, the sunlight-glow of a Knight was unmistakable. A Hound followed at its heels, pink nose lifted into the air, as if scenting for something.

Something it was about to find.

Mina rose and stepped out into the road. The heads of Knight and Hound swiveled towards her, and both stopped walking. A low growl rumbled out of the Hound's throat, and the Knight lowered his bronze-tipped halberd.

"Come and get me," Mina murmured, then ran back into the alley.

The Knight and Hound followed as predicted. Mina raced past buildings, ducking into a succession of smaller and smaller alleys, until finally coming to a halt in a blind. The Knight and Hound, believing their quarry trapped, started towards her.

Mina called in her staff and smiled.

The other unseelie faelings emerged from their heavily warded hiding places, blocking any hope of escape for their enemies. Janine pulled a wicked-looking knife from under her dress and laughed, her face no

longer really human. Looking bored, Michael flung a net of shadow over the seelie faelings, and the battle began.

The Knight and Hound had no chance. By the time Mina's pack had finished, little was left but frozen hunks of meat, exploded from within. Janine laughed again and stepped on the Knight's disembodied eyeball, which popped with a wet sound under her foot. The faces of the faelings were alight with glee and bloodlust, and Mina felt an odd emotion swelling her heart. After a moment, she recognized it as pride.

"And that's just the beginning," she promised them.

~*~

"You're doing well for yourself," Camhlaidh said towards dawn, when Mina was walking back to the bridge that had turned into her home. His black clothing made him look like a specter risen from a grave, but his golden hair gleamed in the gray light that heralds sunrise.

Mina smiled tiredly. "Yes. I rather think I am."

"It feels good, doesn't it?"

"The fighting? Yes. Yes, I suppose it does." She shrugged. "I've never had the chance to fight back against anything before. I feel as though everything has changed. As if I'm finally taking control of my life."

Camhlaidh's sharp teeth showed briefly. "And it feels good to lead them, doesn't it? It feels...natural."

Mina looked away, out over the Blackrush. The corpse of a dog floated by in a swirl of peat-dark water. Gaslight glinted here and there off the waves the wind made, but it could not truly touch the shadowy river.

She remembered the feeling of holding Halston's will in her own. Remembered the hunger that had woken in her when her pack turned to her for direction, their eyes wild and inhuman. She could feel their need for blood like wires quivering under her hand, and she played them like a fell instrument of destruction.

"Yes," she agreed at last. "It feels good."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The next few weeks passed slowly for Mina. By day she studied with Duncan in the tiny room behind the brewery. In the early evening, she danced before the customers at *The Sailor's Widow*.

And in the depths of the night, she and her pack hunted.

To her surprise, Mina found that she liked dancing better than she had ever liked working at the factory. Gone were the endless, grinding shifts when she had to stand up for twelve hours straight, her hearing slowly eroded by the roar of the machinery. The eternal weariness that had eaten at her bones slowly disappeared, and the heavy coughing caused by breathing air laden with cotton dust went away as well.

Her basic pay was not as good, but as she became better at dancing her tips grew until they were nothing to be sneered at. She and Abby now had enough to eat twice a day, bathe in the public baths, and buy

one or two spare changes of clothing. Most of what was left went towards their contracts, but Mina hoped that the pittance she was able to save would allow them to rent a room to see themselves through the winter. Already the nights were getting cooler, and she and Abby had to huddle together for warmth in the early hours before dawn.

Despite the fact that they could afford to eat well enough, Abby began to slowly lose weight. There was an odd look in her eyes, one of fear and desperation, which worried Mina greatly. But when pressed, Abby would only shake her head and smile wanly.

Later, when we can get a place to stay, she'll feel better, Mina thought.

But the sense of unease did not leave her.

At the end of the third week, Mina made her usual stop by Duncan's hiding-place. Although he had grown morose and irritable over the weeks of his confinement, today he smiled brightly as soon as she walked through the door.

"The salvation of my sanity has arrived!" he announced, flourishing three slips of ivory paper.

Mina laughed at the unexpected pronouncement. "What are you talking about?"

"Janine has kindly sent me passes to her next performance. Did you know that she is in the opera? Not a diva, of course, but a performer nevertheless. I had hoped—that is, I had wondered if perhaps you would like to come with me. And Bryan also." He hastily held up the three tickets, as if to prove that there weren't just two.

"I've never been to an opera—or any kind of theater, unless you want to count yours," Mina said excitedly. Then her heart fell. "But I don't have anything to wear." Not unless one counted the two outfits she had bought for work, which weren't anything she was willing to wear in respectable company.

"That's all right. We aren't going to the Grand Opera that performs for the nobility. This is a small theater—respectable enough, but not for the wealthy." He brightened. "And Meredith—do you remember Meredith? She owns a small tavern around the corner. Perhaps we can get dinner there."

He seemed so enthusiastic that Mina didn't have the heart to argue any more about the clothing. "I would love to go."

That night, she discussed the excursion with Bryan as they made their way through the dark streets, headed for a stage line believed to be guarded by the Seelie Court. More and more Knights and Hounds patrolled the streets these days, as though Mina had stirred up an anthill with a stick. The Seelie Court was actively looking for her pack by now. But so far, all those who had found them had regretted the experience.

"I probably should have been more assertive," she concluded. "I really can't afford anything nice right now. I don't know."

Bryan glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. "It would have broken the old man's heart." He hesitated. "So, you're going to be wearing a dress?"

Mina shrugged. "I thought I would."

"Ready to rejoin the world of women, eh?" He ducked as she took a half-hearted swing at him. "I can give you a loan, if you'd like. I have a small bit put away. Vivian docks my wages for food and board, but not nearly as much as the real cost."

"I couldn't take money from you, Bryan. Not for something so...frivolous."

"It's a loan. And besides, it's not frivolous. Just find yourself something nice at one of the second-hand shops. If you don't like the idea of me doing something for you, then consider it a gift for the old man."

"And how on earth would that be a gift for Duncan?"

Bryan grinned and winked. "You'll see." He sobered a moment, glancing about at the tall buildings and darkened windows that hemmed them in. "The old man's been like a father to me, you know. I was lucky he was around after Dad died. Dad was the only faeling in the family that I know of, so there wasn't anyone else to teach me how to control my powers. I would have died a long time ago if not for Duncan."

"I know." Mina kicked a bottle out of her path, watched it roll and bounce across the street, to vanish down a storm drain in a last glitter of light. "I hate deceiving him like this."

"He's going to find out eventually, you know."

"Yeah. The Hounds and Knights are stirred up now, thanks to us. It's bound to come to his attention one way or another."

Bryan put a hand lightly to her shoulder. "You're right, but that isn't what I was referring to. I meant he's going to find out that you're living under a bridge."

Mina jerked out from under his touch, spun, and glared at him. "How do you know?"

Bryan shrugged. "I followed you home one night."

"Damn it, you had no right!"

"I was curious. I guess waiting tables doesn't pay much, huh?"

She ran a hand back through her short spikes of hair, feeling suddenly depressed. "You might as well know the rest of it. I'm working at a burlesque."

"You're waiting tables at a bawdy house?"

"No, moron, I'm not waiting tables at all. Get it?"

Bryan winced. "Oh, Mina, I'm sorry."

"It's not that bad, really. The men aren't allowed to touch us or anything. And I'm mostly wearing glamour as it is." She made a deprecating gesture towards her flat chest. "No one's going to pay good money to see a couple of mosquito-bites fail to jiggle around, after all."

He laughed and shook his head. "If you say so."

"*Don't* tell Duncan. I'm serious, Bryan. If he finds out..." she trailed off and sighed. "It was bad enough when I was a factory slave. I mean, the difference in our stations was about as big as it could get to start with. But at least I could say I was doing respectable work."

Bryan gave her a thoughtful look with his large, dark eyes. "The difference in your stations," he mused. "That's how you feel, huh? I guess that explains it, then."

"Explains what?"

"Why you haven't been mussing up the bed sheets in his room at Jeremiah's."

"Prick!" she exclaimed and punched him hard in the shoulder. He danced away, laughing.

~*~

"I feel like an idiot," Mina muttered, tugging at the bodice of her dress. Not surprisingly, cleavage failed to appear.

Bryan sighed. "You look great."

"I look like a fool. I wish I could grow my hair out overnight. Why can't this faeling magic be good for anything practical?"

They strolled together down Beer Lane, headed for Jeremiah's brewery where they would meet Duncan. The last light of evening was fast on the wane, and clouds of pigeons swirled in the shell-pink sky, searching for their roosts. The smell of cooking dinners filled the air, wafting from a hundred apartments and houses. A woman sold beans from a cart on one corner, and great clouds of steam boiled up from her pots to blow on the cool breeze.

Mina had found a dress that suited her at a second-hand shop. Its ivory skirts, decorated with embroidered wildflowers around the hem, felt alien around her legs and ankles. The torso was fairly form fitting, and left her arms and shoulders bare. It was cut low to show off cleavage—if she'd had any.

Bryan looked quite nice himself, in a red coat, yellow waistcoat, and necktie. He even wore a low-crowned top hat. The clothes made Mina feel as if they both had passed into some alternate version of reality.

Duncan was waiting for them in the shadows of the brewery's entrance. He had also managed to piece together proper attire. A slightly shabby black frock coat hung over a white shirt with frilled cuffs. A soft explosion of lace from his necktie showed above a black waistcoat, and his trousers were also black. He had tied his long, silver-shot hair back in a tail with a black ribbon, and crowned it with a top hat. Delicate gold hoops gleamed in both ears. He had finally managed to replace his broken specs, and the new lenses flashed like twin moons in the gaslight.

All in all, he looked rather striking, Mina thought.

"Ah, there you are!" Duncan started as they approached. He stopped suddenly and blinked at Mina. "I...um...that is...."

"Eloquent as always," said Bryan, taking the handles of the wheelchair.

Duncan shot him an annoyed look. "Thank you for your profound commentary, Bryan." He turned around and looked hesitantly up at Mina. "You look lovely tonight, my dear."

"So do you. Handsome, that is." *Good, Mina. Now you sound like an idiot.*

They walked slowly through the streets to the small theater, talking idly as they went and watching other passersby. The theater itself was a small place, modest but clean on the outside. Men and women in evening dress flowed in, the colors of their clothes making them look like a jewel box dropped on the street. Mina stared at them in awe. Some of them stared back—she had not dared to take off the glamour of the iron collar around her throat, on the off chance that someone who knew her might spot her without it, an offense that would end with her back in prison.

They were seated in a box ideally positioned to see the stage. Duncan remarked on how nice it had been of Janine to get them such a good place. Mina nodded, only half-listening as she stared at the people, at the cheap red stage curtain, at the painted figures on the proscenium arch. When she turned to ask him to repeat himself, she caught sight of a grin, quickly hidden.

But it all paled when the curtain finally rose and the opera began. The costumes dazzled Mina and made her think of far-away places and long-ago lands. The clear voices of the singers lifted her up and thrilled her blood. Men fought duels with swords, lovers met in secret trysts; a sorcerer cast a terrible curse that rebounded on the one who had requested it. Without realizing it, Mina took Duncan's hand during the climatic scene where the hero fought the villain, who had tricked the heroine into marrying him instead of her true love. Although the hero won, he was mortally wounded. Seeking out his beloved, he discovered her dead, having drunk poison rather than face her villainous husband.

"That was really sad," Mina said at last, when the curtain came down.

Duncan looked down and appeared to discover his hand for the first time, as if it had been off doing things without his permission. "It was a tragedy," he pointed out, releasing her fingers reluctantly. "Besides which, I thought you once said that you didn't believe in love."

"Did I say that?"

"Yes. In the park. Remember?"

"Way to go," Bryan mouthed over Duncan's head.

Mina shot Bryan an angry glare. "I must have been having a bad day," she said lamely.

They left the opera house for Meredith's small tavern around the corner. Meredith was an elderly faeling whom Bryan had not contacted for inclusion in Mina's pack due to her age. The tavern was very plain, but it was clean and warm, and if the patrons sitting around the small tables inside looked as though they were not rich, they did not seem particularly poor, either.

The three found a small table in one corner. Meredith came over with a smile. "Duncan, it's always good to see you and your students. Dinner is on the house tonight. Tut! Don't argue—I'm too old to change my mind about anything once it's set." She placed a bottle of wine in the center of the table. "The best in the house," she said proudly as she poured out three glasses.

Duncan took a sip, swallowed, and smiled with apparent difficulty. "It's...very distinctive, Meredith. Thank you."

Meredith beamed. "Well, I'll be right along with your dinners, then."

"None for me, thanks," said Bryan, rising abruptly to his feet. "I have an early day tomorrow at the shop. I'll see you two later."

"Are you certain, Bryan?" Duncan asked.

Bryan winked at Mina. "I'm certain. Enjoy yourselves."

Duncan turned to her once Bryan had left. "Um. Yes. Well. What did you, ah, think of the opera?"

The topic lasted them through dinner and the first bottle of wine, which Meredith replaced immediately with another. But after that the conversation wandered to life in Dere, to magic, to the nature of the stars, to new discoveries of moons, distant planets, and strange elements. They laughed and gestured, and once

Duncan had Meredith bring a sheet of paper so he could scribble a sketch to illustrate a point. Mina found herself leaning over the table, wineglass in one hand, her being totally focused on the way Duncan's lips moved when he talked, on the gleam of eager intelligence in his eyes, and on the little lines that sprang up around his eyes when he laughed.

The other patrons of the tavern left, and Meredith started sweeping and putting chairs on tables. Duncan and Mina watched each other as they finished off the last bottle of wine. The world had taken on a dreamlike quality, as if everything had been distilled down to the beats of their hearts, the words spoken by blood and heat.

"We should go," Duncan said at last, reluctantly. "I think we've overstayed our welcome."

Mina stood up. "I'll walk you home."

"I should be the one escorting you to your door."

She shook her head quickly. "No. It's...well, it's not in the nicest part of town. I would rather walk you home instead."

He frowned. "Oh. Are you certain that it's safe for you to live there?"

"For me? Think about it."

"Of course. Then I would be delighted to have your escort home."

They went slowly under the stars. "I'm going to chance returning to the theater in another few weeks," Duncan said. "I seriously doubt if anyone would bother to put a watch on the area for so long. I have a telescope there—perhaps you would be interested in viewing some of the planets?"

"I'd love to."

They stopped in the yeasty darkness outside of Jeremiah's brewery. Mina could see the fine bones of Duncan's face very clearly in the shadows. He had pulled the ribbon out of his hair, so that the brown locks hung down around his shoulders, threaded through with moonlight.

"Well, goodnight, then," he said at length.

"Goodnight." She hesitated, then bent down suddenly and kissed him on the lips. It was just a quick kiss; the sort of thing one friend could forgive another, or could pretend never happened. Then she turned and hurried away.

The stars were madness-bright above Mina as she walked through the deserted streets. Her blood pounded in her veins, as if trying to match itself to unheard music. She stopped on a bridge over the Blackrush and leaned her elbows against the railing. The moon was a distorted silver reflection in the dark water.

Ripples disturbed the surface, and she leaned over farther, stretching her unseele sight. A horse's head breached the water briefly, and then did so again. The snout lifted, and the aughisky let out an odd, belling cry, before disappearing beneath the water. Mina wondered what it called for. Perhaps it sought another of its kind—a mate, even.

She threw back her head and imitated its cry. The same dark tides moved in her blood, rose in her like sap moving through a tree. She could feel its loneliness intensely, could feel its blind need for completion. They were her emotions as well.

As Duncan had reminded her, she had at one time told everyone who would listen that there was no love, only lust and the fumbling attempts to make it into something nobler than it was. Perhaps she had even believed that. And she could feel the strength of desire in her, so intense that it left her breathless.

But she thought that there were more layers to it than that, more needs than the simpler demands of the body. Perhaps she wanted a tumble in the bed sheets, but it would be even better if afterwards they could lie together and discuss the movements of the stars, or the flight of birds, or the secret ways of magic.

A part of Mina was tied to the movements of nature, and that part was sure and certain and undistracted by the fears of a young woman. But the rest of her did fear quite a bit. She feared that Duncan would turn away; that the connection she'd felt with him tonight was nothing but illusion. Or worse, that it was nothing but the madness of the season and the night, and that even if his body's need matched her own, that of his heart did not.

Mina sighed and turned away from the aughisky and the river, trailing her fingers along the stone railing of the bridge. Another quarter-mile brought her to another bridge, this one the only sad excuse that she had for a home. Anxious to tell Abby about her night, Mina hurried up to the lean-to they had built out of weathered boards.

The sound of muffled sobs greeted her. Startled, Mina stopped in the entrance, eyes adjusting cat-like to the deeper darkness within. Abby sat in the center of the lean-to, rocking slowly back and forth, her arms wrapped tightly about herself.

"Oh God, Abby, what's wrong?" Mina asked, squeezing inside, heedless of her dress.

Abby glanced up, her face tear-streaked in the dimness. "I did it."

Mina froze, feeling something go still inside her. "Did what?"

"I got us a place to stay."

"What? How?"

"How the hell do you think?" Abby shouted. "I told that pig Gregor that I'd be willing to take customers to bed for that little room in the back!"

Mina put her hand over her mouth to keep back a sudden surge of bile. "No, you didn't, did you? I mean, not yet?"

"Yes."

Mina closed her eyes. "Why? We've been saving—we'll be able to afford something—"

"No, we won't! You're just deluding yourself!" Abby stood up and struck the wall of their lean-to, sending boards flying. "I can't live under a bridge like an animal! I can't! And what about when winter comes, damn you? What then? Maybe it can't touch you, but it can kill me!"

"It can touch me," Mina said steadily. "I'm human enough for that. But, Abby—"

"No! I didn't have any choice! You should be thanking me—I at least had the guts to do what was necessary to keep us alive."

Mina stood up and faced her friend. "I can't. If you expect me to do this with you—to spread my legs for strangers—I won't. I'd rather die in the street."

Abby cast her a look of anger so pure that it was almost hatred. "Then you can keep your hands clean, if you want to. *You* don't have to rent yourself out if *I'm* doing it—we'll have a room, either way."

"Abby, please. It's not that. But my mother did this, and I saw what it did to her. I just...I can't face that for myself. If not for her, then maybe I would do it with you. Maybe I would have done it already." She bit her lip. "And I can't accept a room under those conditions. I can't let you sell yourself so that I can stay warm this winter."

"What the hell difference does it make? I'm going to do it either way. Whether you're there or not won't change that."

"It makes a difference to me."

Abby closed her eyes and turned away. "So you're going to leave me all alone there?"

She sounded like a little girl at that moment, lost in the dark and afraid that the day would never come. Feeling like a coward, Mina put her hands on Abby's shoulders. Her friend flinched at the touch. "All right. I'll stay with you. But I'm going to keep saving until we can afford something else."

Abby nodded mutely. If she believed Mina's words, she showed no sign of it.

~*~

Rhiannon stood before one of the high, wide windows that looked out over the palace grounds. The night air blew through, stirring her hair, both real and glamour-made. Mirrors showed only the glamour, and she wondered suddenly how many years it had been since she had seen her true face. Probably as many as it had been since she had last heard her true name.

A step echoed on the marble floor behind her, and she felt the faint presence of seelie power, so inimical to her own. No wonder Dagmar was mad, with both battling in her blood. Rhiannon drew in a deep breath, smelled perfume tainting the richer scents of night.

"You disappoint me, Roderick," she said at last.

He expressed his anger in the tight silence that followed. Pouting, like a little boy.

"First you can't find one stupid girl, then you find and lose her. Now you have failed to find an old man in a wheelchair, for God's sake!" She stopped, took in a deep breath of rage. "And now Dagmar tells me that Knights and Hounds are failing to return from their patrols. Why have I not heard of this?"

"It's nothing."

"It isn't *nothing*!" She spun and glared at him. The desire to unleash her own power against him smote her suddenly. The idea of seeing him squirm and beg appealed, as it had not in years. "After all this time, someone has suddenly decided to challenge us! I have kept order in this city for more than thirty years—and now this! And you say that it's *nothing*?"

She stepped closer to him, cupped his inhuman chin in her hand. "It all began with that girl. She's behind this somehow—I can feel it, taste it. Find her and kill her, Roderick."

His eyes narrowed, as if he would challenge her. Then, suddenly, he bowed his head, turned, and marched quickly out of the room.

Rhiannon went back to her window. The Knights and Hounds Roderick had sent to search for Duncan

had turned up nothing. No sign, no trace. It was as if he had been but a ghost, rising up briefly to foretell...what?

She shivered suddenly. There was no certainty that it had been Duncan, of course. A part of her hoped that it had not been him. How would it be to see him old, the mortal blood in him stealing years as fast as in any human?

Alone, the Queen of Niune stood at her window and wondered.

~*~

It took Mina a long time to get to sleep, that last night in the lean-to. When she did, she half-expected her dreams to be filled with nightmarish fear and doubt.

But instead, there was only Duncan.

Mina found herself in the theater, in the wings of the vast stage. An orchestra sat in the pit below, playing the reel of a dance. Duncan stood on the stage, as if waiting for her.

She walked towards him, and his face lit up in a smile. "Dance, with me, Mina!" he cried, young and wild as the dreams would make him.

Mina pointed to the red-haired beauty who stood to one side. Her devil's smile glittered below her tangled hair, and her laugh was like breaking glass. "What about her?"

Duncan looked at Aerin and frowned. "She is nothing. Gone."

Aerin smiled. "The dark queen without mercy," she whispered.

Duncan made a swift gesture like a magician. Aerin wavered and vanished like a fever dream.

"See?" Duncan said. "Now will you dance with me?"

Mina went to him, felt his hand settle on her waist. He spun her into a waltz, laughing for the joy of it. She laughed as well, and then tripped so that he had to keep her from falling. Their eyes met and held for a moment. Then he bent down even as she reached up, and their lips met.

They kissed passionately, frantically exploring one another's mouths. Her hands tangled in his hair, and she pressed her body hard against his. He wrapped his arms about her and bore her to the floor. Clothing disappeared the way it sometimes did in dreams, and she arched her back, opening herself—

Mina jerked awake. The thunderous rumble of a dray passed overhead, then faded as it crossed the bridge. A few streets away, a muffin-seller began singing about fresh rolls and steaming bread. Factory bells clanged far off, like ghosts dragging the chains of past lives. The city was waking with the dawn, heedless of headaches or heartaches or dreams.

~*~

Duncan awoke suddenly, for no reason he could discern, his entire body in an agony of desire such that he simply closed his eyes and frenziedly continued the fantasy, until his need was spent. Afterwards, he lay quietly in the little cot Jeremiah had given him, his heart thundering in his ears.

He felt ashamed, as if he had betrayed Mina. Dreams were one thing—who could control what their sleeping minds invented? But deliberate fantasies about his young student crossed far over the line into impropriety. His role as teacher gave him a certain authority over her, and he refused to take advantage

of that.

There was hollowness under his heart, a grief and a need that some days seemed to eat him out from within, until there was nothing left but sorrow. Mornings had come when he would have sold his soul to have someone by him when he woke.

Except that nebulous ‘someone’ had somehow become Mina. He wasn’t entirely certain how it had happened—he thought that he’d long ago resigned himself to the fact that he would never again know a woman’s touch. Unless he resorted to paying for it—a course of action that would be so humiliating that he would rather fling himself in front of an omnibus.

He shouldn’t have to remind himself that Mina was not only a student, but also a young woman less than half his age who would be more inclined to see him as a father figure than a romantic prospect. But he did, anyway.

Foolish old man, he berated himself in despair. *Foolish, foolish.*

It didn’t help.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The next few weeks passed in a sort of peaceful rhythm for Mina. She and Abby moved into one of the small rooms in the back of *The Sailor’s Widow*. By day, they slept or practiced dancing with the other girls. Mina spent the afternoon with Duncan in the little room behind the brewery. Then came the evening and the acts. After her set, Mina met her pack in the park, and they all went hunting.

They became frightfully good at it. They were always careful to make certain that they had the advantage in terms of numbers and ground. They avoided ambush themselves by varying their pattern nightly, and they used the Knights’ predictability to their advantage. Most of the pack grew to enjoy the bloody work. And those few who began to think of leaving, or of telling Duncan...suddenly found themselves incapable of making such a decision.

Michael remained a thorn in Mina’s side. Although she never had to use her coercive power on him, he nevertheless watched her with a silent jealousy that slowly turned to real dislike. It was apparent to Mina from the beginning that Michael wanted to be the pack leader, wanted to make all the decisions. And yet, he never quite seemed to have the nerve to challenge her.

Or perhaps he was simply biding his time until the right moment.

Still, Mina felt herself quite capable of handling Michael, should he dare become rebellious. And after a while, she ceased to worry about him at all.

Once the night was done, Mina dragged home at dawn. Abby was usually lying in bed already, her face to the wall. Sometimes, she seemed to be crying. The sight of her friend burned Mina with grief, guilt, and helplessness. And gradually, these emotions—and the anger Abby felt towards Mina for not suffering with her—began to erode the closeness that had once existed between them. Even so, Mina tried to take every opportunity to do things for her friend, in a feeble attempt to bolster her up until the time came when they could finally leave the bawdy house.

In October, everything began to fall apart.

Mina went through the motions of her solo performance, her mind elsewhere while her body followed the urgings of the piano. The autumn air had made her restless, infecting her blood with an urgent need to move, to run, and to act. The smell of burning leaves was like some secret incense that whispered to the innermost workings of her body. The time of the Seelie Court was fading, as unseelie power waxed with the coming of winter.

The restlessness of the season had given a raw edge to her dancing. The other girls she had performed with in a group act earlier had commented on it, and she had already collected several generous tips. Just a little while longer now, before she could go out into the darkness with her pack, to stake their nightly claim to the city. Excitement thrummed in her heartbeat, in her breath.

Mina felt them on a subconscious level before she saw them. A faint ripple in the air, like two fish passing beneath still water, caught her attention. Startled, she strained her eyes against the blinding footlights, peering towards the back of the crowded room.

She caught sight of Bryan first, standing with his back to the stage. Duncan sat beside him, his head in his hands, obviously not looking. Shocked, Mina stumbled, lost the pace of the music, and then picked it back up in desperation.

What the hell are they doing here? she wondered frantically. *Oh, God, no!*

They could both see through the glamour, if they bothered to look. Feeling truly naked for the first time, Mina almost ran from the stage when the set finally ended. Her heart hammering in despair, she pushed her way through the crowd of women waiting to take the stage and hurried back to the room she shared with Abby. Abby wouldn't be doing any 'entertaining' until after her last set, so Mina sat down on the bed after frantically pulling on her street clothes.

Maybe it was a mistake. Maybe it wasn't really them.

Yeah, maybe it was some other black man with a guy in a wheelchair.

She closed her eyes, feeling as though a sentence of execution had just been passed on her. The time stretched on interminably, but the expected knock still made her jump when it finally came. Barney stuck his head in, a scowl creasing his battered face. "Two guys out here to see you. I told 'em you don't take outside work, but they said you were expecting 'em. Should I show 'em the alley?"

"No." She took a deep breath. "Let them in."

Mina had planned to meet their eyes defiantly, but instead found herself staring at the floor as the door swung all the way open. Two shadows wavered across the warped boards; then the door shut again with a soft click. She felt trapped and terrified, hideously exposed.

"So," Duncan said slowly, "waiting tables, are you?"

She flinched at the coldness in his voice. "How did you find out?"

Cloth rustled softly, and his shadow on the floor folded its arms. "Jeremiah was delivering beer to an establishment nearby. He saw you come in here. After that, I confronted Bryan and demanded he tell me what he knew of the matter."

Mina shot an angry glare at Bryan, who shrugged helplessly. "Sorry. He was insistent."

She tried to be mad at Bryan but found that she couldn't summon the emotion. Instead, she merely closed her eyes in weariness. "So now you know."

"The...gentleman...who escorted us back here said that you had the clap," Duncan told her quietly.

"No! It's just something Abby and I put around, to discourage anyone from asking after me. I'm not doing anything like that, just dancing. I swear I'm not."

"Why did you lie to me?"

Unexpected tears pricked Mina's eyes, and she wiped them away hurriedly. "I didn't want you to despise me."

There was a moment of shocked silence.

Then Mina gave up, put her face in her hands, and cried.

"Mina, no, my dear, please," Duncan said. The wheelchair creaked, and she felt his hand on her shoulder, stroking her hair, touching her back. "Why would you think such a thing?"

"You're angry," she shot back, still not looking at him.

"I am angry, but not with you. I'm upset that you had to do this in the first place. I wish that you had told me earlier. Perhaps I could have done something to help you."

"What? I know you don't have much for yourself. And, God, you got me out of prison—wasn't that enough?" She risked a look at his face, glimpsing his concern. "And...how can you feel anything but contempt for me, now that you know? It was bad enough when I was a factory slave, but at least that was respectable."

"You are the most frustrating woman," Duncan murmured, half to himself. "I wish I understood what went on inside that head of yours. Of course I don't despise you, or feel contempt for you. I—" He stopped suddenly, as if catching a slip of the tongue. "That is, I'm your friend, Mina."

She managed a weak smile. "Good. I could use one."

"So I see. Are you all right?"

"I think so."

He nodded. His fingers brushed her short hair, ever so lightly. It was just a simple touch, but Mina felt her body respond, as if the gesture had been erotic.

"Could you leave us for a moment, Bryan?" Duncan asked quietly.

Once Bryan was gone, he caught Mina's chin and raised it so that she had to look at him. His blue-gray eyes were filled with a mixture of grief and pain that startled her to see. "Now tell me the truth, Mina," he said softly. "Are you acting as a prostitute as well? You said once before that you'd had a baby that hadn't come to term, but you didn't want to speak of it because you feared losing my respect. Was that because you were...selling yourself when you became pregnant?"

Her heart clenched. He really thought that she was hooking. Certainly it seem like a logical explanation as to why she made a habit of visiting him in the afternoons, instead of at night once her set was done.

Mina closed her eyes; she felt numb. "Not exactly. I...my mother was a whore, killed by a customer who got too rough. I swore I would never end up the way that she did. But...when I was sixteen, I was working as a dresser at the mill—it was really hard work. The overseer up on the floor with the looms was a man named William. He would come down and visit me during lunch, bring me things. He was

handsome, I suppose. I really...I mean, I thought that he liked me. And I was young and stupid enough to think that I was falling in love with him.

"After a few weeks, an opening came up on the looms. William came to me and said that he could give me the job, which was easier and paid better than what I had been doing. But there were more experienced girls that he could give the position to. If I wanted it, I had to show him that...that I was worth it."

Duncan closed his eyes and took a sudden sip of indrawn breath, like a man with a sharp pain. "I...see."

"I wouldn't have agreed to it if I hadn't felt something for him—I would have told him to go to hell otherwise, I swear." Mina hesitated a moment, then took Duncan's hand for comfort. "So, anyway, he, um, took me back to one of the storerooms. It hurt a lot, and it wasn't very nice at all—no kissing or caressing or anything like that. But then it was over and I had the new job, so I tried not to feel too bad about it. And after that William started to pay attention to one of the other girls, and that hurt, but I tried not to let it bother me.

"When the next month came, though, I didn't get my moon blood. It scared me to death. The mills all have an 'immorality clause' so I could have been fired if anyone found out about my being pregnant. I tried not to panic. I told myself that William would help me. Maybe I even thought he would marry me.

"I went up to his office one day, which was raised up above the main floor, so that he could look out and see all of us at once. I told him that I thought I was pregnant. He just cursed me. He said that I was nothing but a cheap whore and that he was going to have me fired for immoral behavior.

"I couldn't believe it. I was so shocked, and scared, and humiliated, and...I don't even know what. He turned his back on me and walked out onto the catwalk. And something inside me just...snapped.

"It was the only time before the accident a few months ago when I was able to draw on my unseele powers. I didn't even know what happened or how I did it. A surge of power just came out of me and struck him. It shoved him right through the railing of the catwalk. It...it killed him. Duncan, please believe me that it was an accident!"

Duncan's fingers had tightened on hers; his knuckles were white. She risked a look at him and saw that his mouth was drawn with anger. No one sane would have wanted to get in the way of the rage in his eyes.

"I know," he said tightly, and she realized with overwhelming relief that his anger wasn't directed at her.

She nodded and squeezed his fingers gently. "Thank you."

"What...what happened to the baby?"

Mina bit her lip and closed her eyes. "I couldn't keep it. I would have been fired as soon as I was far enough along for it to show. And then what would I have done? I couldn't have even supported myself, let alone a baby. But even so, it was still the hardest choice I ever had to make." She took a deep breath and let it out slowly, regretfully. "I saved up all the money I had, even knowing that it would mean that I couldn't eat for the next week, and I went to the chemist. 'Cure for interrupted menstruation,' they call it. It hurt a lot, and there was a terrible amount of blood—I was actually sort of afraid that I was going to bleed to death. The baby wasn't very far along—there wasn't even anything to see."

Silence fell between them. Duncan's thumb moved slowly over the back of her hand, soothing her shattered nerves. "I am very sorry," he said at last. "I know that is entirely inadequate, but I can't think of

anything else to say."

Mina gave him a feeble grin. "It's all right." She shrugged. "Anyway, I'm not using this room for anything other than sleeping. You have to believe me."

"I do believe you." He gave an unhappy sigh. "I wish that I had felt it when you used your power all those years ago. Was it near midwinter?"

"Yeah."

"That would perhaps explain why the Seelie Court didn't feel it and send a Hound after you. And if there was unseelie activity going on near me—a student casting a spell—it might have kept me from feeling you as well. I apologize, Mina. I should have been there for you."

"Don't be silly." She folded both her hands about his, feeling the calluses that the violin had left on his strong fingers. "And maybe it was for the best. I needed time after that."

He gave her a puzzled look, as if unsure how to interpret her words. Then, very reluctantly, he pulled his hand from hers. "I should go, I suppose. Please...if there is anything that I can do, don't hesitate to ask. Please."

She smiled. "I promise."

He rapped on the door and called for Bryan. As his student opened the door, Duncan paused briefly and looked back over his shoulder. "There isn't anything else you're keeping from me, is there?"

Mina went cold. "No," she somehow managed to answer steadily. "Nothing."

Duncan nodded and turned. Bryan glanced at her over Duncan's head, and his look said plainly that he had doubts about the wisdom of keeping the secret of their nighttime activities. But he said nothing, only turned and followed Duncan out.

Mina sat with her head bowed, feeling an insurmountable weight of guilt press down on her. For the first time, she began to question the wisdom of not telling Duncan everything at the start. But what would he do if he knew of her coercive power? Would he accept it, as he had accepted so much else about her, and help her learn to control it? Or would his friendship turn to fear and distrust, never knowing which of his desires were his...and which were hers?

You could make him want you, whispered a small voice deep within.

No. That would be like becoming William. It would be worse than becoming William, because at least *she'd* had a kind of choice.

Abby's shadow fell across the doorway, and Mina looked up quickly. Bitterness aged her friend's face, and she stood with her arms folded defensively, her posture radiating anger. "When Barney told me that you'd taken two men back here, I thought that maybe you'd finally figured out something about responsibility," she said, venom in her tone. "Or did you? Did your friends pay to enjoy you? I hope you charged extra if it was both at once."

Mina stood up, sickened. "They came to talk. Duncan was worried about me."

"About *you*?" Abby laughed, a sound with no humor. "As if anything bad has happened to you."

Mina pushed past her angrily, heading out into the comforting night. Abby's hatred and resentment felt

like a fire burning at her back.

~*~

Duncan slumped in his chair, for once letting Bryan push him without complaint. Rage and fear warred in him, turning his stomach queasy. He hated the thought of Mina working in the bawdy house. A bitter pang of jealousy seared through him at the thought of other men looking at her, wanting her....

Stop being an old fool. Jealousy should have nothing to do with this.

But it did. God, it did! He bit his lip angrily, staring down at his useless legs. Stupid and insane as it might be, he disliked Mina's current occupation for his own sake as well as for hers.

And, oh, when she had been up on that stage, it had been so tempting to look, to see through the glamour. The thought of her dancing in front of other men might gall, but the simple idea of her dancing was powerfully arousing.

Well, her story of William had certainly thrown cold water on that. Duncan's hands tightened on the armrests as a surge of rage went through him. If the man hadn't already been dead, it would have been tempting to hunt him down and make him suffer. But, as in all other things, Mina didn't need him or anyone else to dole out punishment for her.

It explained so much, though. He thought of her boyish style of dress, which she had always claimed as a defense against the dangers of the machinery she worked with. The explanation might hold some truth, but he felt that it had been a defense against unwelcome male attention as well.

Mina was a wounded young woman who deserved his sympathy and his support. Yet he had served her no better than to think of her in ways she would never have wanted. He was lucky that she wasn't privy to his dreams—she would truly have despised him then.

He sighed and turned his attention away from anger and towards fear. Mina pushed into a corner like this could mean danger. She was so damned powerful...he dreaded opening the newspaper one morning and seeing a headline about a score of mysterious deaths at a burlesque house, but that was exactly what he feared might happen if she lost control of her temper.

At least she isn't a dyana, he reminded himself. If she were, surely he'd have seen signs of it by now. The incident after the mill fire had troubled him for a while, true. But nothing had happened since to make him think that Bryan's rush to Mina's aid had been caused by anything more sinister than failing intuition. And as for his own sense of being called while he lay dying and without his amulet, it had more likely been simple delusion brought on by sickness. Without better proof than that, he refused to believe ill of her.

"So," Bryan asked conversationally, "did you look?"

It took Duncan a moment to realize what he meant. "No! Of course not! And you had better not, either, or I shall be extremely angry."

"Of course I didn't," said Bryan, steering them around a pile of rags lying abandoned on the sidewalk. After a moment, Duncan realized the pile was actually a child, whether dead or asleep he couldn't tell. "But you were glaring so hard at nothing that I thought you might need something more pleasant to think about."

"I hardly think that the prospect of Mina working in that establishment is pleasant."

"I guess not. But we could always catch one of her shows."

"Bryan—!"

"All right, all right! It was just a joke! You're in a foul mood tonight, old man. You sound like a jilted lover."

"I am a concerned friend," Duncan replied icily, wishing that he could glare at Bryan without having to twist into an awkward position first. "And I am her teacher."

Bryan sighed. "You sound like a man who's trying awfully hard to convince himself."

"I will not have this conversation with you."

"Fine." Bryan lapsed into silence as he pushed the chair up a steep incline. Duncan folded his hands in his lap and stared down at them, trying not to think.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"I don't like this," Bryan said, when he met Mina in the park the next night. The pack was not hunting that evening—as the Knights and Hounds became more wary of attack, Mina had decided to vary their schedule, making it as unpredictable as possible. So tonight she stood alone with Bryan, surrounded by the low ruins. "I wish you would make a clean breast of it with Duncan."

Mina scowled at him, wondering if she ought to use a bit of compulsion on him. The thought of treating a friend that way bothered her, but it was better than having Duncan find out. "I can't tell him, Bryan. Can you imagine his reaction? I don't know what he'd do." She shivered. *Not to mention his reaction if he found out the rest of it.*

"Doesn't it bother you to keep secrets from him?"

"Yes, it bothers me! But it's better than the alternative."

Bryan shook his head. "He's going to find out one way or another, Mina. And it will be ten times worse if it doesn't come from you."

Her eyes narrowed dangerously. "How is he going to find out? The same way he found out about my job?"

"I didn't have a choice—you'd been seen. I couldn't think of an alternate explanation that he'd believe. Not one that wouldn't be worse than the reality, anyway."

She settled back. "All right. I'll take your word for it." She looked away, out over the park, nostrils flaring as if to pick up an elusive scent. "I wish we could hunt."

"Do you really think we're hurting them?" he asked unexpectedly.

"You're in the mood for asking pointed questions tonight, aren't you?"

"Just answer me."

Mina looked down at the ground and shuffled her foot in the dirt. "I don't know. We're nibbling at the edges of the Seelie Court's power, yes. But we can't reach the spider in the center of the web. And I

don't know whether we're really hurting them or not."

Bryan sighed and went to sit down on a tumbled wall. "I'm worried."

"About what?"

"I don't know. That everything's going to go wrong. Turn out badly."

Mina remembered the prediction of the bean-nighe. For the most part, she had managed to put it out of her mind as time passed, but tonight she wondered if she wasn't perhaps rushing headlong to her own destruction. Perhaps Duncan was right, and hiding was the best option.

She hissed, restless and edgy. She couldn't hide. And tonight, she couldn't hunt. "I feel like something's bottled up inside me. I want to get out, run, do things."

"Yeah, I feel it, too. It's always like this in the fall. I don't know what Duncan does to keep from going crazy with it." Bryan shrugged. "But then, the blood's weaker in him than in either of us. And weaker in me than in you."

"There's nothing weak about Duncan," she said softly.

Bryan looked at her. "You're wrong. Duncan's no better at avoiding self-delusion than the rest of us. Hell, he's a damn expert."

"What do you mean?"

But Bryan only shook his head. "Nothing. You ask me to keep your secrets from Duncan; you'll have to put up with me keeping his from you."

"Jerk." She grinned, to show that she was just teasing.

Bryan snorted and stood up. "Go home, get some rest. I'm going to."

Unfortunately, Mina couldn't go back to *The Sailor's Widow*, due to the possibility that Abby might still have customers. The nights were long as the year hastened towards its waning, and there were still many hours left before dawn. Sticking her hands in her pockets, she wandered along the banks of the Blackrush. She half-expected to see Camhlaidh lurking about, but the dark fae remained absent. Not even the aughisky stirred the waters. *Maybe there's a fae convention somewhere that I don't know about.*

About an hour after midnight, Mina turned her steps homeward. Duncan had been back at the theater for a week now, and the Seelie Court had failed to appear on his doorstep. It would probably be safe for them to move in with him for a little while, at least until they could afford something of their own. Abby would be glad to hear that.

Mina noticed a crowd standing in front of the bawdy house as she approached, but paid it no mind. Ducking into the alley that led behind the long, low building, she was brought up short by the constables standing in the open service door.

Nothing to do with me, she told herself firmly. Nevertheless, her one experience with the police caused a flutter of terror to rise in her chest as she walked slowly towards them. They were questioning a girl by the name of Martha. Martha still wore her dancing outfit with its gauzy skirt and nearly see-through bodice, but her makeup was streaked and smudged with tears.

She looked up as Mina approached and let out a low exclamation. "Mina! Oh God!"

Dread pooled in Mina's belly. "Where's Abby?"

One of the constables looked up from making notes on a yellow pad. "This the victim's roommate?" he asked Martha.

The victim? "What's happened, damn it?"

Martha wiped tears from her eyes. "I'm sorry, Mina, but Abby...she's dead."

Mina stood very still, feeling as if the world around her had simply ground to a halt. "No."

"I'm sorry—"

It wasn't real; that was all. There had been some kind of mistake. They had misidentified some poor woman; that was it. She would show them that they were wrong. "Where is she? I want to see her."

"You don't want to," Martha began, but one of the constables gave a short, firm nod that over-rode her objection.

Then Martha was leading Mina into the building and down a corridor to one of the private sitting rooms in the rear. Mina walked slowly, feeling as though she had somehow slipped backwards through time. She was in the charity hospital again, the nurses taking her to see her mother's broken body. Voices murmured around her, but she was unaware of what they said, as if they spoke in some language she had once known but could no longer understand.

There was a figure lying under a sheet on one of the parlor couches. The couch was large enough for two people to lie on it together, and the figure under the bloodstained cloth looked very small, almost like a child. Feeling bile creep up her throat, Mina reached out and pulled the sheet away from the face.

Abby looked frightened in death. Her eyes were open, staring at some last sight with a look of horror. Her throat was a red ruin, slit open from ear to ear.

Voices beat at Mina's ears, meaningless as moths fluttering against a window. The shock was too big to feel; it crowded out all other emotions, until nothing was left but a sort of numbness.

"What happened?" Mina heard herself say, as if some other person spoke the words for her.

"No one's sure," Martha sobbed, pausing to blow her nose. "Someone said they saw her go out the back way with one of her customers. I don't know why—she knew better than that. I don't know what he offered her to make her agree to go with him. Sara got to feeling sick around midnight, so she went outside for a breath of air. She...she spotted Abby's shoe lying in the street, so she walked over that way and...." The rest of the tale dissolved into hysterical sobbing.

"Do they know who did this to her?" Mina asked hollowly.

"N-no. Nobody got a good look at his face or thought he was anybody they knew. Th-the police don't seem to think that they'll catch him."

Something deep and terrible began to unfold inside Mina's chest. She turned away from the sight of her friend's body and walked carefully back down the hall. Martha called out after her, but she found herself unable to reply. If she opened her mouth, the darkness inside her would come out. And none of the girls here deserved that.

Somehow, Mina made her way from the bawdy house to the banks of the Blackrush. She found herself standing by the low bridge that had offered shelter to Abby and her. It had seemed at the time that things could not possibly get any worse.

But they had.

She turned slowly in the direction of the palace, like a lodestone drawn irresistibly to the pole. *All your fault*, she thought, hating them. *All your fault*.

The man who had killed Abby was long gone, beyond the ability of any power she possessed to find him. But the Seelie Court wasn't. The Seelie Court, in their persecution of her, had burned down the factory. That one act had led to everything that followed: the bridge, the bawdy house, the whoring that sent Abby into the arms of her killer.

All your fault, Mina thought again, narrowing her eyes. "Bastards! I'll kill you all!"

The nearest gaslights winked out, extinguished in a tidal wave of rage and hate. Darkness spread outward, snuffing all flames, washing across the city until the only light left in Dere came from the setting moon. The sounds of startled voices sounded here and there, although most of the sleeping city failed to notice the sudden return of primal night.

Then Mina reached out. Her awareness spread across the city, found unseelie faelings like onyx beads sewn into a black scarf.

"Come," she whispered. "Fight. Send them to hell where they belong."

Some of them responded eagerly to her summons, ready to fight, hunt, and kill. Others fought her, like children trying to overcome the grip of a strong man. She tore through their defenses almost without thought, willing them to go out and kill every Knight and Hound they could find. Once, she found the shadow that was Duncan. She lingered over him for a moment, and then moved on. He would remain apart from this; he would remain safe. Perhaps some instinctive part of her understood that losing him so soon after Abby would mean relinquishing the last link to whatever humanity she still possessed.

Once she had marshaled the unseelie faelings and turned them loose, she began to run herself, heading for the battles she could feel beginning, like drops of blood springing from wounds on the city.

Tonight, the Seelie Court would finally pay for all that they had done.

~*~

There was a fire raging in the distance. Flames threw an unnatural glare into the sky, as if hell had risen to earth and lurked just over the horizon. A fire engine clattered by, foam flying from the horses' flanks and bells clanging in alarm. People yelled and ran about in confusion, and onlookers and curiosity-seekers clogged the streets. Power rolled over the city, buffeting Duncan like waves against a swimmer.

Sweat dripped down his face and into his eyes, but he didn't take his hands off the wheels to wipe it away. He had been awakened suddenly in the middle of the night. There had been a sort of *presence* with him for a moment, which had quickly passed on, like something huge and dark moving past him in deep water. Still, it had been there long enough for him to recognize it and taste its musky darkness on his tongue.

Mina.

After that, all hell had broken loose. Spikes of power had come to him from a distance, warning of some

violent conflict. Desperately frightened for his students, he had dressed hurriedly and flung himself out into the night, straining the muscles in his arms in his hurry to reach them.

That was when he had seen the fire.

He was getting close to the heart of it now. Skidding around a corner, he braked hard, yelping in shock as a Hound tumbled past him. Its golden blood leaked from a dozen wounds, but it snarled and fought still. Janine ran after it, shrieking like a mad thing. Duncan hurriedly flung ice at the Hound's flank; startled, it spun, and gave Janine the opening she needed. When it was dead, she looked at him, and an odd grin stretched her face.

"Janine, what are you doing?" Duncan demanded. His heart was pounding from exertion, and he began to wonder whether it would hold out. "What's happening?"

For a moment, she hesitated, frowning. "I...I...I have to fight. I have to kill them."

"Why?"

She shook her head, then turned and sprinted back in the direction of the fire. Shaking hard, Duncan followed her into a maelstrom.

The conflagration had begun in a warehouse, undoubtedly set off by seelie power. Flames had leapt to surrounding businesses, until several blocks had been engulfed. Firefighters pumped water from their engines, but it was a losing battle. Heat smote Duncan's skin and cinders stung his eyes. Squinting against the blaze, he made himself invisible to the firefighters and followed Janine down a street walled in by flame.

In the center of it all, a massive struggle was going on. His students fought ferociously against more Hounds and Knights than he had seen in thirty years. For an instant, he remembered that terrible night when Aerin had died, and his heart wrenched inside of him. Desperate, he scanned the scene before him, sorting through individual struggles to find some explanation behind the battle.

Bryan staggered through the smoke, holes showing in his shirt where sparks had burnt through. He looked wild and half-scared. Grabbing Bryan's sleeve, Duncan repeated his insistent query.

Bryan stared at him as if emerging from a dream. "It...I...I was lying in bed," he said uncertainly. "And I woke up, and I realized that I had to go out and find the Seelie Court. I had to destroy them." He frowned, puzzled. "I don't understand why I thought that."

Dreadful realization froze Duncan's limbs, pinning him in place. He had convinced himself that Mina was no *dyana* because he had not wanted her to be one. He had put aside the evidence from the mill fire, determined to have *proof*.

Determined not to believe.

"Where is Mina?" he shouted, shaking Bryan hard. Bryan blinked like a sleepwalker and pointed dumbly down the street, in the direction of the most intense fighting.

With a furious oath, Duncan shoved his student aside and set off into the heart of the inferno.

Bodies littered the street. Most of them belonged to Knights and Hounds, but not all. Duncan navigated around them as best he could, trying not to look too closely. Yells and battle-screams rang out from somewhere in front of him. He bowed his head against the smoke and doggedly followed the sounds.

She stood framed against the flames, standing over the body of a Knight. Her staff was in her hands, the ends sizzling with golden blood. Dark shadows leapt around her like some sort of anti-flames, or icy fire. Her short, spiky hair was in disarray.

"Mina!" Duncan shouted desperately.

She turned slowly towards him. She was smiling a cold predator's smile, and her teeth looked small and sharp. Her eyes were utterly black, all white and color lost from view. Power unfolded from her tangibly, like dark wings. She had never looked so utterly inhuman. She had never looked so beautiful.

The breath stopped in Duncan's throat. For an instant, he wanted nothing more than to say: *To hell with it*, and put aside all the human cares that chained him. He wanted to follow her, to lose himself in her, to forget about every other concern except for her. It was as if something in her said: *I am everything that you have ever wanted.*

And every molecule of his being replied: *I know.*

He closed his eyes, struggling against a compulsion that came from nowhere except inside himself. In the days of his youth, he had dreamed that Aerin might approach this glory, this power. He had needed to subsume himself in her, to become her servant and willing slave. But she had been nothing but a pale shadow.

"Mina," he said finally, slowly, as if heavy rocks filled his throat, "what are you doing?"

She hissed at him like a cat. Slowly, she walked towards him, her every movement sending a jolt of desire through him so intense that it hurt. "I'm doing what needs to be done," she said in a sibilant, reptile voice.

"No. Not like this."

Her black eyes narrowed. "Abby is dead."

Oh, God. No wonder this had happened. It occurred to him suddenly that there wasn't a lot holding Mina to the human half of herself. That part of her had always been ascendant before, because the life she had lived had been its life. But it was a life she had hated, and she had never tried to tie herself to it with friends and family. Abby had been the only person that she had really cared about.

"I'm sorry," he said carefully, knowing that the words he spoke in the next few minutes would make all the difference, and desperately afraid because of it. "But you must stop this."

"No. Not until they pay."

"I can't agree to this. I must oppose you."

She laughed, a sound like a clock tolling midnight, hollow and dark. "I could make you want to help me."

"No," he said steadily. "Your *dyana's* power cannot touch me."

He felt her magic go by him, like a leviathan brushing past the toes of a swimmer. A frown creased her exquisite, inhuman face.

"You see," he went on quietly. "I am immune to your coercion."

She made an angry gesture. "Why are you fighting me? Can't you see that what I'm doing is right? The Seelie Court will destroy us, but not until they've killed everything we love! Look at you! They killed

Aerin, they killed your family—what more does it take for you to grow some balls and fight back?"

"I've never denied that I'm a coward," he said, even though the words were like broken glass on his tongue. "And I understand your anger. But look at what you're doing." He gestured to the burning buildings around them. "*Look* at what your actions have cost. You haven't pulled Rhiannon off her throne. You haven't fed Roderick to the aughisky. You've destroyed the livelihoods of innocent people who had nothing to do with this."

Mina faltered at that. The blackness drained out of her eyes as she stared at the flames, for the first time really comprehending what they represented.

Duncan seized on the opening and attacked. "You are angry with the Seelie Court because they devastate everything they touch. You hate them because their carelessness with humans destroyed the mill and ruined Abby's life. But here you are, doing the exact same thing. In your eagerness to hurt your enemies, you are willing to tear asunder the lives of innocents without thought or care." He paused and put all the venom he could muster into his last words. "You shouldn't hate the Seelie Court, Mina. You're just like them."

She stared at him, horror dawning in her expression. Her aura of power collapsed like a deflating balloon. Suddenly she was no longer the dark queen without mercy, but only a young woman, frightened and alone.

The cries of the other unseelie faelings sounded around them as they were released from Mina's spell. There came a stampede of running feet, dark faelings panicking to get away from the flames and the light. Fortunately, there were few Hounds and Knights left to chase them.

"Duncan?" Mina said, sounding lost.

He closed his eyes and turned away from her, feeling the beginnings of the most terrible grief he had ever known. "I am going to speak to as many of my other students as I can," he said softly. "And then I will see you at the theater tomorrow afternoon. Do you understand?"

"I...yes."

He nodded and rolled away without looking back, afraid that the sight of her standing alone and forlorn against the flames would break his heart.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Duncan sat quietly in his familiar sitting room, his hands folded in his lap. He felt every one of his fifty-three years hanging like weights about his neck. He had spent the morning talking with as many of his students as he could easily contact: Janine, Halston, Fox, and Michael. Only Fox, in her wit-wandering way, had spoken no word against Mina. Janine had been vicious as only a woman could. And the picture Michael had painted of Mina's activities had been damning indeed.

Duncan felt as though he were losing everything. He had spent years forging the unseelie faelings of the city into a community. Now that trust was shattered, perhaps for good. At the very least, it would take a long time to undo the damage Mina had caused.

And as for Mina...all of his foolishness had finally caught up to him. She had been the student he'd always dreamed of: intelligent, clever, and eager to learn. He should have put some distance between them when, over time, he had allowed her to become more than that. But it had been so very, very long since

he had felt about anyone the way he felt about her, and he was so lonely. It had been far too easy to close his eyes to consequences, or to signs to which he should have paid attention. And now they were all going to suffer for his weakness.

He heard the door open at the end of the hall. Footsteps came hesitantly towards the sitting room, stopping just outside. Looking up, he beheld Mina standing there, twisting her bowler hat in her hands uncertainly. The sight of her drove pain like an iron spike through his heart. She looked so lost and frightened. He wanted only to forgive her everything, to open his arms and hold her until she smiled again.

No. He took a deep, resolute breath. *I have to be strong.*

"Tell me everything," he said without preamble.

She did. Everything she had hidden from him, from her meetings with the fae Camhlaidh to her growing awareness of her power as a *dyana*, came pouring out. Except, of course, that she made it sound as though she had used that power far less often than Janine and Michael claimed.

You can't afford to believe her, he told himself. *Your other students are depending on you.*

At last her words stumbled into silence. She stood quietly with her head down and her hands limp at her sides.

"Did it never occur to you to wonder why this fae had such interest in you?" Duncan asked softly.

Mina flinched, as if he had struck her. "Yes. But he wouldn't tell me. I don't know why he encouraged me."

"Really? It seems obvious to me. Camhlaidh is your father."

She blinked at him. "Oh, God. Do you think so?"

"I can think of no other explanation."

She nodded. "I'll ask him. Duncan...I'm sorry. I shouldn't have lied to you."

He forced himself to remain cold and impassive. "No. You should not have."

"I was afraid. I thought you'd hate me."

"Did you?"

She winced. "Please, Duncan. I know you're mad. But don't be so cold, please. I just lost Abby—I don't think I can stand this."

His heart cried out, but Duncan kept his face impassive. "It's too late for that now, isn't it? If you were afraid that I would hate you for doing these things, then you should not have done them. Obviously, it wasn't enough to rein you in, so I fail to see why you're upset now."

She stared at him in shock, tears gathering in her eyes. "You don't mean that, do you?"

He shrugged. "That is irrelevant."

"Duncan, please, I swear I'll make it up to you. I'll make it up to everyone."

"You'll do nothing of the kind."

"Then...what?"

The next words were the hardest he had ever spoken in his life. "You will leave Dere immediately and never return."

Mina's eyes widened and the tears spilled over. "No! Duncan, please—"

"There will be no discussion. I am told that your...activities...over the last few weeks have disrupted the Hounds and Knights enough that it should be possible for you to sneak out of the city now."

"But—"

"No. You are a *dyana*—you can control the minds and wills of other unseelie faelings. While you remain in this city, you are a threat to all my other students. I cannot allow that. I pity any unseelie faelings living wherever you go next."

She shook her head slowly. "Duncan, don't make me leave. Please. I'll give you any promises you want."

It hurt. He wanted to believe her so badly. But he had already fallen into that trap before. "I've seen the worth of your promises, Miss Cole. You think that I am being cruel to you. The only people I am being cruel to are those I inflict you upon by sending you away. In times past, *dyanas* were killed by those who could resist their power."

"It would be kinder!" Mina burst out, sobbing. "Don't do this! *Please*." She bit her lip and looked at him with those brown eyes that were like windows into midnight. "I love you."

Duncan's whole body went numb, as if she had stabbed him through the heart and left him to die. Somehow, he managed to take a breath despite the pain. "Truly the words of a desperate woman," he said quietly. "Go from Dere. I never want to see you again."

He stared fixedly at his hands, knowing that he would relent if he saw her face. After what seemed like half an eternity, he heard the shuffle of her feet on the floorboards of the hall, retreating from him. The soft click of the door sounded like the closing of a tomb.

Duncan put his face in his hands and wept.

~*~

Bryan found Duncan sitting by the cold hearth an hour later.

Duncan felt as though all of his insides had been torn out, leaving only a hollow shell behind. He tried not to think of his words to Mina, or her words to him. He tried not to imagine all the long nights ahead, when he would sit here alone, or with some other student, knowing that she would never cross his threshold again. It hurt worse than anything he had ever imagined in his life, and he wondered miserably where he would find the strength to continue.

"You look terrible," Bryan said quietly, moving around to stand in front of him.

Duncan looked up; he was tired and wished that Bryan would go away. Or perhaps that the world would simply end and have done with it.

"I sent Mina away."

Bryan looked alarmed, which was somewhat unexpected, given Duncan's earlier interviews with his other students. "What? Why?"

"Why do you think? Really, Bryan, I don't wish to talk about it."

"The hell you don't," Bryan said rudely. "You're going to whether you like it or not. Was this because of last night?"

"Of course. And everything that went before. Her pack." Duncan closed his weary eyes. "She is a *dyana*, Bryan. Even you know what that means."

"What I know is that you don't know your other students half so well as you think, old man. I saw some of them before I came over here. I heard Janine whining about how she never wanted to hurt anyone, how Mina forced her to do all those horrible things. I suppose she tried the same load of shit on you."

Duncan opened his eyes and scowled. "There's no need for profanity."

"Screw that! Listen to me, damn you! Fine, maybe Mina used a little extra persuasion here and there. But I'll be damned if she used even a fifth as much as they say. Mina wasn't behind Janine's bloodlust. That girl was raring to go every night. If Mina ever touched her even once before last night, then you can chop me up and feed me to the aughisky."

"She did. She admitted doing it right here, when she first met Janine."

"When Janine was all over you? Small wonder." Bryan shook his head, his eyes angry. "I swear to you, Duncan, we were in the pack because we wanted to be. She let Halston go when he didn't want to do it—she just made sure that he didn't tell you."

"We followed Mina because we thought that she was doing the right thing. Maybe we were wrong about that, and maybe we weren't—that's not the point. The point is that I think Mina mostly used her power to keep it a secret from you. At least until last night."

Duncan fought to regain the cold demeanor he had used with Mina. "Until last night. Last night was hardly trivial, Bryan."

Bryan sighed and clasped his large hands together. "I know. Mina made a mistake. She was hurting, and she lashed out. But isn't she allowed one mistake? Does she have to spend the rest of her life paying for it?"

"Innocent people were killed!"

"I know." Bryan raised his eyes and fixed Duncan with a gaze that burned. "Our mistakes do cost more than those of other people. But I think that sometimes you forget what we are, Duncan. The blood's thin in you, and maybe you can ignore it. But Mina can't."

"We're *unseelie faelings*, Duncan. We aren't pretty little faeries skipping through meadows and sipping nectar from flowers. We're the slimy things that crawl in the mud. We're the shadows hiding under the basement stairs. We're the scary things that snatch at your ankles when you cross a bridge late at night. We aren't pretty, and we aren't kind. We may not be evil, but we're sure as hell not good."

"So what are you saying? That I should just ignore what Mina did? Take her back with open arms?"

"No. But I am saying that you're going overboard by banishing her. You've forgotten what she is. What she did last night wasn't right, but then she wasn't thinking clearly. But I know Mina, and I trust her not to abuse her power too much under ordinary circumstances. I can accept that it's a part of who she is. You used to be able to understand that in Aerin. Why can't you see it in Mina, as well?"

Duncan put his head in his hands. "Why are you doing this to me?"

"I'm not doing anything to you."

"You don't know. You—" Duncan bit his lip, catching back tears.

"What's wrong?" Bryan asked gently.

"Mina said she loved me." Duncan wiped his eyes. "I didn't think she could be so cruel."

Bryan was silent for a long moment. Then he shook his head in disgust. "If you really think that she was lying just to keep you from sending her away from the city, then maybe you don't deserve her."

Duncan's head jerked up. "What?"

Bryan flung his arms in the air in a gesture of defeat. "God! Are you blind? Deaf? Insane?"

A sharp knock sounded from the outside door. Startled, Duncan shot a look of hope at the lens on the table. Perhaps it was Mina, come back to him.

Instead, he saw a knot of his students at the door, all looking tense and angry. With a disappointed sigh, he loosened the locking spell on the door. He had to find Mina, he thought as they came down the hall. He had to talk to her.

"Where is she?" Michael asked when they emerged into the room.

Duncan looked up, surprised at the question. "Who? Mina?"

Michael gave him a dark look. "Yes. That serpent."

"Duncan sent her away from Dere," Bryan offered.

"Really?" Michael sneered. "And how effective do you think *that* will be?"

Dread pooled in Duncan's belly. "What do you mean?"

Janine hissed and tossed her red curls over her shoulder. "You hardly have the strength to enforce your order, do you? You're a fool, Duncan."

Duncan's mouth felt dry as dust. "And what do you propose?"

Janine smiled, her bloodlust clear. "We have to kill her."

"There's no need for that!"

Michael laughed, but the sound was edged with hysteria. "No need? If you'd been through what we have, you wouldn't say that!"

"Bryan has told me a slightly different version of the story."

Michael's eyes narrowed with anger. "Has he? Didn't it occur to you that if Bryan's defending that bitch, it's because she's forcing him to?"

"That's a lie!" shouted Bryan, coming to his feet.

"Don't believe anything he says! He's under her control!"

"Stop that this instant!" Duncan snapped. He looked at the gray, fearful faces of the other faelings and tried to think. Right now, they were in terror of their lives, their freedom, and their sanity. He could not blame them for being afraid. He certainly couldn't blame them for wanting to protect themselves. "I won't countenance violence against Mina."

"What alternative do we have?" Jeremiah demanded bluntly. "Can you restrain her? Can you stop her if she decides to turn on us again?"

He owed them the truth. "No. You know I can't. None of us can."

Jeremiah gave a curt nod. "I didn't think so. We have to do it, Duncan. Hell, it's not that I have something against the girl. It's not as if it doesn't bother me. But we can't let her live. Not if we don't want to end up like the Knights and the Hounds."

"Are you coming with us?" Janine asked in her tight, shrill voice. "Do you know where she went?"

"I don't know," Duncan said honestly. "And I can't come with you—I'd only slow you down."

Michael's eyes narrowed. "Don't think about interfering."

"Do you truly believe I could?"

That restored his confidence. Michael had never believed anyone capable other than himself. "No."

They left with barely a backward glance. Duncan sat silently for a few moments, giving them time to get far enough from the theater that they wouldn't see anyone following them. Then he motioned sharply to Bryan. "Get my bag."

"What are we going to do?"

Duncan shook his head. "I don't know. We have to try to reach Mina before the others do."

Bryan looked uneasy. "And if we don't?"

"Then God help them."

CHAPTER TWENTY

Mina took a long pull of whiskey from the bottle clutched in her hand. The drink burned her throat and belly, but did nothing to chase away the words that raced about in her mind, like an army of dwarves stabbing at her with tiny knives. Her feet stumbled on uneven pavement, and other passersby gave her a wide berth, eyeing her with disapproval. She half-wondered if someone would summon the constables to arrest her for public drunkenness, but truthfully could not find it in herself to care.

It was all over now. All of her lies and deceptions had caught up with her at last. If only she had listened to Bryan, or stopped her ears to Camhlaidh, or....

Or not been such a fool herself.

In the end, there was no one else she could honestly blame for what had happened. The stupidity had all been hers.

With all her heart, she wished that none of this had ever happened. She wanted never to have heard of

faelings, or Hounds, or anything else. If only she had been born fully human.

The memory of Duncan's voice sneaked up on her, quiet and rich. He had always seemed to be the one compensation for her inhuman heritage.

And now he hated her.

What's the point of it all? Mina wondered. She was exhausted; the desire to lie down on the street and never get up again rushed over her like a wave. She closed her eyes and sank to her knees.

"Not promising, child. Self-pity is so unbecoming."

Camhlaidh stood behind her, a mocking smile cutting his handsome face. Rage slammed through Mina, and she staggered to her feet, waving the whiskey bottle in his direction.

"You! I should have listened to Duncan—I should never have spoken to you!"

He laughed. "My, what a temper. Do you think your words can hurt me?"

"Why have you done this to me? What do you want?"

"I told you before. I have my reasons."

"Duncan thinks that you're my father."

Camhlaidh tilted his head to one side, so that his beautiful golden hair tumbled over one black-clad shoulder. "And if I am?"

Mina clenched her hands into fists. She felt the power rise through her, drawn from the earth through the soles of her feet. "Then I will dedicate myself to destroying you."

For a moment, he did look uneasy. "You can try. But you are nothing but a faeling. I am many times older and more powerful than you are. You'd do well to remember that."

"I hate you."

"Sweet child. And I've given you such good advice until now."

"You've made my life a living hell!"

He laughed. "Don't blame your problems on me, my girl. Look at what you've done. You have come so far already. I always knew that you had great potential."

"For what?" she shouted. Mina flung the whiskey bottle at his head; it shattered on the bridge abutment behind him. "Potential for enslaving my friends? For bringing misery everywhere I go? For dying alone?"

Camhlaidh's eyes narrowed. "Don't do anything foolish."

"Why not? Perhaps I'll go swimming in the Blackrush. See if I'm stronger than the aughisky. I've been banished from the damned city! Duncan threw me out! I don't have any friends, I don't have a home—I have nothing!"

"Tsk," said Camhlaidh. "Duncan doesn't have the strength to force you out of the city. Why not stay?"

"No." She took a step back from him, shaking her head violently. "I'm never listening to you again. Go back to hell where you belong."

Mina turned and walked quickly away, her heart pounding in her chest as though she had run a thousand miles. Her fear that Camhlaidh would follow her was unfounded, and she soon found herself alone on a street flanking the peat-dark river. She felt tired and sick, so she stopped and leaned against a lamppost for support. The black iron chilled her, muffling her power, but she didn't care.

Sudden pain cracked across the back of her head. Mina stumbled off balance, seeing bursts of light before her eyes. The cobblestones ripped a hole in her trouser knee as she collapsed to the street. Before she could think straight enough to wonder what had happened, rough hands grabbed her from behind, and she felt a loop of iron chain wrap around her throat.

Startled, Mina tried to call ice from the river, but the power inside did not respond. Her fingers locked around the chain, struggling to pull it off so that she could use her magic. Instead, she was shoved down; more chain wrapped around her legs, then pinned her arms against her heaving chest.

"Now let's see you enslave us, bitch," hissed a familiar voice.

Mina struggled to raise her aching head. Michael's face loomed up against the moon, his eyes dark with fear and hate. Behind him she could make out Janine's red hair, Jeremiah's bulk, and a handful of other unseelie faelings.

"No—no!" she managed to gasp out. "Stop!"

"Sorry," Jeremiah rumbled. "But we can't exactly afford to take any chances with you. You've got to understand that."

"Stop gawking and help me," snapped Michael, as if he was afraid Mina might bespell him even with the iron dampening her powers.

Hands lifted her, the chains clanking and trailing about them. She felt herself being carried, felt the hands holding her tense up, as if they would throw her. For a moment, she was weightless, the damp night air breezing across her skin.

Then the frigid water of the river closed around her.

Half her breath left her with the shock. The heavy chains around her body dragged her relentlessly down through the peat-laden water. Panicked, Mina struggled frantically, but the other faelings had been too thorough, and she was unable to break free.

No! She thrashed wildly, lungs already starting to burn from lack of air. Currents brushed her face, stirring her clothing and hair as she sank with almost lazy slowness to the bottom. Silt blinded her eyes, and the cold of the water leached the warmth from her body.

No...I can't die like this...I can't die....

Breath escaped from her mouth, silver bubbles rushing up towards the surface, leaving her behind. Her mind was starting to go gray at the edges, and her struggles got slower, more lethargic. Her dying brain snatched at random images: William falling, the drive belt snapping.

Twice before, Mina had managed to fight through the binding of iron. In those moments of pain and horror, she had pushed through somehow, reached out.

With the last of her strength, she tried to do something, anything. But no power responded. Her lungs spasmed, fighting her futile attempts to hold her breath.

In a few moments, she would be unconscious. Shortly after that, she would be dead.

Help me, she called, on the final edge of blackness. *Help me*.

A shadow moved in the peat-laden night of the water.

~*~

Duncan's arms burned with effort as he propelled the wheelchair through the near-deserted streets, following the siren call of his link with Mina. Bryan loped beside him, panting.

"Can you still feel her?" he gasped hoarsely.

Duncan didn't have breath to spare. "Yes. Ahead." A vague feeling of desperation suddenly touched him. "Something's wrong."

"Yeah. I feel it."

They burst out onto a street that followed the course of the Blackrush. Eight dark shapes walked slowly up the road towards them, heading away from the river. For a moment, Duncan felt overwhelming relief—they had not found Mina yet after all.

Then he saw the looks on their faces, and relief turned to terror. "What have you done?"

Michael stopped and took a pace back, clearly surprised to see him. "We drowned the bitch," he said, his handsome face gone nasty and evil.

Oh God. "Go, Bryan!" Duncan barked.

Bryan bolted past them, heading for the waterside. Michael and the rest turned to stop him, but Duncan hit them as hard as he could with a shower of hailstones. Cries of pain, betrayal, and outrage rewarded the effort.

For an instant, they were too shocked to respond. He sent the chair hurtling down the slope, skidding to a stop with his back to the water, hoping that it would lend him strength. Bryan was further down the bank, and Duncan couldn't spare the attention to see if he had found Mina.

"Why, Duncan?" Janine demanded. She looked truly hurt, and it wounded him. "We trusted you! Why would you side with her?"

He swallowed hard. "I'm sorry. I can't let you kill her."

Michael gave him a cold look. "Too late."

"Perhaps," Duncan said and deflected the darkness that someone flung at him. He responded in kind, then found himself on the defensive, desperately fighting a battle he didn't have the strength to win.

~*~

Mina caught a faint glimpse of a shadow darker than the silt, and then felt a muscular body brush against her. Something fastened in her collar, jerking her up and up. Water surged past with frightening speed; then, suddenly, broke apart into night sky.

She took a deep breath, lungs heaving helplessly. Water splashed into her mouth, making her cough. Whatever had a hold on her shoved her towards the bank, then let go. She twisted in a sudden spasm of

fear as again she began to sink. Then her feet touched bottom, and she realized she stood in the shallows.

"Mina!"

She looked up and saw Bryan running towards her. She was farther downstream than she had been when she went into the water, no doubt because of the current. Bryan's warm hands steadied her, helped her to the bank, and began to pull away the binding chains.

"God, I'm glad to see you," she gasped, teeth chattering from the cold of the river. "How did you get here?"

"Michael told Duncan that he was going to kill you. Duncan and I tried to find you before Michael and the rest could, to warn you. Unfortunately, they moved faster."

"Where is Duncan?"

Bryan's face went grim, and he unwrapped the last of the chains from about her legs. "He stayed behind to hold off the others, while I ran to see whether there was still time to do anything for you."

Her heart trip-hammered in renewed fear. "They'll kill him!"

"We've got to—" Bryan started, and then stopped. His gaze went beyond her to the river, and his eyes went nearly round with shock.

Feeling an odd prickling at the nape of her neck, Mina turned to confront her savior.

~*~

Michael flung over the wheelchair and Duncan sprawled across the rough ground. He got his hands under him and tried to turn over to face his attackers, but his useless legs tangled together and hampered his every movement. His students' power choked his breath and threatened his vision with darkness. Ice ate at his bones, left him shaking so hard he could barely prop himself up.

Michael looked down at him scornfully. "Now what are you going to do, eh?"

Duncan swallowed, tasting blood. "I don't want to see anyone hurt."

"But you'd rather see *us* hurt than her, is that it?"

"She doesn't deserve to die!" He closed his eyes, feeling despair slide into his belly like a long knife.

"You didn't have to kill her."

Michael's fingers tangled in his hair, wrenching his head back painfully. "It's your own life you should beg for."

"Michael, no," Janine twittered, plucking at his sleeve. "Duncan's no threat to us. Leave him alone."

"He sided with the *dyana*," Jeremiah reminded her grimly. Murmurs of agreement sounded all around, and Duncan realized with horror that they truly meant to kill him as well.

Summoning the rags of his courage, he spat weakly in Michael's direction. "Then get it over with."

Michael started to speak, then stopped. With a sudden hiss of fear, he let go of Duncan and scuttled back from the river. Surprised, Duncan twisted about to follow his shocked gaze.

It rose up from the water like some ancient god, fey and mad. Its mane was full of water and rank weeds, and shellfish snagged in its tail. Barnacles crusted its sleek gray flanks, and slime dripped from its flaring nostrils. It tossed its head and opened its mouth in a bone-freezing cry, revealing a set of teeth like knives.

Mina rode on its back. Water dripped from her short, spiky hair, and silt stained her clothes. And her eyes...her eyes were as black as night, as oblivion...as death.

Someone screamed. The aughisky snorted and took a step onto land, so that it straddled Duncan protectively. Mina flashed the most vicious smile he had ever seen.

"Go," she whispered.

They went. Perhaps she impelled them, but if so, Duncan did not feel it. The aughisky tossed its head, lips drawing back from carnivore teeth as it watched its prey disappear. Mina watched them as well, black eyes narrowed, and he could feel the ice of her rage.

Then she looked down to where he lay helpless. "Duncan?" she gasped, and her voice sounded so frightened and confused that it tore his heart. Her hands twisted in the mane of the aughisky as she slid easily down its sleek back. "Are you all right?"

"I'm f-fine," he managed to say.

She dropped down by him, her eyes normal once again. Fingers brushed his face worriedly, and then cupped his jaw. For a moment, she looked profoundly uncertain as to what she might do next.

Then, with a soft cry, Mina bent over and kissed him.

Her mouth was fierce and desperate on his. His fingers locked around her shoulders, dragging her against him. Her clothes and skin were soaking wet, and she smelled and tasted of rank water. It occurred to him that this was insane, but somehow the thought didn't have the same urgency as the contours of her mouth.

"Knights!" Bryan shouted as he sprinted up.

Mina tore away with an oath. Fear pricked Duncan's skin—only Bryan was really in any shape to face a contingent of Knights. He had no strength left, and God alone knew how badly Mina had been hurt.

The Knights showed bright against the night, like ghosts or foxfire. Duncan shoved himself up on his hands, cursing the useless legs that condemned him to meet his enemy from the ground.

The aughisky snarled, a primal sound that made the hairs on the back of Duncan's neck stand up. He tore his attention away from the Knights in time to see the fae lay its ears flat back against its head. With a terrifying roar, it leapt over him, hooves clanging against the street as it charged the Knights.

For a moment, Duncan thought they would stand and fight. He had never heard of any single faeling who could hope to win against even the most minor of fae, but surely numbers could make up the difference.

Then the aughisky was on them, and they ran, scattering like leaves before a hurricane.

It didn't chase them far, stopping within sight of the river. It stood still for a long time, ears perked, as if it listened for their return. Finally, satisfied it had driven them from its territory, it turned back towards the river and waded into the flood. Dark water closed over its head, and the aughisky vanished in a cloud of bubbles.

Duncan swallowed. "How—how did you manage that?" he asked shakily.

Mina only shook her head. "I don't know."

~*~

It was an exhausting walk back to the theater. Bryan pushed Duncan's wheelchair, and for once got no complaints for his kindness. Mina walked beside them, her arms wrapped around herself for warmth. She could smell the stink of the polluted river on her skin, and the cold of sopping-wet clothes left her trembling so hard her teeth chattered. No one said anything.

Once back, Duncan motioned wearily in the direction of the kitchen. "Could you fetch the bottle from the left-most cabinet?" he asked of Bryan. To Mina's surprise, Bryan reappeared with a bottle of bourbon and a small teacup. Duncan took both and held them out to Mina.

"Here," he said kindly. "This should help."

She poured herself a drink and took a sip. The warmth collected in her belly and stilled her trembling. "Thanks," she said, passing it back.

Duncan took a rather large swallow straight from the bottle. Mina exchanged a surprised glance with Bryan. "Um, are you all right?"

"No. Bryan, would you draw a hot bath for Mina?"

Bryan gave them both an odd look and left.

"Thanks," Mina said again, then watched Duncan take another pull from the bottle. "I'm sorry. Tell me what I can do."

He shook his head, earrings glinting faintly in the gaslight. "It's all gone, Mina. I spent my life building a community of unseele faelings in this city. I did everything I could to see as many survive as possible. I protected and taught them, and they trusted and respected me in return." He propped the bottle against his knee. "And it only took one night for it all to fall apart."

Guilt bit into Mina. "I'm sorry, Duncan. I wish I could go back and change things."

He waved a negating hand. "You can't help how you were born." He paused for another swallow of bourbon. "I failed my students, or they failed me, I don't even know which. Probably both. I wanted to protect them from you. Perhaps I should have worried more about protecting them from themselves."

She took a deep breath, and then let it out in a sigh. It was hard to gather together the rags of her courage, but she knew that she owed it to him. "I'm sorry I didn't run to the nearest gate and leave Dere. But I thought I could at least take enough time to decide where I should go, what I might do when I got there." She laughed bitterly at herself. "Of course, I didn't even do that. I just wandered around the city pitying myself. I'm sorry. I swear I'll leave tomorrow."

He closed his eyes, as if in pain. "Don't. Don't do this to me."

"I'm sorry. What have I done now?"

He took another pull from the bottle. "It took everything I had to send you away this morning. I don't think I have the strength left to face that again. Bryan says that I was a fool to even try. I want to believe him and ask you to stay. But I don't know if my reasons are good ones, or just my own folly clouding my

judgment. I have made so many mistakes with you, Mina, when you were the one student I could least afford to make mistakes with. I'm sorry that I've failed you."

Mina frowned, trying to sort through his confused and meandering speech. "You didn't fail me. I was the one who wouldn't listen to your advice. I was the one who didn't tell you the truth."

"And I am a self-indulgent old man who deluded himself in the worst possible way."

"I don't understand. Do you really want me to stay?" She hesitated. "I thought you were frightened of me."

"You have a great deal of anger in you, Mina. Heaven knows you have reason for it, but a combination of rage, great distrust, and enormous power is not a comfortable mix."

"No. I suppose it isn't."

"Do you truly feel that you owe the other unseeleie faelings anything? If there was something you truly wanted, and they stood in your way, would you hesitate to go through them?"

She shivered. "I hope so. For you, I would."

"You are dangerous, Mina. And powerful. I would be a fool not to have a healthy respect for you and for what you are capable of doing. But I want very much to trust you."

"You can. I swear you can."

Duncan sighed. "Why don't you see if Bryan has your bath ready?"

She rose to her feet, uncertain where the conversation had left them in regards to one another. "All right."

Hot clouds of steam billowed out of the bathroom to greet her. Bryan looked up, concern plain on his face. "Are you all right?"

"I don't know." She shook her head. "I'm confused. Did you see? He kissed me by the river."

"I saw. And I don't see what there is to be confused about." Bryan's sudden smile lit up his dark face. "Your clothes are a ruin—you'll need something to wear tonight. Shall I go to the prop room and choose for you?"

She nodded, buoyed up a little by his good spirits. "Thank you."

The water was hot and relaxing as she slipped into the huge, claw-footed bath. With a sigh, she sank in up to her nose. The memory of Duncan's kiss lingered on her lips. She touched her hand to her mouth, and then carried the kiss to her breasts, between her legs.

After a few minutes of floating, she heard the door open. Bryan's arm extended through a small discrete crack. An extremely wispy nightgown dangled from his hand. "Well? What do you think?"

Mina burst out laughing at the absurdity of her wearing anything like that. "I think it would look better on someone else. On me, it would look like a little girl dressing up in her mother's underthings."

"Do you want me to take it back?" he asked, his voice muffled by the half-closed door. "Do you want me to bring you some trousers and a shirt? Or am I reading things right, and you're interested in turning into a woman again?"

She hesitated for a long moment. "No. No, leave the nightgown here. And...could you bring me one other thing?"

Once she was clean, she stepped out of the bath, toweled off, and slipped into the gauzy nightgown Bryan had brought for her. A full-length mirror stood in one corner, probably hijacked from some prima donna's dressing room long ago. She positioned herself in front of it, staring at the stranger reflected in the glass.

Mina had never been able to afford a mirror bigger than the palm of her hand, and the sight she saw now depressed her. Years of malnutrition had left her body small and skinny. Her breasts were there, but just barely, as if her body had started to undergo puberty then changed its mind. Her hips were skinny and straight, and her butt looked sadly like a boy's. With her spiky, unevenly cut hair, it was no wonder that she had often been mistaken for a male. In her men's clothing, she must have looked almost sexless.

Are you interested in being a woman again? Bryan had asked.

After William, she had taken that part of herself and carefully set it aside, not really thinking that she would ever need it again. It had taken Duncan to make her realize that she was perhaps ready for it at last.

The nightgown was so light and thin that it was nearly translucent. The dark circles of her nipples showed through the ocean-green material, as did a hint of her sex. The iron collar around her neck jarred with the rest of the image, but there was nothing to be done about that.

She took a deep breath for courage. Probably Duncan would be horrified if she went down wearing this. Probably it would make him change his mind about sending her as far away from the city as possible.

Leaving the nightgown in place, she went to the door and let herself back out into the hall.

~*~

Duncan leaned back against the divan and eyed the bottle of bourbon reluctantly. He had moved to the divan, thinking that he would sleep there tonight and leave the bed for Mina. Tomorrow morning...he didn't know what. He had no idea how to forge a peace between Mina and the other unseele faelings. Now that he had lost their trust, there was no reason for them to listen to his words.

He wished that he had spoken to Mina of her potential earlier, or had treated her as a *dyana* as a precautionary measure even when he had no proof. But he had been afraid of finding himself in the very impasse he was in now, unable to control Mina or shield his other students from her.

The sad truth was that he had been so afraid of seeing Aerin in her that he had been horribly unfair to Mina herself. He had not told her of the Seelie Court, because he had been afraid that she possessed Aerin's impetuosity. And he had not told her of his suspicions that she wielded a *dyana*'s power, because he had been afraid that she possessed Aerin's desire to rule. Thirty-five years was a long time to stay in thrall to the dead, eaten away by guilt and self-hatred. Aerin had been a possessive woman, but surely even she would not have wanted it so.

Perhaps her ghost could forgive him for what he had done. Perhaps not. Either way, it had been long enough.

He started to take a drink from the bottle, then reconsidered and set it aside. His decisions had been muddle-headed enough when sober.

A faint swish of cloth caught his attention. He looked up to see Mina come hesitantly through the door.

She was dressed in a sheer gown the green of oceans or deep water. The neckline plunged down between her breasts, and he could see the shape of her legs through the thin fabric.

He wanted her so badly that it felt like every particle in his body strained towards her. His mind blanked for a moment, refusing to think of anything but the powerful arousal that gripped him. Then he gasped and looked away, somehow having the presence of mind to bundle the edge of a throw rug into his lap.

"M-Mina," he managed to say. "Are, that is, um, are you feeling better after your bath?"

He felt her draw closer as if every fiber of his body was attuned to hers. "Yes. Thank you."

"Um, if you couldn't find anything warmer, I, uh, have a nice fluffy robe somewhere about. If you're cold."

"You don't like it?" she asked. "Have I...offended you?"

"No! I, uh, like it. Very much."

"Then why won't you look at me?"

Duncan bit his lip hard and stared resolutely at the fringed edge of the throw. "Because I would be staring, and that wouldn't be an appropriate thing for a teacher to do to his student."

Mina laughed, as though she were relieved. "You said just this morning that you wanted me to leave Dere. I took that as a signal that my studies were at an end."

"Mina, please!" He closed his eyes, agonizingly torn. "You don't understand. I know that women don't often think of a man like myself as, well, a man anymore. The chair has that effect, I suppose. But I'm not made of stone."

Her hand touched his shoulder, followed the line of his collar, and found the button at the top of his shirt. "I'm glad to hear that."

"Don't." He caught her hand in his own. The urge to kiss her fingertips was almost overwhelming. "I'm sorry, Mina. I'm sorry that I'm old and broken. Right now, I would give anything to be young and whole, and the sort of man you deserve. But there's no magic that can do that."

"I don't want any other man! I want you." She drew his hand up to her mouth and kissed his fingers gently. "Look at me and tell me honestly that you don't want this, and I swear I'll leave you alone."

He looked at her, intending to force himself to lie for the sake of them both. But something caught his attention, and he realized that he could see the slave collar around her neck with both eyes, not just one. Surprised, he touched it, felt the shock of real iron against his fingers. "What—why are you wearing that?"

She looked down self-consciously. "I had Bryan get it for me. He said that it was still lying in the bottom of your doctor's bag from the morning you took it off me. That day seems like a lifetime ago, doesn't it?" Mina touched the back of the collar. "There's no way of closing it at the back, since it was sawn through, but I wrapped a scarf around the sharp edges to keep them from bothering me too much."

"But why?"

She glanced up with grief in her eyes. "Because I didn't want to influence you. Because I didn't want to make you desire me if it's not what you really feel."

"Not desire you? God, Mina, you have no need to ever think that!"

She smiled a sweet, uncertain smile. "Then show me?"

That undid him. His hands closed on her shoulders, and he pulled her against him. Her lips opened under his, and he slid his tongue into her mouth in a frantic rush of desire. She responded eagerly, her hands tangling a moment in his hair, and then sliding down to fumble at the buttons of his shirt.

His heart was pounding so hard Duncan could barely hear her ragged breathing. He kissed her mouth, then found her throat, drinking in the taste and scent of her. He ran his hands along her back, over the curves of her body, and back up to her breasts. The ancient fabric of her gown ripped a little; Mina laughed and paused a moment to tug it off over her head.

The smell and feel of her skin was maddening. He caressed the round curve of her breast, explored the hard nipple with his mouth until she cried out softly. Her hands fumbled urgently at his belt; then she drew him out and into herself.

He gasped when she took him, his hands tightening on her hips. She made a little moan, arching her back and climaxing unexpectedly. He tried to focus on her pleasure, feeling her peak and grinning when she laughed for the sheer joy of it. It seemed to go on for a long time and no time at all, until her rhythm dragged him inexorably with her. He closed his eyes, and everything disappeared into red-black blankness as he spent himself inside her.

Mina wrapped her arms lazily around his shoulders and snuggled against him, her face hidden in his shoulder so that he could feel her breath stirring the small hairs of his neck. He stroked her back gently, slowly. Feeling her skin raise in goose pimples, he retrieved the throw with a free hand and settled it over them both. He wondered if he had just done something profoundly foolish in making love to a woman less than a half his age.

"I love you," she murmured sleepily in his ear.

"I love you, too. I think I've loved you since the first moment I met you."

He felt her lips curve into a smile against his skin. "Silly man."

"Probably," he agreed. He found the collar around her neck and started to ease it off.

She sat back in alarm. "What are you doing?"

"Getting rid of this damned thing. It can't be comfortable."

"But—"

"Shh." He found the amulet around his neck, where it had twisted during their lovemaking. "This is what shielded me last night. I...suspected what you are, although I tried to convince myself otherwise. The ingredients are quite expensive, and I only have the one."

"Oh," she said in a small, subdued voice.

He pulled it off and set it by the collar, on the nearest table. Mina's eyes widened. "What are you doing?"

He sighed and stroked her flank gently. "I trust you," he said finally. "I'll put it back on tomorrow morning, if you insist upon it."

"But what if I make you do something you don't want to do, without even meaning to?"

"At the moment, I can't imagine anything you might ask of me that I wouldn't be happy—no, eager—to do."

She grinned wickedly in response. That, and the sight of her body, made him stir in her again. Mina laughed and kissed him fiercely. "Fine," she murmured in his ear. "Then my first command is that we get off this damned divan and into a real bed. My knees are starting to hurt."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Duncan awoke the next morning with the sun streaming in through the windows and an unfamiliar weight on his arm. Turning his head, he found Mina sprawled on her back beside him, snoring softly. *She looks beautiful*, he thought, *with her pale skin and ridiculous hair*. He worried what she might think when she woke up and found herself here, and whether she would regret the night before.

It was easy to do desperate things in the heat of the moment, especially when one had suffered so many blows in so short a time. Nevertheless, although he thought that might have passed for an explanation for the first time she made love to him, he felt rather certain that it couldn't explain the next two, which had been longer, more deliberate, and utterly thorough.

The snores stopped. Mina mumbled something, rolled over, and flung her arm over his chest. He kissed her forehead, which was now in reach, and she opened her brown eyes. A contented smile curved her lips, and she snuggled in closer to his side. "Hello."

"Hello," he replied and kissed her again. "How do you feel this morning?"

"Happy. Tired. A bit sore." Her face lapsed into a thoughtful frown. "Like everything's different."

"How so?"

"It's hard to explain. I've heard girls say that they felt different after they'd lost their virginity. And after William, I did feel different, but not in a very nice way. Now I feel different again, but in a really great way." She laughed suddenly. "I probably sound like a complete idiot."

His fingers trailed along her shoulder contemplatively. "No. Not at all. It has been...a very long since I have done anything like this. To be brutally honest, the last time was with Aerin, before I lost the use of my legs. And it wasn't only being with a woman that I missed, but just being touched at all. No one's really touched me much in a very long time, except when Bryan or another student has had to carry me somewhere."

"I'm sorry. But I don't understand why things have been that way. You're very handsome, after all."

Duncan barked out an incredulous laugh. The night before, he had been acutely embarrassed by the idea of disrobing in front of her. His shoulders and arms were fairly muscular from using the wheelchair, but of course his legs were wasted to nothing, and the combination was not one that he thought would be particularly arousing to a woman.

"Now you're laughing at me," Mina accused.

"No, I'm not. It all just seems very unreal. I fear that I shall awaken at any moment to find that this has all been a dream, and that the only thing which actually happened on the divan last night was that I passed out in a drunken stupor."

She smiled. "Why didn't we do this sooner?"

He sobered a little, feeling a shadow touch his heart. "Because you are a beautiful young woman who shouldn't tie herself to an old cripple like me. You deserve better, Mina, and if I had any fortitude at all, I would have sent you to bed alone last night."

She rapped lightly on his skull. "Hello? Anyone listening in there? I'm here because I want to be! It's for me to choose what's best for me, not you, right?" She rested her head on his shoulder. "Besides, you don't know how long I've been waiting for this. I dream about you all the time. Remember that night we went to Janine's opera? I dreamed that I met you at the theater and we ended up making love on the stage."

Coldness touched his heart. "I asked you to dance," he whispered.

Mina leaned back and blinked at him in surprise. "Yeah. How did you know that?"

"I dreamed it, too."

"I don't understand. How is that possible?"

"It happens, sometimes, between feelings who are very close." He shook his head angrily. "The first time it happened, I worried that it might be a dream-sharing, but I denied it. I told myself that it couldn't be true."

She frowned, puzzled. "Why?"

"Because it was hardly appropriate for me, your teacher, to be courting you in dreams—but at the same time, I didn't want to stop. So I deluded myself into thinking that it was nothing, harmless, so I could continue my own pleasure." He covered his face with his hands. "I am utterly without moral fiber."

"Mm, that's what I like about you."

"Mina!"

"Oh, hush. You're too hard on yourself. Stop trying to convince yourself that you've done something wrong, when you know that everything about this is right." As he was still hiding his face, she started kissing him other places. Startled, he dropped his hands.

"Mm. I love you," he managed to say.

She didn't bother to stop long enough to reply with words. But only a few moments later, a faint knocking echoed down the long hall, making her look up in sudden alarm. Duncan swore mildly and picked up the lens lying on the nightstand. He breathed frost onto its surface and peered through. "It's Bryan. I had forgotten that today is Sunday. He usually comes early when the store is closed. Not to mention that he probably wants to check up on us."

"Ah." Mina sat up, wonderfully naked. "Do you want me to tell him to leave?"

He grinned at her suggestion. "Absolutely...but I suppose we shouldn't. You can bathe, if you'd like. I'll let Bryan in and make us some breakfast."

"Sounds great." She bounced out of the bed with an energy that made him envious. Shaking his head, he reached down to the floor and hunted for his trousers by feel.

"You look like hell," Bryan declared when Duncan opened the door. "Hard night on the divan, huh?"

"Excuse me!"

"Well, I'm assuming that you were polite enough to let Mina have the bed." Bryan wedged himself past and into the hall.

"Oh, uh...yes. Would you like breakfast?"

"Sure. What's Mina's nightgown doing on the floor of the sitting room?"

Duncan pretended not to hear and beat a hasty retreat to the kitchen. He was so used to cooking for himself alone that he misjudged the ratio of batter to water twice, and ended up with enough pancakes for five people, so long as they didn't mind them being a bit black around the edges. Carefully balancing a tray laden with pancakes and tea, he made his way back along the corridor to the sitting room. Mina and Bryan's voices floated back to greet him.

"You look good," Bryan was saying. "I take it the gown was a success?"

"It was good choice. Thanks."

"Am I to understand that you were conspiring against me, then?" Duncan asked, wheeling into the room.

Bryan rolled his eyes. "Absolutely. Our diabolical plan was for Mina to torture you with sex so that you'd be too exhausted to teach today, and I could go home early. Did it work?"

"Make him read the Scroll of Death by Boredom," Mina suggested.

"And after all I've done for you! I don't think I'll ever understand the feminine mind. What do you think, Duncan?"

Duncan wisely stuffed a pancake in his mouth to avoid answering.

They made a good dint in the slightly blackened pancakes. Mina perched on the end of the divan, eating slowly. The troubled look in her eye worried Duncan.

"Are you all right, my dear?"

She nodded, and then shrugged. "I suppose. I was just thinking how Abby used to make breakfast for us, back when we had the apartment. I...it doesn't really seem fair for me to be happy after what happened to her."

Duncan reached out and covered her hand gently with his own. "I am truly sorry about Abby. She seemed like a wonderful person."

"She was." Mina set her plate aside. "I was thinking that I should go down to *The Sailor's Widow* and talk to the girls there. I don't know whether Abby's been buried yet or not, or if any of them went to the funeral. She would have gone to potter's field, I guess. I should go see her grave, if nothing else. And I should try to find her family. Her Dad was the one who got the family indentured to start with, but he died only a few months after entering into the contract. I know she had a little sister working in one of the mills, though." She sighed suddenly. "And, after missing the last two nights without word, I suppose I should find out if I still have a job."

Duncan nodded, even though he hated the idea of her dancing even more now than before. "I understand. But you don't have to stay in that place, if you don't wish to. I'd be happy to have you here. I wouldn't, um, expect anything in return."

Bryan rolled his eyes. Mina smiled, stood up, and came to kiss Duncan softly on the lips. "I love you. I do want to stay here with you, if you'll have me. And I'd love to share your bed. All right?"

He kissed her back.

"Should I leave now?" Bryan asked wryly.

Duncan scowled at him. "You seem to have an opinion on everything today, Bryan. Very confident for a student who's had his training set aside for several months. I'm assuming that you've practiced everything assiduously enough to impress me with even the most difficult exercises."

Bryan sighed in resignation. Mina grinned, kissed Duncan again, and left them to torment one another.

~*~

"I don't like this," Rhiannon snapped.

Roderick turned to her. The wind streaming across the battlements raked their hair back. A seagull, come upriver for the winter, called from somewhere high above. "I don't either. But we have to deal with it. For some reason, the aughisky has chosen to ally itself with this upstart girl."

"But why? The fae have never shown any interest in our dealings before. Why take sides now?"

Roderick shrugged. "It's her. She's different, somehow. Powerful."

Rhiannon turned and slapped him, hard. "She isn't any more powerful than me," she hissed, fury boiling in her belly like bile. "If I could not bind the unseelie faelings together—if I could not draw dark fae to my cause—then she cannot either."

Green eyes filled with venom stared back at her. "Nevertheless, *she* has."

Rhiannon turned away, clenching her fists. The sense of betrayal from that long-ago battle still lived in her, like poison under her skin. This stupid factory slave could not be what Roderick thought. She could not be a *dyana*.

"Tell me some good news," she commanded.

"Very well. We have found their lair."

"What?"

"One of the Hounds followed them home last night, after the aughisky went back to the river. They went to an abandoned theater in the east part of town. The Hound waited to see whether they would come out again, or whether it was simply a front. Another faeling went inside this morning, and then the girl emerged later on. The man in the wheelchair went in last night and did not come back out."

Rhiannon's heart speeded wildly. *Duncan*. "Then he's still in there. Send the Hounds and Knights in force—no more mistakes. Bring everyone in the theater back here alive."

"Alive?"

"Do it!" she shouted, turning on him.

He stiffened, inhuman eyes going narrow. "You've changed. This business of unseelie faelings has done something to you. You do nothing but abuse me anymore. You never even come to my bed."

She turned away and stared out over the city, as if she could see Duncan from here. The childlike whining in Roderick's words sickened her. "Just do as you're told. The sooner we destroy this nest of faelings, the sooner things will get back to normal."

Except, if she had her way, things would never again be as they had been. Everything would change, and all the mistakes of the past would come undone.

~*~

Mina walked slowly through potter's field, passing by rows upon rows of graves marked only with unworked fieldstones or rough pieces of wood. Her heart felt like lead, and she numbly wished that she had come earlier. It didn't seem right that Abby had been put in the ground without a single person to witness her passing.

Abby's grave was among a number of freshly dug ones, with nothing to differentiate it from any other. Mina stood in front of them, wondering dully which belonged to her friend. She had spent some of her precious few remaining coins to purchase a rose to put on the grave. Now she didn't even know which was the right one.

"You're wasting your tears," said a silken voice unexpectedly. Startled, she turned and beheld Camhlaidh. His black cloak blew in the cold wind sawing across the open field, making him look kin to the carrion birds circling above. "She was only human, after all."

Mina turned away from him, anger rising in her blood. "I'm half human as well, *Father*," she flung at him.

"True. But you aren't human, just as you aren't fae."

"So you don't deny siring me?"

"Should I?"

"I'll kill you."

He snorted at the likelihood of that. "Turn your energies towards your true enemies, child. You should be worrying about the Seelie Court, not crying like a little girl."

Coldness touched Mina's heart. "What do you care about the Seelie Court?"

Camhlaidh tipped his head to one side, his hair streaming about his face like golden rags. "What I care," he said finally, "is that they are too powerful. There is a balance of power in faery, my daughter. Never before has one faction, seelie or unseelie, become strong enough to truly threaten the other. But events here in the mortal world do have impact on the faery realm, no matter how much some of my parochial kin would like to deny it. The basic problem is that seelie faelings have been allowed to live, even if they are only slaves, while unseelie faelings have been killed without mercy."

"So your power in faery is threatened, is that it? What the hell do I care about that?"

He smiled like a dagger. "Nothing at all, I'm sure. You aren't required to care. Your own personal danger is enough of a goad."

"Is that the answer, then? You raped my mother so that I could kill seelie faelings twenty-four years later?"

His eyes were cold as the Pole Star. "I did nothing that she did not enjoy, impudent child. The seduction

of mortals has been a subject of long study in the realm of faery, believe me."

Mina stood very still, dreadful suspicion building in her. "So you wanted a tool. And you tell me now not to shed tears for Abby. Because you want the unseelie *dyana*, not the human woman with a conscience." She paused and took a deep breath. "You killed her. You killed Abby."

Camhlaidh's eyes had gone black. "You are so much more than what you have been. Your Duncan saw it. Even as he begged you to stop your war the other night, in his heart he still worshipped you as the dark goddess you are. Destroy these seelie pretenders and take what is yours, Mina. Spread your shadow across this land, and unseelie faelings everywhere will fight for the chance to kneel at your feet."

"And turn the war in faery to your advantage." She gritted her teeth and let the rage come. "I suppose you thought that, if I managed to survive childhood, you'd have an ignorant little puppet desperate for the chance to get the power and wealth she'd always been denied. If you wanted that, you should have fucking raised me yourself, Daddy."

She hit him with everything she could muster, knowing that it would make no difference to him. But to her surprise, he staggered to his knees with a cry. For an instant, they stared at one another in mutual shock.

Then he stood up, turned, and seemed to simply step away into thin air.

Mina let the rose drop from her hand and softly began to cry.

~*~

Later that evening, Mina walked slowly back to the theater, her heart heavy. Her confrontation with Camhlaidh had disturbed her and left the hollow ache of guilt in her gut. Once again, Abby had suffered because of their friendship. It would have been better if Mina had turned away from everything human on the first day she had learned of her faeling nature. At least then she would have avoided dragging her only friend down into hell with her.

Duncan would probably disagree with that. Her longing to see and talk to him was so intense that it was a physical pain. He would hold and comfort her, she knew, and probably come up with some perfectly logical reason as to why she shouldn't blame herself. He would probably even make her smile despite everything.

The side door to the theater lay in splinters where something had smashed it in. Heart in her throat, Mina ducked inside. The air within was thick with the reek of burning. The hallway was scorched with fire and puddled by half-melted ice. Something sharp had gouged out a long strip of plaster from one wall.

The sitting room was a disaster. Books lay scattered across the hearthrug, some still smoldering dangerously. The microscope and telescope had been swept to the floor and smashed, and Duncan's wheelchair lay overturned near the hearth.

Mina gasped in horror. Closing her eyes, she reached out, trying to use her *dyana*'s power to find Duncan's presence. But, although she felt the faint shadows of other unseelie faelings, she found no sign of either Duncan or Bryan.

It was as if they had both vanished from the face of the earth.

~*~

Duncan peeled open eyes that were crusted shut. His entire body hurt, as though he had been bludgeoned repeatedly. His vision swam, and after a moment he realized that his spectacles were gone.

He lay on something soft and yielding. Blinking to clear his vision, he got an impression of brightly colored coverlets and thick bed curtains. His spectacles rested on a nightstand by his head, and he reached for them and put them on, wincing as they rested on a cut across the bridge of his nose.

He was in a bedroom, he saw in confusion—and an extremely well appointed one at that. Gaslight shone from ornate shaded lamps, gleaming off the deeply polished wood of wardrobe and chairs. There was a faintly musty scent to the air, as if the room had just been reopened after long disuse.

The scene before him made no sense. The last he remembered, Knights and Hounds had burst into the theater in a sudden attack as overwhelming as it was unexpected. He and Bryan had done everything they could to hold their enemies off, but sheer numbers had made the conclusion foregone. Something had happened to make him lose consciousness...and now this.

He lifted both hands and studied the smooth iron bracelets someone had fastened about each wrist. Despite the unexpected opulence of his cell, he was nevertheless a prisoner.

His tongue was thick from thirst. Casting about for a pitcher, he was surprised to discover a small platter of food sitting on the stand by the bed. There was a pear, a heel of soft-looking bread, and an apple-cake. Hardly fancy cuisine, but certainly not prisoner's fare, either.

His heart went cold. There were stories, old stories, about faery food. Anyone who ate it was in thrall to the fae forever. Of course, the meal might be perfectly safe—he'd never personally heard of any faeling able to make faery food. But here, in what must be the house of his enemies, he would take no chances. Instead, he reached out and swept the platter to the floor. The sound of breaking crockery was loud, and he wondered who or what it might summon.

Not knowing what else to do, he settled back and closed his eyes. How had the Seelie Court discovered the theater? Had he been wrong in supposing that the watch for him had ended? But then, he'd been there for over a week—why hadn't the attack come sooner?

And another, more chilling question: why was he still alive?

Duncan glanced at the ruined meal on the floor. If it was faery food, then someone wanted an unseelie faeling who would tell them...what? Who all the other faelings in the city were? Perhaps, he thought with a frisson of fear, what they truly wanted was a traitor.

The faint sound of a key turning in the lock of the heavy, oaken door caught his attention. Bitterly, he wondered why they had even bothered, considering he could hardly get up and totter across the rug-strewn floor. Taking a deep breath, he propped himself up on his hands and steeled himself for whatever horror might come through the door.

She slipped inside, small and delicate and beautiful as memory. Her red hair cascaded around her slender shoulders, and an impish smile creased her cupid's-bow mouth. Duncan's heart lurched, and for a moment all he could feel was the most profound shock of his life.

Aerin tilted one delicate brow. "What, Duncan," she asked, "no hello for your lost love?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

"You aren't real," Duncan gasped, feeling coldness settle in his belly.

Aerin smiled again, crossing the room to sit down on the bed.

"Am I not?" she asked, running one soft hand down his nearest leg. "Do you see a glamour on me?" She moved her fingers to the iron binding his wrists. "I'm touching iron—that would break any spells of deception, wouldn't it?"

For years he had dreamed of what might have been had he not been a coward, had she survived their assault on the Seelie Court. The reality was more of a nightmare than he ever could have imagined. "But you're young. You haven't aged at all."

Her look grew sad. "And you have, my love."

"How?"

She sighed and crossed her arms over her firm breasts. "Perhaps you will recognize me better this way." She shimmered like a reflection in a wind-rippled pond. Then Aerin was gone, replaced by the glamour of a handsome, aging woman with long black hair and a regal face. Duncan recognized the face of the woman not only from newspaper clippings, but also from his own encounter with her younger self. She was Queen Rhiannon RiLlyn.

"I don't understand," he whispered.

"I know." Aerin dropped the glamour and sighed. "It's a long story. I was never who you thought me to be, Duncan. Rhiannon was my sister. Well, not really—we weren't truly related. But her mother's husband was my father, mated to an unseelie faeling. Queen Catherine wanted her children to have equal dominion over seelie and unseelie. Rhiannon was the child she showed the world, being of her own blood, while I was raised illicitly. When I came to womanhood, I chose to leave the palace and my sister's shadow, and enroll in the university, where I met you."

"You...you lied to me?"

"I had to. You wouldn't have trusted me, else." She reached out and touched his face. He jerked away, and she frowned a little. "You used to enjoy that."

Slow terror, turning the blood in his veins to ice. This wasn't—couldn't be—*his* Aerin. This was some monstrosity conjured up by Rhiannon to drive him mad.

"All these years, you've just turned a blind eye to Roderick killing our own kind?"

Her mouth tightened sharply, a look he remembered all too well. "The unseelie faelings of this city refused to acknowledge me as their queen. They brought it on themselves." Her face softened. "All but you. You don't know...I thought that you were dead, my love. That night we attacked the palace, when all the other unseelie faelings chose to betray me, my true plan was to overthrow Rhiannon and take her place on the throne. She thought that she had beaten me when I was captured. Then she said that she had killed you, and that gave me all the strength I needed to slay her.

"But after that...without you, none of it meant anything. I've spent years wondering what might have been had I given up on my ambitions and simply lived out a normal life at your side."

He swallowed thickly. "What do you want from me?"

"I still love you. Can't you believe that I don't mean you any harm?"

"Harm? You set Knights on me and tried to trick me into eating faery food!"

"The food was Roderick's idea. I told him we wouldn't need it, but he has become rather petulant

recently. What do I want from you? I want to help you, Duncan. I want to save you. I see all the years in your eyes and your face—it shocked me when they brought you in, I'll be honest. Tell me that those years haven't been an eternity of loneliness and frustration and humiliation. Tell me that you wouldn't have given anything to relive that night over again and do it all differently. I *know*. It's been the same for me."

He said nothing. She nodded, as if he had confirmed her thought. "I can wipe it all away, my darling. I can make it as if the last thirty-five years never happened. I can take away all the pain and the grief. All of it."

Something seemed lodged in his throat, cutting off his breath. "How?"

"Roderick can reverse what his mother did to you. He can give you back your legs. And you and I will be together again, just as we were so long ago."

Looking in her eyes, he saw that she was serious. To walk again...to be with her again...to make it as though none of this had ever happened....

It was what he had most wanted for longer than he cared to remember. It was what he would have gladly sold his soul for, had the devil cared to make an offer. The stigma of being a coward, of being a cripple, would be gone forever. He could start anew.

"In exchange for what?" he whispered.

Aerin gave him a beautiful smile. "In exchange for helping us kill Mina Cole, of course."

~*~

Mina collected everything she thought that she might need from the theater. Duncan's home wasn't safe anymore, and it seemed likely that the Seelie Court had left a watch on the place. Besides taking her staff, she stuffed the contents of Duncan's heavy doctor's bag—herbs, bandages, lock picks, a hacksaw, and her old slave collar—into a satchel she could sling over her shoulder. She also threw in anything else portable that she could possibly conceive of needing, then headed at a fast pace for the door.

Which was flung back before she could reach it.

Startled, she dropped into a crouch, pulling blackness from the plague nights that had killed the theater. But it was no eerie-pale Knight that stumbled through the door.

"Bryan!" she cried, running to him.

He looked awful, his hair in disarray, his clothing torn. He staggered a little and put his hand to the wall for support. "Mina," he gasped. "Thank God you're here. They've got Duncan!"

"I know! Where have you been? I thought they'd captured you, too."

"They did, but I managed to escape. I had to run for my life—I couldn't get the old man out." Guilt twisted his face.

She put a hand to his shoulder. "Don't worry. You did the right thing. We'll get him away from them. Where have they taken him?"

Bryan's face was ashen. "The palace."

Mina's heart turned to ice. "Oh, God." She'd imagined that they would put him in some half-defended

cell, like the one she had been held in beneath the ruined church. But the palace...it was the one place she would never have dared go, even at the height of her power with her pack at her heels.

"How the hell are we going to get him?" she whispered.

"I'll show you how I got away. There's a secret passage they send the Knights and Hounds in and out through, where no one else can see them. We can go through there."

"Not and expect to live! I'll be damned if I repeat Aerin's mistake."

"We don't have any choice! Not if we want to see him alive again!"

Mina closed her eyes and nodded. She couldn't abandon Duncan, even if it meant her life.

Even if it meant her soul.

If they went, they would need all the help they could get. Some of Duncan's students would take the risk freely. Some of them.

As for the rest...they could be coerced.

He wouldn't want that. Duncan would be horrified if she took away the free will of the other unseelie faelings to save him. He would probably rather die.

But Duncan wasn't the one who had to make the decision. That burden belonged to Mina alone.

Picking up her staff, she brushed past Bryan. "Come on. Let's go down to the Blackrush."

~*~

They stopped at a butcher's on the way to the river. Pooling their slender funds, they bought the bloodiest hunk of meat they could find. Carrying it in a sack slung over her shoulder, Mina made her way through the reeds on the river's bank. Night was falling, and she had chosen a spot where it was unlikely that passersby would interrupt them.

Pulling out the chunk of dead flesh, Mina held it over the water, letting the blood drip into the peat-dark river. Fighting to be calm and to concentrate, she sent out her call.

The aughisky's equine head broke the surface nearby, dead gray eyes fixing on her with interest. She flung the meat into the water and watched as the fae disappeared, then surfaced beneath its meal. Sharp fangs tore into flesh, snapping bone, and within a few moments nothing was left but a bloody spot dissipating with the current. Mina wondered morbidly if the aughisky would have preferred human over cow.

The fae waded up out of the river, its gray hide dripping dark water. The stink of rotting weeds and fish washed over Mina in a wave. She breathed deeply, keeping her gaze fixed on the aughisky's eyes. When it stopped before her, she reached out cautiously and stroked its slimy mane. Speaking calmly, she explained her need to it. Its ears pricked forward, and it gave a soft snort. She supposed that the fact that it didn't leave meant it agreed to assist her.

She turned away, to where Bryan stood wide-eyed.

"Er, that should help," he said, and his voice shook.

Mina sighed. "Help, yes. But she's not enough. We need more."

She closed her eyes and stretched out her arms. Unspooling her mind like a black thread, Mina cast out across the city, reaching farther and farther, until she felt like some enormous spider spinning a web to swallow Dere. Minds sparked as she touched them, and she let them feel her need. A few, like Fox, began to move towards her of their own will.

The rest tried to run.

There was nowhere for them to go. Mina caught them one by one, feeling their minds squirm and scream and writhe away. Shutting her ears to both curses and pleas, she thrust her own need into them, forcing it to become theirs as well. Some accepted it instantly and turned towards her, wondering why they had been so unreasonable as to refuse before. But the strongest held out longer, fought harder. Michael was one of them, shrieking and railing, exhausting his own power in the futile attempt to get away from her. She broke his stubborn mind with a quick snap, then realigned the remnants the way she wanted them.

And then she realigned the rest of him as well, pushing and shaping malleable flesh. Done with him, she found the others who had fought hardest and changed them as well.

The unseelie faelings began to emerge from the night around her, some of them still free and human. But others came behind them, twisted into darker shapes by Mina's need, even as the need of the Seelie Court had transformed its minions. Long, lithe shapes boiled out of the darkness, their scales reflecting the light like chips of obsidian. Slime dripped from fanged jaws, and blood-colored eyes gleamed with unholy light in their reptilian heads. Their claws gouged the cobblestones about them, and their tails coiled and uncoiled in a frenzied tattoo.

Their counterparts came behind them, so shrouded in shadow that it was impossible to tell male from female. Cloaks of darkness billowed about them, and tangles of antler sprouted from their heads, clutching at the sky.

"What—what are they?" Bryan gasped, and Mina could hear the horror in his voice.

"Knives and Dragons," she said quietly, not meeting his eyes. "To fight the remaining Knights and Hounds."

"Oh, God. You did this to them."

"Yes. I did."

"Will you—*can* you—change them back later?"

"I don't know." A shiver ripped through her. "It might be kinder to leave them like this. Their minds are broken, I think."

Bryan looked away. Mina wondered if the act had cost her not only Duncan, but also her only other friend as well.

"Let's go," she said grimly. She turned to the aughisky, and then stopped, heart tripping. Beyond its broad shoulder, she caught a glimpse of a woman hunkered down on the edge of the river, industriously washing the blood from a coarse shroud.

The bean-nighe turned her corpse face towards Mina and smiled a ghastly grin. *Don't ask*, Mina thought, as if she observed her own life with an outsider's detachment. But her traitor tongue spoke the words anyway.

"Tell me the names of those who will die."

The bean-nighe cackled. "Too many to name." Blood ran down her legs, pooling on the algae-slimed rocks beneath her. "You are betrayed, Wilhelmina Cole. It is your shroud I wash."

The hairs on Mina's neck stood up. "No. It's not certain."

Two red pinpoints burned far back in the bean-nighe's sunken eyes. "Is it not?"

Mina spun around and strode to the aughisky's side. Grabbing a handful of mane, she swung herself gracelessly onto its back.

Bryan stared up at her, fear twisting his handsome face. "Maybe we shouldn't go," he said.

Mina shook her head grimly. "I won't believe that it's certain. Likely, maybe, but not certain." Her fingers tightened in horsehair braided through with riverweed. "And if it is, then you'd better believe I'm taking the bastards with me."

She touched her heels to the aughisky's flanks. It snorted and broke into a brisk trot. The other unseelie faelings fell into line behind them, chained to Mina's will. She pulled a glamour over them that she hoped would at least allow them to approach the palace.

After that...she'd just have to see, wouldn't she?

They followed the winding Blackrush through Dere. Humans had built the ancient palace, situating it on a wide bend in the river where queens and kings could launch pleasure barges. The Seelie Court had left it there despite its proximity to water, having no good excuse to move it to another locale.

Mina left behind the streets she had known all her life. The shops and homes gradually changed, becoming larger, cleaner and more ornate. The spires of the university's cathedral reached up only a few streets away. Gates of black iron appeared in front of houses, defending drives wide enough to accommodate carriages. Laughter and music drifted over one low wall, and Mina caught a glimpse of women in dresses of satin and lace. The streets themselves became smoother and wider. A few servants clad in livery ran late errands from mansion to mansion, their bearing as stiff as the starched collars of their shirts.

Duncan used to go to parties in places like this, Mina thought. The gulf between them loomed larger than it had ever been. She'd never truly realized exactly how different the life of an educated nobleman might be from that of a factory slave.

Mina more than half-expected to be met by an army of Knights and Hounds before they even came near the high wall defending the palace from the city. But no ghostly white hide or vacuous pale face disturbed the sanctity of the night. The wind began to pick up, tossing the branches of trees and flinging dead leaves to the ground. A newspaper flopped down the street like a wounded bird.

Mina took a deep breath, smelling smoke and winter. This was her time. The seasons had turned away from the Seelie Court. Perhaps luck would as well.

The aughisky slowed and snorted uneasily. Mina glanced down at Bryan. "Are we headed in the right direction? Where is this secret passage you told me about?"

Strain aged his youthful features. "It's near the Screaming Tower," he whispered, naming an ancient dungeon of ill repute, where kings of old had imprisoned their own sons and brothers lest they become rivals for the throne. "The tower actually butts up against the wall—the passage runs through it."

Mina's face twisted into a quick, nervous frown. "What idiot would build a secret passage in a dungeon?"

Did they *want* people to escape?"

"How should I know? Maybe the Seelie Court put it in. The damned tower hasn't been used for prisoners in a century—maybe that's where they keep the Knights and Hounds when they aren't out hunting us down."

The explanation made sense. "Take us there, then."

The walls of the palace came into view shortly thereafter, towering structures of old stone ten feet thick. Human guards patrolled, their shapes flickering in and out of sight as they passed crenellations. The hairs on the nape of Mina's neck stood up, and she shivered in the cold wind. There was no way they were going to survive this.

But she couldn't abandon Duncan. She remembered the extraordinary courage he had shown time and again in her defense. Could she do any less and still live with herself after?

It occurred to her suddenly that, with Abby gone, there would be no one to miss her if things went wrong tonight. The thought filled her with despair.

Bryan led them along the wall, clinging to shadows. Mina dismounted and followed on foot, the aughisky trailing after. *Where the hell are the Knights? I'd have them patrolling along with the human guards. Under a glamour of invisibility, yes, but there.*

I don't like this.

The blocky silhouette of the Screaming Tower appeared as a blot on the clear night sky. Bryan slipped into its shadow, a worried look on his handsome face.

"All right," he said. "Here it is."

And he smashed his staff into Mina's face.

The blow flung her to the street and nearly robbed her of consciousness. Agony exploded through her head, followed by nausea in her belly. Shocked, she stared up stupidly and saw Bryan standing over her. A terrible light glowed in his eyes, as if he burned from within.

You are betrayed, the bean-nighe had said.

Howls broke the quiet night. Baying and slaving, Hounds erupted from the peaceful side streets, Knights on their heels. Dragons and Knaves surged to meet them, shrieking at the sight of their enemies. The more human faelings flung up their defenses in desperation at the surprise attack. Fire lit the night, hailstones plummeted from the sky, and screams echoed against the tower's walls as people began to die.

Somehow, despite the fact that her head was spinning like a carousel, Mina got her own staff up in time to block Bryan's second blow. Her mind shrouded in confusion, she thrust him back and staggered to her feet. "Why?" she managed to shout. But his only answer was to drop his staff and bring out a wicked-looking knife with a bronze blade.

She skipped back and reached towards the tower with her faeling nature. Chains of shadow looped around Bryan's arms and legs, the screams of the dying stopped his ears, and blood closed his throat. He tried to shrug them off, dashing away chains and thrusting the knife at her. Mina blocked, took blindness from the skeletons sealed in the walls, and hurled it over his eyes. He staggered, slipped, and crumpled against the wall.

"Bryan?" Her heart hammering, she dropped down by him and grabbed his shoulder. Blood ran out from beneath him, staining her boots. Startled, she rolled him over and saw that the knife had gotten caught between his body and the wall, sliding up under his ribs.

His eyes rolled. For a moment, the terrible light disappeared from them. "I didn't...I didn't want to," he gasped. Blood frothed on his lips. "They made me—the food—was enchanted."

Something went cold and dead inside her. "It's all right," she whispered, stroking his hair back from his face. "I forgive you."

Fox fell over them both, screaming wildly as a Knight thrust his spear at her. Rage exploded in Mina's brain, and she heaved the combatants off her. The earth opened like a mouth, sucking the struggling Knight in.

"That's for Bryan, you bastards!" she shouted.

A Hound lunged at her, and she froze it in its tracks. Frost gathered on her own skin, and her breath crystallized the air. She waded into the fray, killing Knights and Hounds without thought, without feeling. But more were coming now; perhaps the Seelie Court had originally underestimated how many unseelie faelings they would find on their doorstep.

Sharp teeth nipped at Mina's arm. She spun and found herself face to face with the aughisky. The fae snorted sharply, then turned towards the wall and stamped an impatient hoof. Its barnacle-crust ed ears pointed forwards, and its breath quivered in wide nostrils.

The aughisky wanted inside, Mina realized. Grabbing its mane, she swung on its back, and together they raced straight for the wall. Mina parted the stone like water, as Bryan had once done for her, and they burst through the other side.

The contrast from the screaming chaos of the battle was a shock. On this side of the wall, everything was still and silent. The human guards continued their patrol, oblivious to the uncanny fray beyond. A courtyard surrounded the tower, and beyond it stretched what appeared to be a garden. The garden gave way to a wide lawn. In the center of that lawn was a huge, multi-storied structure that could only be the palace. Bright light shone through hundreds of windows, as if the building burned from within.

Mina swallowed convulsively. Her ears still rang from both the din outside and the blow she had taken from Bryan's staff. Agony split her face, and blood poured down over her lips. At the least, she guessed that her nose was broken, although she didn't have the courage to actually reach up and feel out the full extent of the damage.

The aughisky paced nervously through the courtyard and entered the garden. A few hardy roses continued to bloom here and there, but most plants had lost their leaves. Dark hollies formed masses of shadow, their red berries looking like dried blood in the moonlight. The aughisky cantered past the marble statue of an angel, his arms raised to heaven as if beseeching some favor from God. Nearby, a wide pond broken by the shapes of sleeping geese reflected the moonlight, the fountain at its heart stilled.

"So, you've come to kill them," said a soft, girlish voice.

She stood on the other side of the pond, looking like something cobbled together out of disparate parts. Her long hair was a bizarre mix of black and white strands, and her eyes were two different colors. Her body was scrawny and a little odd in its proportions, and there was something decidedly inhuman in the contours of her face.

Mina brought up her staff. "Who are you?" she demanded. Her broken nose made her voice sound strange, as though she spoke through several layers of woolen muffler.

The girl smiled. "Dagmar."

The name was familiar from the newspapers. "Prince Roderick's daughter."

"And Rhiannon's. Or what calls itself Rhiannon, anyway." Dagmar tipped her head to one side. "They sent me here to stop you. I suppose they consider me expendable. They wanted a mix of seelie and unseelie faelings, you see, thinking that I would be something they both loved. Instead, I turned out to be something they both hated."

The wistful tone of the girl's voice made Mina profoundly uneasy. She clutched her staff more tightly, but Dagmar made no move to attack. Instead, she glanced back at the palace and gestured towards it. "Go on."

"I thought you were supposed to stop me."

"I said that's what they wanted. But I doubt that what they want is in *my* best interests. I've had to grow up very fast, you understand, and I think it's time I made my own decisions." She turned back, and her eyes gleamed, one with white light and one with shadow. "Go."

At that moment, the howls of Hounds broke out across the open lawn. The aughisky turned and snorted, then bucked a little. Taking the hint, Mina scrambled down. "Can you hold them?"

The aughisky hissed and displayed its impressive set of teeth.

Mina turned to the motionless Dagmar. "Thank you," she said.

Then she ran for the palace, staff in hand and satchel bouncing uncomfortably on her back.

She slipped into the palace through a servants' entrance, then stopped, wondering where to go next. Not truly expecting any result, she once again tried to feel Duncan's presence.

To her surprise, she found him almost at once. Hope bloomed in her heart, and she tightened her grip on her staff. Following her sense of him, she slipped like a shadow through the halls of the palace. The plain corridor she followed led her to the kitchens, then up a flight of stairs to another door. Opening it, she stepped out into a grandeur she had never before imagined.

The hall was enormous; big enough to swallow the largest apartment Mina'd ever lived in several times over. Floor-to-ceiling mirrors hung every twenty feet or so, their ornate frames heavy with gilding. Yellow silk covered the walls, and delicate vases or marble statues stood in nooks. No less than three chandeliers illuminated the hall, each one festooned with hundreds of beeswax candles. Priceless crystal hung from beneath them, refracting the light into rainbows.

Feeling suddenly small and powerless, Mina walked down the center of the imposing hall. At the end stood a huge pair of double doors. One had been pushed open halfway, as if inviting her to enter. Taking a deep breath, she stepped through.

The room fit the hall that led to it in every way. More chandeliers, more marble floors, more works of art. Heavy tapestries, their colors faded with time, hung from the walls. Directly across from the doors rose a grand dais canopied in gold. Two thrones stood upon it, one slightly below the other.

"So, you did make it after all. I would not have thought it possible," said a low, rich voice.

Roderick stepped through a small door set behind the thrones. Candlelight touched his proud, beautiful features, his golden hair, his rich clothing.

Mina swallowed and fought the urge to kneel.

"I've come for Duncan," she said shakily.

Roderick tilted his head slightly. His inhuman eyes were pure poison. "Is that any way to speak to your Crown Prince?" A Knight came to stand near him, a long pike in its hand and a truly wicked-looking knife at its belt. Mina spared it only a glance.

"Give me Duncan, and I'll leave."

"I don't think Duncan *wants* to leave." Roderick stepped away from the door. "Why don't you ask him yourself?"

And on that cue, Duncan walked onto the dais.

Walked. True, crutches had to give him the support that his stick-thin legs could no longer provide. But there was no question that he moved under his own power.

Absurdly, Mina's first thought was of how very tall he was. He had to duck a bit to avoid striking his head on the edge of the canopy. The movement threw him a little off balance, and he staggered into the Knight. Expressionless still, the Knight caught his arm and waited until he had righted himself.

"D-Duncan? How is this possible?" Mina asked, bewildered.

He looked at her, and the expression of wretched shame on his face was terrifying. "The Prince did this for me."

Slow fear ate at her heart. She denied it. "In exchange for what?"

He shook his head sadly. "In exchange for you. I agreed to be the bait to bring you here. Not to do anything to warn you."

You are betrayed, the bean-nighe had said. Only she hadn't been talking about Bryan, who had never betrayed anyone of his free will. She had meant Duncan.

"No," Mina whispered. "No. They did something to you, like they did to Bryan. You wouldn't do this to me."

Another figure moved in the shadows of the door. She stepped out onto the dais, moving to stand by Duncan, her hand on his arm. Mina stared, not believing, but it was no glamour that created that perfect face, that pert body, that glorious red hair.

Aerin smiled and tipped her head against Duncan's shoulder. "My Duncan isn't foolish enough to eat faery food, stupid girl."

Duncan closed his eyes and bowed his head. "I'm sorry, Mina. Truly, I am. You have to understand—I can undo it all! I can undo all my mistakes. Everything will be the way it was before the night when I lost Aerin." He opened his eyes and looked at her, pleading. "Surely you understand that."

Mina's mouth went dry. She had thought that something died inside her with Bryan. But that couldn't have been true, because whatever it had been was screaming now.

"Little girl, I suppose you thought that you could make yourself into me," Aerin said, a nasty grin on her perfect face. "Take my lover, take my subjects, and take everything that belonged to me. But you've failed. You're nothing but a shadow."

Mina forced herself to smile, as if none of it mattered. "Fuck you, bitch."

A wall of heated force slammed into Mina, hurling her to one side. Acting on instinct, she smothered it with shadow and water, even as her body struck the floor with stunning impact. The stench of burning hair filled the air, and her entire left arm screamed with pain.

Roderick, Mina thought, groggy from the blow. She'd let herself be distracted by Aerin and Duncan—no doubt as they had intended all along.

A mixture of rage and despair slammed through her, driving her to her feet and blocking a second attack. No matter the outcome of this battle, she had already lost. Bryan was dead, and Duncan had shown her the worth of all his pretty words. A distracted part of her mind, seared with bitterness, realized what she should have known all along—that a man like Duncan could never truly love a factory slave.

Roderick came at her again, a blaze of fire and light that blotted out the world. Even as Mina deflected his attack, a sudden blast of cold and darkness came from the other side, freezing her burned skin. She screamed in pain, fighting to shield herself from them. Her breath seemed snatched away by alternating heat and cold; as soon as she adjusted her defenses against one, the other hammered into her. It was a fatally effective tactic—no one could hold out against such punishment for long.

Blinking liquid out of her eyes—blood or sweat, she didn't know—Mina glanced towards the dais. Roderick was descending the steps towards her, a cruel smile on his face. Aerin still stood above, although she had moved to the edge, in front of Duncan. She looked wild, beautiful, and powerful, and Mina felt a rush of hatred such as she had never known. For a moment, it lent her the strength to fling off their attack.

It didn't give her enough time to retaliate, though. A moment later, Roderick was on her again, scorching her with fire. The tapestries on the wall behind Mina caught, going up with a whoosh of flame. Aerin laughed and raised her hand, preparing to call down the power that would break through the last of Mina's defenses.

Her laughter choked off. Perfect red brows arched in shock, and her lips worked in silent amazement. A thin streamer of blood leaked from one corner of her sensuous mouth. More blood soaked through the front of her green dress... where the point of a bronze knife emerged from between her breasts.

Duncan stood behind her, one arm locked around her shoulders to hold her still. He jerked hard on the knife, which he must have taken from the Knight he had stumbled against earlier. Aerin made a little sound of surprise and pain. Then the life drained out of her eyes, and she crumpled to the ground. Duncan stood over her, his face haggard, his eyes haunted.

"Aerin!" screamed Roderick. "My love! No!" He flung out his arm, and Duncan flew backwards, slamming into the wall behind the thrones with sickening force. The Knight raised his pike, ready to make an end of him.

"No!" shouted Mina, flinging every last reserve at the Knight to burst his heart with ice. The Knight staggered, collapsing beside Duncan's inert form.

All the strength gone out of her, Mina fell to her knees. Roderick turned towards her, his face a mask of fury and power. *This is it*, she thought in sudden terror.

"You aren't doing too well, Roderick," she croaked, licking lips parched from seelie fire. "Your little playmate's dead. And did I mention that your daughter betrayed you?"

Roderick dashed her to the floor, hard enough to tear the satchel from her back and scatter its contents. Dazed, Mina saw the Prince approaching, wreathed in fiery light. His golden hair fanned out around him like a halo, and Mina caught the faintest suggestion of gossamer wings unfolding.

Roderick reached out and hooked his multi-jointed fingers. Pain jarred through Mina's throat and chest, and she fell over in a boneless heap. She fought to breathe, but her lungs refused the demand. One hand scrambled frantically over the floor, searching for her staff, but the only thing she felt was the useless contents of the satchel. A hypodermic rolled away beneath her fingers. A moment later, it shattered with a crunch under Roderick's foot. The Prince approached slowly, so close that Mina could have reached out and touched his finely crafted boot.

"You dare," Roderick said in a cold and furious voice. He lifted his hand again and made a second gesture.

Mina felt her heart stop.

The bean-nighe was right, she thought dimly. *That was my shroud*. Her fingers twitched in a last spasm, skittering over spilled herbs and coming to rest against the cold iron of her old slave collar.

Roderick's spell shattered. Mina's heart lurched, an agonizing spasm that almost sent her down into oblivion. With all her remaining strength, she grabbed the slave collar and lunged at Roderick, hooking the bent metal around his foot.

Roderick shrieked, leaping back as if he had been burned. *Never touched by iron before*, Mina thought groggily. In that instant of distraction, she made a grab for her staff, twisted about, and cracked it against Roderick's head with every remaining ounce of strength left in her.

The Prince fell.

Leaning heavily on the staff, Mina climbed to her feet. Roderick lay unconscious, a knot already forming on his forehead. Taking a deep breath, Mina lifted her staff, and drove it with all her might into his eye. The wood punched through skull and into brain. Mina put all her weight against it, making sure. Roderick's body twitched once, and the foul smell of voided wastes rose up from it. Then he was still.

Her head spinning, Mina pulled the bloody staff out and staggered away. The fire from the tapestry was spreading, and smoke was starting to fill the huge room. Coughing and gasping, she somehow made it to the dais steps and dragged herself up them.

Duncan slumped against the wall, blood seeping from a wound on his temple. Mina shoved the Knight's body out of the way and lay down by him, touching his face. He gave a soft moan, eyelids fluttering.

"We've got to get out of here," Mina said. Her voice rasped in her throat. "Can you walk?"

He blinked, fighting to focus on her. "N-no. Roderick must have reversed the healing." He struggled to move, and then stopped, his face white with pain. "I think my arm is broken. Possibly several other things as well. Is there a fire?"

"Yes."

"Then go on." He reached out with his good hand and gave her a weak push. "Get away from here."

"I'm not leaving you."

"You must. I can't walk, and you can't carry me. It will be all right."

"The hell it will! I didn't come this far to leave you to die, you stupid martyr! I'll drag you all the way across Dere if I have to." How she would do that, Mina didn't know—she could barely stand herself. Angry tears gathered in her eyes, and she dashed them away. As her vision came back into focus, a movement in the small doorway nearby caught her attention.

Dagmar stepped out, her mismatched face lit from within. Frightening satisfaction filled her eyes as she observed the bodies on dais and floor.

"You managed to do it after all," she said, her voice mild and uninterested. "I was not certain you could."

"There's still Rhiannon," Mina reminded her.

Duncan shook his head, and then winced at the movement. "Aerin," he gasped. "She killed Rhiannon thirty-five years ago. It's complicated."

"I see."

"I am the Queen of Niune now," Dagmar went on thoughtfully. "Of course, there will be a Regent until I am old enough to ascend the throne, but I will make certain it is someone I can control."

"We helped you," Mina gritted. "Now help us! Put out the fire."

"Let it burn. Let it all burn."

"What about us?"

"Help is already coming."

Dagmar disappeared back through the little door. Mina sat staring in incomprehension. Then a gust of smoke blew into her face, and she began to cough.

"You have your life, then," Duncan said. He reached up and touched her face. Aerin's blood had congealed on his fingers and left sticky warmth on Mina's cheek. "Go."

She shook her head. "No."

"Damn you! Listen to me!" A coughing fit took him, and his body went rigid with pain.

A shadow came between Mina and the blaze of the fire. The sound of a sharp hoof clanging against marble echoed through the heavy pall of smoke. A moment later, cold water dripped onto the back of her neck.

She put one hand to the aughisky's leg. The fae mare eyed Duncan thoughtfully, and then settled to the floor.

"I'm sorry," Mina whispered, hooking her hands under Duncan's armpits and dragging him roughly onto the aughisky's wet back. He gasped and closed his eyes as bones grated against each other. Mina got up behind him, wrapping her arms firmly around his waist.

The dark fae came to its feet in a rush. Mina pressed her face against Duncan's back as the aughisky carried them past the flames and away.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Mina almost didn't go to Bryan's funeral. But in the end, she felt that she owed him that much, if not more. The day was gray with clouds and rain, perfect for unseelie faelings—the few that remained in Dere, anyway.

Of the survivors, many who had escaped transformation had fled the city, finally driven away not by the threat of the Seelie Court, but by one of their own kind. It was rumored that three or four Knaves and Dragons haunted the banks of the Blackrush, empty and aimless now that Mina no longer gave them purpose. Mina suspected that the aughisky was slowly picking them off.

She stood quietly by the grave, far enough back from the small collection of family members that they couldn't object too strenuously to her presence. The priest extolled the virtues of dying young and pure, while Aunt Vivian stood looking stoically on. A thin woman in a folding chair wept helplessly, her body seeming too fragile to withstand the sobs that wracked it.

On the opposite side of the grave, just under the line of yew trees separating this part of the cemetery from that containing the richer folk, sat Duncan and Fox. Mina tried not to look at them. She felt as though her heart had been torn out, leaving behind only a raw, bloody emptiness.

Perhaps it would have been better to join Bryan in the peaceful earth.

At last the sermon wound to a close, and the mourners began to drift away. None of them cast a glance in Mina's direction, as if her presence was shameful. She wondered what they would do if they knew that she had been partially responsible for Bryan's death.

Duncan and Fox had not moved. Wrapping her arms about herself to check her despair, Mina turned and began to walk away, careful not to stray near them. But to her surprise, Fox moved purposefully towards her. She stopped, feeling vaguely as though she awaited her own executioner.

"Duncan wants to talk to you," Fox said matter-of-factly. Her wide, mad eyes were filled with tears or rain. "He didn't think I could get the chair over this rocky ground fast enough to catch you before you left."

She leaned forwards and kissed Mina on the cheek. Then, her silk shawl drooping from her shoulders, she went to stand by Bryan's grave. Her ever-present string dangled from her fingers a moment, then dropped into the hole. Bowing her head, Fox turned away and left the cemetery.

Mina closed her eyes, not wanting to go to Duncan. It had been three days since she had last seen him. They had been at the charity hospital the night of the battle, waiting for a doctor to look at their wounds, when she had told him everything that she had done. She had known then that he would hate her for her actions, but she had at least hoped to get out of Dere before having to face that hatred.

I could still run away down the hill, she thought without hope. It's not as though he could chase me. But, as with Bryan, she owed him more than that.

Mina crossed the distance between them and sat down on a convenient tombstone. Marking the grave of a child, it was small enough that she would be on eye-level with him, if she dared to meet his gaze at all. One quick glimpse told her that he looked awful—his left arm in a sling and his torso stiff with the bandaging for his broken ribs. Not that she looked any better. Her broken nose was hugely swollen under its plaster, and she doubted that the charity doctor had troubled himself too much about setting it

straight.

She sat hunched over, her hands clasped between her knees. The cold rain dripped out of her short hair and hurt her nose when it hit too hard. After what seemed like an eternity of silence, she heard Duncan stir.

"How are you?" he asked.

She had expected condemnation at best, enmity at worst, but never that gentle query. Her entire body caught in a sudden spasm of need for him, and it was everything she could do not to burst into tears then and there.

"I'm leaving Dere," she said at last, when she thought she could speak again.

He was silent for a long moment, as if considering all the implications. "Is that what you want?" he asked at last.

"I think we've all had enough of what I want," she pointed out bitterly.

"Ah. I see." He thought about her words for a while, and then sighed. "Does what I want matter to you at all these days?"

"Of course. How can you even ask?"

"You've been avoiding me."

"I didn't think you'd ever want to see me again after what I did."

"Ah," he said again, even more softly this time. "I wish that you had not done it. I wish you had left me to whatever death Aerin found expedient."

She shook her head. "I couldn't. I knew that I'd lose you by using my *dyana*'s power, but it seemed better than leaving you to die. I don't regret it. I can't. Maybe you should have taken Aerin up on her offer after all."

"No. Her offer...was not entirely without merit, I suppose. I would be lying if I said that it held no temptation for me whatsoever. Perhaps if I had not known you, it would have been more tempting still. But in the end I had moved on—had let go of the past. I think in an odd way that she never had." He sighed again, a wistful breath of air. "But that is neither here nor there. I asked if you care to hear what I want."

"I'm already leaving Dere."

"I want you to stay."

Mina looked up at him, glimpsing the unguarded love in his blue-gray eyes—and the sudden death of hope was even more painful than its sudden birth had been. "Oh, God, no! You aren't wearing your amulet, are you?"

In response, he pulled it out from beneath his shirt and dangled it from his one good hand. "Of course I am. I trust you, but I didn't want you making any decisions for me because you believed they were in my best interests." His mouth softened. "I want you to stay, Mina. I want you to be my lover, my friend, and my wife."

She stared at him, wondering if the blow to his head had been worse than she thought. "You can't be

serious. Look at what I did. Some of the other faelings went with me willingly, out of love for you. But the rest I turned into monsters, into things that would fight for me. In the end, I was no better than Roderick or Aerin."

Duncan sighed. "You acted as you did because you had been pushed into a corner and saw no other way out. And as for the Knaves and Dragons, I suppose I could not expect you to feel much sympathy for people who tried to kill both of us earlier. Would you have done it, otherwise?"

"I don't know." She shook her head. "I would never have hurt Fox or Bryan, I do know that. But you still think that I did the wrong thing."

Duncan took off his glasses and rubbed at his eyes. "Of course I do."

"Then why ask me to stay?"

"I've spent the last three days asking myself that question. You did something terrible for my sake, and I would give anything to be able to undo that. But at the same time, I wonder whether or not I would have acted so differently, if our positions had been reversed. I don't know the answer to that.

"Bryan said something to me that I've thought about a great deal. That day when I asked you to leave Dere, he told me I was being a fool. He said that you only acted according to your faeling nature. If one wishes to love a tiger, one must love the tiger for what it is, not for what one desires it to be. I cannot change what you are any more than I can turn the aughisky into a vegetarian. And I *do* love you. My only choices are to accept you for what you are, or let you go forever." He paused, and then gave a weak laugh. "I don't know if that made sense."

"It did." Mina dared to glance at him hopefully. "Duncan, I swear I'll try not to use the power again. I don't know for certain that it's a promise I can keep. But I will try."

"I know."

"Then you want me to stay with you?"

"I thought I had already said that."

"Yeah." She gave a sudden grin. "You really want to get married?"

Duncan looked embarrassed. "You have every right to tell me that I am an old fool, you know."

Mina laughed in delight and leaned over to kiss him. Her nose bumped roughly against his face, and she jerked back with a yelp of pain. "Maybe we should wait a couple of weeks, until we're presentable enough to go in front of the priest. Or until we find out whether or not I'm going to debtors' prison instead."

"What had you planned to do if you left Dere?"

She gave an awkward shrug. "I don't know. Just...lose myself, one way or another. I hadn't thought about it at all. But if I'm staying, I should find out whether or not I still have a job down at *The Sailor's Widow* after disappearing for so many days."

"Didn't I mention?" Duncan asked with elaborate casualness. "I paid off your contract."

"You what? I mean...h-how?"

Duncan regarded her thoughtfully. "Answer this question first. You did something to Dagmar, didn't

you?"

Mina shook her head in puzzlement. "There at the last, when the room was burning, I did want her to help us. But she's at least as much seelie as unseelie. I didn't think anything happened."

"Perhaps it didn't. Either way, she *is* doing something to help us now. A messenger came to me at the theater yesterday. Queen Dagmar has restored the RiDahn lands and titles to me. I'm not exactly a rich man, mind you, but I did have enough to complete your contract. And I think I'll be able to provide a modest living for the two of us."

She laughed and flung her arms around him, careful of his broken ribs. "Yes! God, yes!"

"Wonderful!" He kissed her carefully. "We can go back to the theater and celebrate."

"You have a broken arm and two broken ribs," she pointed out.

He smiled, his blue-gray eyes mischievous behind rain-streaked spectacles. "We'll just have to be cautious."

She hugged him again, and then pushed the wheelchair down the hill and away from the graveyard. The rain fell on her face, wild and wonderful, and for the first time Mina realized that even winter's orphans might find their way home.

The End

About the author of **Winter's Orphans**

Elaine Corvidae has worked as an office assistant, archaeologist, and raptor rehabilitator. She is currently earning her Masters degree in Biology at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte. She lives near Charlotte, NC, with her husband and three cats.

Visit her website at www.onecrow.com

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