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Lord of Wind and Fire Series

Wolfkin
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The Shadow Fae Trilogy

Winter's Orphans
Prince of Ash
The Sundered Stone

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Tyrant Moon
Heretic Sun
Sorceress Star

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Beyond the Mundane: Flights of Mind
(Short Story: "Survival Instinct")

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6470A Glenway Avenue, #109
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To order additional copies of this book, contact:
books@mundania.com
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Prologue

The night was dark and cold, born from the depths of a winter more bitter than even the oldsters could remember. No gaslight reached the ruin of the burned-out shop, but the cloudless sky was spangled with stars. The constellation of the Hunter strode over the horizon, a silver shape amidst the blackness of the infinite sky, proclaiming the dominion of winter.

Pook stood in the street for a while, watching for any movement, any sign that whatever lay within the ruins knew that he was there. Even from a distance, he could smell old smoke, the echo of fire wafting from the charred beams that rose, stark as bones, against the moon. The place had been a chandler's shop before the fire had taken it, and maybe flame and the memory of flame was why a seelie fae had claimed it for a lair.

Eight kids found dead, Rose had said, as she read the newspaper to him. *Coroner thinks they was strangled, but there weren't no marks on 'em.*

It had been near the back of the paper, just a short paragraph, the brief tale of a curiosity barely worth noting. Eight children, all of them guttersnipes, dustbin kids, not even indentured, and so of no

value to anyone who mattered. But Rose knew by now what would catch his interest. Two years of looking through the paper whenever they could buy or steal one, two years of searching for any story that might hint of bad things to come, had attuned them both to the signs of fae activity.

Pook sighed, and his breath formed a cloud of steam in front of his face. *Damn* it was cold, so cold he was almost glad he wasn't all the way human. Then again, if he'd been totally human, he wouldn't be here now, would he? He'd be back at the Trap, or at the Sevens, snug and warm, with gin in his belly.

And it'd be somebody else's job then, wouldn't it?

But who else would do it? Not the dyana, that was for damn sure. She had the power to enslave the minds of other faelings, plenty to keep her safe; so why would she worry about what the fae were doing in some other part of town?

Someday she's going to find me. Someday I'll slip, and she'll feel it, and then...

He pulled a cigarette out of his pocket and thrust it between his lips, trying to distract himself with the ordinary. The matches, he carried in a small tin. He struck one, then held it up for a moment, staring at the fire as if it were something alive.

I ain't afraid of you, he told it. Maybe someday that would even be true.

Pook sucked smoke into his lungs, let it soothe his nerves. Somewhere far off, cathedral bells tolled midnight. In his blood, something turned, marking the hour of greatest darkness.

Time to go.

The smell of ash and old fire grew stronger as he approached the burned shop. The roof hadn't entirely collapsed; no wonder it had seemed like a good place for children to huddle together through the long winter night. Their little corpses must have been black from soot when the crushers pulled them out.

Pook shuddered and pushed aside thoughts of other soot-stained corpses. His life circled around, leading him back to fire, again and again, and damned if he knew why. Maybe God had it in for unseelie faelings like him. Hell, maybe God just had it in for everybody.

He paused in the soot-filled shadows, listening and smelling. No matter what Darcy thought, he wasn't stupid—if he was going to do shit like this, then he was going to do it when the advantage was all his, not the seelie's. Midnight on a winter's night, and he couldn't ask for the cards to be stacked more in his favor, and he thought for a moment that maybe the fae would just cut and run.

A flicker of light touched the corner of his eye—that was all the warning he got. Heat seared him, sucking the air from his lungs, and for a moment he heard flames and felt the dying struggles of the children whose breath the seelie had stolen.

Pook pulled cold from the night all around, banishing the suffocating heat. The memory of frost clung to the stone floor under his feet, and he built it into a shield, driving the fae back. He got a look at it then; it was a small thing made all of light. Dragonfly wings hummed in the air, and gossamer draperies clothed its tiny, perfect form. It was beautiful, enchanting—in short, exactly the kind of thing that most easily seduced kids to their deaths.

It flew at him with a buzzing sound, like an angry hornet. The tiny mouth formed into a sucker-like shape, striving to steal the life from his lungs. Claws raked him, leaving a trail of scorch marks across the sleeve of his coat. For an instant, he caught sight of its angry eyes, like quicksilver mirrors that reflected his own face back at him, a dark shape of brown skin and night-black hair.

He staggered back, struggling to put space between them, and flung shadows at its eyes. A high, thin shriek, like the sound of breaking violin strings, tore from its throat as it fell, blinded. He snatched the advantage it gave him, digging his fingers into the stone floor. Earth and shadow responded, opening like a maw, then closing around the seelie fae's small shape. Its light winked out, but he could still feel it struggling against the dirt that pressed in on it. Closing his eyes and forcing himself to concentrate, he shoved it deeper into the earth, down and down and down, until water seeped around it and put out its light for good.

Pook opened his eyes and found the night silent around him. He stood up slowly and wiped his hands absently against his thighs, smearing ash everywhere. Not that it made much difference; his clothes were already so filthy that it was hard to imagine anything making them worse.

His cigarette had fallen to the ground sometime during the battle and gone out. Pook picked it up,

checked that the coal was truly dead instead of just smoldering, and put it in his pocket for later.

Got to move. His wards were as good as he could make them...but in the end, he just didn't know if they would be good enough to keep the dyana from finding him. So he never lingered after a battle, not even when he had been hurt.

Pook left the ruin and took to the streets. Within a quarter hour, he was back amidst the crowds that thronged the slums down by the Blackrush. Even the bitterest cold couldn't keep the truly desperate at home, and they filled the garbage-covered streets, looking for the false warmth to be found in gin or whores. He moved through them without drawing a look; just another ragged youth, no different from a thousand others. The symbols scrawled on some of the walls warned him that he was flirting with the edge of another gang's territory, so he kept his head down and his step quick, knowing there were some who'd like nothing better than to catch a Rat Soldier alone.

But then, when wasn't he alone? Even when he was with the rest of the gang who'd taken him in, he felt like he was on the edge of things, not in the heart. Except for Rose, none of them knew that they had a changeling in their midst, a thing less than human. And even she couldn't help him in his battles.

Every night I fight alone. And every day I dream of the sea.

He shook his head sharply. Getting maudlin, that was what was happening. No sense in it, no sense at all. It couldn't change anything—and what was there to be changed, really? He was still alive, wasn't he?

But for how long, b'hoy? Been damned lucky so far, haven't I? Ain't never run into nothing worse than I could handle. But someday...if the dyana don't find me and suck my brain out my eye holes...if I don't get knifed or shot on the streets...if I don't get some bad gin and keel over dead five steps out of the saloon...someday I'm going to find myself up against one of the great ones. One of the Gentry.

The creature he had fought this night was just a poor country cousin to the Gentry. Dangerous enough, God knew, but in the end, its power was a candle before the sun. Every time he went out and faced down a fae, there was always the chance he could find himself up against something really deadly, something that would burn him up in a second. And there was no way to know beforehand. No way to know until he was face-to-face with it, and it was too late to run.

But there was nothing else he could do.

* * * * *

Mina stood in the shadows near the burned chandler's shop, peering into the darkness. Her eyes cut through the night, catlike, revealing the small clues left from the battle that had taken place earlier: disturbed earth and fresh footprints in the ashes. But her other senses told a fuller story; she could smell the tang of power on the wind, taste it like dark wine on her tongue.

"It's the same one," she said finally.

Wheels creaked over the uneven cobblestones, and a pale streak of moonlight fell across her husband's face, sparking off his spectacles and earrings. "Yes," he agreed; the word became a plume of steam in the air. She wished that Duncan had stayed home; despite his coat, muffler, and gloves, she could see that he was shivering. *Too human to be out on a night like this*, she thought wryly, although she would never say it. He had his pride, after all, or else might mistake "too human" for "too old."

So he was here with her, teeth chattering, but eyes intent. His long nostrils flared, scenting magic. "Definitely male. Young enough that he's just beginning to come into the fullness of his power."

Mina prowled restlessly near the boundaries of the broken building. "Why?" she asked the night, not expecting any answer that made sense. "Why's he doing this?"

The wheels of Duncan's chair creaked again as he maneuvered closer. The moonlight picked out the gray threaded through his long brown hair. "What is it that you think he's doing?"

The tone of his voice gave her pause. "Fighting a private war against the fae," she said uncertainly. "Do you have any other explanation?"

"No. But I think it unwise to assume too much at this juncture."

"Maybe." She stuffed her hands deep into her pockets. "If he attracted our attention, he's attracted

that of others, too.”

“I fear, on that count, you are likely correct.”

Mina shook her head, her mouth tightening into an angry line. “Damn it.”

Chapter One

It was cold the day Alex’s old life came to an end. Snow fell in fat, wet flakes that dissolved as soon as they touched the dark water of the river. Spume flew back off the steamer’s prow, a spray of mist that verged on ice, making the decks slick, and crackling off the heavy ropes. Gulls shrieked, wheeling like white ghosts against the low, gray clouds.

They scream like the ben sidhe. Alex stood in the prow of the steamer and watched as the docks drew closer and closer. And perhaps the gulls were harbingers of death, in a way, even if it was only the death of everything she had ever known.

Or perhaps it is my death they herald, here in this far, foreign land.

She sighed and tried not to be bitter if it were. Weariness ached in her bones; but more, it ached in her very soul. The physical exertion of her flight across her snow-bound homeland had largely been healed on her ocean voyage, and she had gained back all the weight she’d lost, thanks to the cook’s generous helpings. But it would take far longer for her to stop looking over her shoulder, to stop thinking that at any moment she would hear voices shouting for her capture.

And how long will it be before I stop seeing their faces in my dreams? Before I no longer hear Gosha pleading for help? Before Mama’s screams fall silent?

The steamer slowed, angling towards its berth, and sailors moved about on all sides of her, their breath making frozen plumes in the air. They complained bitterly of the cold, and one or two of them cast her odd looks, as though they thought her mad for choosing to wait in the weather. She had claimed that the frigid climate of Ruska had prepared her for the worst Niune could summon, and that her heavy layers of petticoats and her thick jacket would keep out everything short of a blizzard. There was even some truth to it; although, in fact, she was human enough to wish she could have waited until spring.

But that had not been a choice. Her powers were too slender, her fae blood too thin; best to make her escape in the dead of winter, when her magic was at its height. When only a madwoman, or the daughter of one, would try to make a journey across half of Ruska. Across a hundred miles of frozen rivers, snow-covered forests, and open plains, where the wind howled like wolves and savaged the traveler with just as deadly an intensity. It was a journey that would try even a full-grown man, let alone a girl.

With any luck, they gave me up for dead a month ago.

The boat bumped gently against the docks, and she heard the coarse yells of the sailors. They’d put into port many times since leaving Ruska’s ice-clotted seas, but this was the final stop for her. She picked up her battered valise and made her way carefully over the ice-slick deck towards where the sailors were already running down the gangway.

The smell of the river rose up all about her. Flotsam of every possible type choked its turbid waters: sodden paper, raw sewage, dead animals, the offal of butcheries. *I wonder what makes the water black, though? Perhaps I could run some tests—*

But no. That was over now. There was no mother to tolerate her experiments, to share the secret and keep it concealed from disapproving male eyes. She had to remember that her old life was over, had been buried along with Moira.

“You’ll be getting off here, then, miss?” the captain asked.

Her heart sped for a moment, and she felt fear trace an icy hand down her back. *What if he refuses to let me leave?* It was an insane, paranoid thought, but she couldn’t entirely suppress it.

“Yes,” she said, and fixed him with the coldest look she could summon.

He nodded, rubbing his hands together to warm them. “Good luck to you, then. You did us a right good turn, fixing the boiler like that. If’n you change your mind and decide you don’t want to stay here,

we'll be in port for the next three days. Just come back, and you can have free passage wherever you like."

And Father always said there was no use in educating a woman, she thought, with a wry twist of her lips. Well, now at least she knew the worth of all the years of reading and experimenting she and her mother had done while Aleksei was away in the capital.

They summed precisely to the price of passage on a squalid little steamer.

"Thank you," she said, knowing that she wouldn't be taking him up on his offer. Where else would she go?

Even so, she almost balked at her first sight of the docks. The Blackrush was a deep river, allowing ocean-going vessels to sail into the city of Dere. Books had told her that Dere was the largest city in Niune, and that most of the kingdom's commerce was conducted there. But somehow...the words had failed to convey anything of the chaos that now confronted her.

Apparently, mere bad weather wasn't enough to make anyone in Dere stay home. Dockhands and sailors unloaded cargo, lashed ropes, hauled on nets, sang, bickered, and brawled. Captains screamed orders, while well-dressed merchants ranted over damage to their goods. Carts pulled by enormous horses rumbled and rattled about, some of them barely able to navigate between the mountains of boxes, crates, bales, coils, and barrels that cluttered the wharves. Vendors selling parsnips, noodles, mollusks, pastries, and beans sang loud songs praising their wares, while donkeys brayed and dogs barked, and above all, the gulls screamed.

Chernovog, god of the waning year, protect me. I can't do this, Alex thought. Crossing Ruska alone in winter had been one thing—then she'd had only to contend with the elements. But this...

I didn't think there were this many people in the entire world.

So many people, and none of them friends. Her cold-chapped hands clenched tightly on her valise, she closed her eyes, then opened them again, as if she hoped the madness of the docks were some trick of her thick-lensed spectacles. Her feet felt frozen to the deck of the little steamer, and her heart pounded in her chest like a bird in a cage.

I can do this. I have to. I don't have any other choice.

I do. I could take up the captain on his offer. He hasn't been bad to me—he didn't ask for anything but gold in payment, and most of the hands stopped trying to get under my skirts after I fixed the boiler. I could go with them. Go somewhere else—anywhere else...Dere didn't have to be my destination. I could go to Grynnith, try to find Mama's family there—

But that was the first place *he* would look, if he thought there were any chance Alex had survived. Her mother had been Niunish by birth, the product of an alliance between a small and unimportant noble house and the third son of a Grynnithian marquise. Moira was a mere child when her family was slaughtered, and she escaped to her father's relatives in Grynnith only through providence and the help of loyal servants. But she had always considered Niune her true home.

Besides, Mama's uncles in Grynnith were the ones who arranged her marriage and sent her to Ruska in the first place. Would they even care if I told them the truth? Or would they just ship me back?

She stifled a sigh and squared her shoulders. Long past time to accept that there would be no help at this end of her journey, just as there had been none at its start. Somehow, she would make do, even if the best she could manage were some menial job. Scrubbing floors for the rest of her life wouldn't be her first choice, but there were far worse fates.

Dying alone in a dank cellar, surrounded by the screams of the mad, for one.

Taking a deep breath of the icy air, Alex stepped off the ship and onto the gangplank. It swayed a little under her, but not treacherously so. A few more steps, and she was on the wharf itself.

The first thing she discovered was that being down in the midst of the activity made things more confusing, not less. She awkwardly dodged a dockhand pushing a cart, got cursed by a noodle-vendor when she nearly upset his pot, and was almost stepped on by one of the huge draft horses being hitched to a load. Everyone was taller than she, and the crowd alone would have blocked her sight even without the towering piles of cargo everywhere. Feeling like a mouse in the midst of an entire colony of cats, she

somehow managed to avoid being run over, kicked, or knocked down, until she finally found a small, clear space to stand, between a pile of wooden crates and a stack of cotton bales.

I hope the entire city isn't like this. She stopped to straighten her hair and get her bearings. As she took another look around at the milling mass of humanity, she realized that some of the dockhands were wearing iron collars around their necks.

Indentured workers. She'd heard tales of them, but the sight of the crude collars made her blood run cold. *I can't end up like them. I can't. Please, Chernovog.*

At that moment, an old man reeking of alcohol shambled past. Seeing her, he thrust out a grimy hand; the skin on his fingertips was blackened with frostbite. "Spare a coin or two?" he asked; his breath could have been used to strip paint from a wall.

"I—I don't—" she stammered, shrinking back, but he'd already lost interest and stumbled away. Clutching her valise, she watched as he left, half-afraid he might decide to come back and steal her only possession. At last assured that he had forgotten her, she returned her attention to the fore...and found herself staring directly into a pair of dark eyes.

He leaned against the brick wall of a warehouse: a young man in his late teens, with skin the color of coffee lightly cut with cream. Raggedly cut hair, like midnight silk, blew around the shoulders of a shabby peacoat buttoned up against the cold. His eyes were beautiful, slightly slanted and surrounded by the thickest lashes she had ever seen. He had prominent cheekbones, full lips, and a straight but broad nose. As she watched, he lifted a cigarette casually to his mouth. His fingers were long and strong, and somehow managed to turn the mundane gesture into something exquisitely graceful.

Gorgeous... It felt as if he'd stolen away her breath. The crowded wharf seemed to disappear; she was alone with the painful beat of her heart. But then the practical part of her mind intruded, and she found herself wondering why he was staring back at her with such intensity.

She wasn't beautiful—didn't even qualify as pretty—so it couldn't be the natural interest of a young man for an attractive girl. It seemed far more likely that he was contemplating robbing her. Tightening her hold on her valise, she started to step back, desperate to put space between them, even though she felt as though he'd worked some magic and captured her with his eyes...

"You there!"

The spell broke, and Alex let out a slight yelp of surprise. Startled, she looked up at two men dressed in what she guessed was the uniform of the local constabulary. They were both glaring at her, and she wondered wildly what she had done wrong.

"Y-Yes?" she asked timidly.

"What's your name?"

At home, a boyar's daughter would never have submitted to questioning by commoners. But here, she was no one, and she didn't know how much power the police might have over her.

"A-Alexandrea," she mumbled, hoping they didn't ask for more.

They exchanged a glance. "You a foreigner?" one asked, as if calling her a nasty name.

"I'm from Ruska, but my mother was Niunish and—"

"You got people here? Family?"

"N-no, I—"

"We don't take to loafers and layabouts here," the other said harshly. "Whatever it's like in foreign parts, here you got to work. You ever heard of debtors' prison, girl?"

Flummoxed and frightened, she glanced about for some avenue of escape. To her surprise, she saw that the beautiful stranger who'd been watching her had drawn nearer and was now standing behind the constables, who seemed unaware of his presence.

"Well? Answer me, girl!" one of the policemen roared.

Seeing he had her attention, the young man smiled at her, winked—then reached out and very deliberately pushed over the stack of crates.

They came crashing down with the crack of breaking wood. Dried fish spilled out of the shattered crates and onto the slush-covered ground. The two constables instantly spun around and started yelling, but the youth was already off and running, his laughter floating behind him like a silver banner. For a

moment, Alex only stood in confusion and watched the chase; then, realizing the opportunity she'd been given, she grabbed her valise and made her way swiftly away from the wharf.

She didn't stop until she found a quiet, relatively deserted street. Gasping for breath, she sank down on a stoop and shook her head.

I might be wrong, she thought. *I've never met another besides Mama. I might be wrong.*

Because at the moment he'd drawn closest to her, she'd thought she'd felt a flash of power, as if her hands had unexpectedly encountered a warm, velvet animal in the darkness.

The beautiful youth was an unseelie faeling.

Like her.

* * * *

Pook almost laughed out loud as the crushers wandered right past him, cursing and slipping on the icy muck. Almost, but didn't; the glamour that made him look like a pile of kindling leaning against the wall wouldn't hold up too well if, all of a sudden, the sticks started giggling. So he watched them poke around the narrow alleyway for a few minutes; then, muttering uncomplimentary things about b'hoys and gangs and youth in general, they gave up and left.

As soon as they were gone, he let the glamour slip and strutted off in the opposite direction. He'd have to keep an eye out and stay off the wharves, at least for the next few days, but it had been worth it just for the opportunity to play a trick on the constables.

And I got to help out another faeling.

Yeah, another faeling. Nothing to do with the fact that she was about the cutest cherry you've ever seen, huh?

She'd caught him looking, though. His good spirits drained away, remembering how she'd stared back. He ought to be used to it now, he guessed, but somehow the acid-burn pain of being a freak never quite went away.

He absently ran his fingers through his hair; sure enough, his pointy ears were sticking out again, so he tried to pat the unruly locks back into a position that would at least conceal them. Glamour hid them from most people, but a faeling like her would have seen through the magic to the deformity beneath.

A few years back, he'd worked up the nerve and the money, both, to go to a barber and have his ears clipped. They might look all scarred and ugly, but that had to be better than being a freak. But that had been right about the time his faeling powers were coming out, and he'd put on his fur face for the first time only a few days after...and that had been that, ears right back to what they'd been, just like he'd never gone through the expense *or* the pain. So he figured he was stuck with them forever now.

Pook absently pulled an empty sack out of his belt and kept an eye open for anything he might be able to scavenge or sell. Almost immediately, he spotted a piece of coal that had fallen off a cart, so he darted in front of a surprised teamster, snatching it up before anyone else could get to it. Picking up dropped bits of coal was a good way to make money; you could fill a sack in eight or nine hours if you worked hard enough. With the cold weather, prices were at their best. A full sack might keep him fed for two days instead of just one. And if he couldn't find enough coal, well, there were always rags and old nails and crap like that, which the junk sellers would give a few coppers for, anyway.

Pook left the wharf district behind and cut across Pennywhistle Lane, with the vague idea of finding a saloon where he might get a good shell game going and make a little money before sunset. The area was largely given over to bordellos, burlesques, taverns, and dance halls. Some of the girls walking in the street or looking out windows smiled and waved at him cheerfully. He stopped once to talk with Kerry the Gouger, asking after her little boy and commiserating on the tribulations of making ends meet. As he angled over towards Grinder Street, passing out of the main entertainment district and into a maze of tenements, saloons, and grocers that sold more booze than food, a familiar voice called out to him.

Rose ambled out of an alleyway, fluffing her skirts as she went. The cold had brought a flush to her thin cheeks, and she rubbed her hands together for warmth, despite the thin gloves she wore. The gloves had belonged to Pook at one time, but the cold didn't bother him nearly as much as it did her. They were far too long for her fingers, so she had stuffed them with straw, making her hands look twice their normal

size.

He and Rose had been friends since he'd first come to Dere, starting out together as bootblacks, then working up to picking pockets and finally to membership in the Rat Soldiers. Every now and again, when Rose felt like it, he'd help her run a panel scheme. Pook would steal some bastard blind while the guy was busy screwing Rose, then threaten to report him to the crushers when the mark found his wallet gone and couldn't pay her. Then they'd go out and get a drink and laugh themselves silly at the mark's expense.

"Did you get the fae?" she asked as she approached.

He went a little cold, remembering the ruined shop and the thing that had lived there, waiting to steal the life from anyone who happened by. "Yeah."

Rose nodded. She'd been with him when it had begun, when some of their fellow bootblacks had died mysteriously...and then what had killed the others had come for them. That was right after his power had manifested, and the memory of that first battle still scared him. He hadn't known half of what he'd figured out since then, and it had been as much luck as anything that had kept him alive.

Don't matter none, though. They just keep coming. Don't matter what I do.

"None of that tonight," Rose said, like it was just some crazy hobby or something he enjoyed doing. "Darcy's called us all in. Said she's got a job that'll need every Rat Soldier. You got to come, fairy-boy—she's pissed enough at you as it is. Says you ain't pulling your weight in the Soldiers no more."

Pook rolled his eyes. The complaint was nothing new. Darcy just couldn't get over the fact that he wouldn't share his "tricks" with her: teach her how to run a shell game the way he did, or get away from the crushers without being seen, or any of a dozen other things. Problem was, all that stuff was magic, pure and simple, and he couldn't have taught it to Darcy even if she knew the truth about him.

At the time he and Rose had hooked up with the Rat Soldiers, it seemed like a good idea. Being part of a gang meant protection, meant you had people looking out for your back, who would take out anyone who messed with you. Even though they couldn't help him with the fae, they could stand between him and more mundane threats, so long as he was willing to do the same for them.

But now...now I'm just sick of it all. Sick of the quarrels and the fighting, sick of keeping track of every little slight somebody gave to somebody else. Tired of jumping every time Darcy snaps her fingers.

There were days—more all the time, it seemed—when he wondered if maybe there weren't something more to life. *But there ain't. And if you don't like it, well, too damned bad. Because this is what you signed up for, and I sure as hell don't see anybody offering you a better deal, do you?*

He thought about the cherry on the docks. She was a faeling, and he wondered if maybe he should have gone after her, once he gave the crushers the slip. She didn't really look like the type who'd go rushing into a fight with him, but, even so, it'd be nice to have somebody to talk to. Somebody who understood. Even better, somebody cute and female.

That ain't for you, b'hoy. Stuff like that was for people who did something other than struggle for survival every single second of every single day. Whether it was against the fae, or against hunger and want, or against another gang, there was nothing for him but the fight.

I'm so tired.

Rose took a drag from her cigarette and blew the smoke in his direction. "Look, you and Darcy may not be best friends, but we got a job tonight, and you better show. Hal went home for a while and overheard his old man talking—there's going to be boatload of stolen goods coming right down the river tonight. It's supposed be headed for a landing all the way down on Gallows Isle."

"But it ain't going to make it," Pook guessed uneasily. "Is Darcy crazy? I don't mind running the stuff back and forth from the riverside to the fences, but if we actually take on a bunch of river pirates, they're going to be hunting for our heads next."

Rose gave him a look that said she couldn't believe what she'd just heard. "Are you saying you're scared? Are you saying you're going to just let the rest of the Soldiers go do this, and meanwhile you'll sit back here where it's nice and safe, let us take all the risk?"

Pook jammed his hands in his pockets and scowled at her. Every bit of sense he had told him to just nod his head, turn around, and head the other way. But of course he didn't. The Rat Soldiers might not be much, but they were all he had.

"I'm in, Rose, you know that."

She smiled and clapped him on the shoulder. "I knew you'd come through, Pook. You always do."

* * * *

"It's started," Fox said.

Sleet clicked gently against the large glass window at the front of the bookstore. The soft glow of gaslight reflected off gilded titles stamped into leather bindings. A large black cat with only one eye stretched languidly on her perch next to the window, then went back to sleep. The comforting scent of old books filled the air, mingling with the smells of wood polish, smoke, and tea.

Duncan RiDahn glanced up from where he was recording the newest batch of books in the ledger. Fortunately, there were no customers in the store at the moment, although the regulars were by now probably used to Fox's strange announcements. In his experience, people adapted to the little shop and its admittedly odd inhabitants, or else hurried out and never returned.

"What has started, Fox?" he asked, feeling a faint stirring of unease. Although his old student was given to bizarre declarations, this latest one seemed more ominous than usual. The image of the burned-out building from last night came back to him forcefully, along with Mina's restless look when they had spoken of the unknown faeling. *The hunter.*

Fox blinked her large, mad eyes, as if surprised to see him. Dark brown hair tumbled around her thin face, jeweled clips caught in the snarled ruins of what might have begun as a fashionable coiffure. Her shawl slipped off one shoulder, and she tried to pull it back up, apparently forgetting the colorful string twined around her swollen fingers.

"You have to go to her," Fox said urgently, looking around as if she had misplaced something.

Not the hunter, then. He remembered the scent of spent power that had still lingered around the battlefield. Deep power, it had been, wild and angry and so strong that he wasn't entirely certain the wielder wasn't a true fae, untainted by human blood. But, whether fae or faeling, it had definitely been male.

The sound of heavy boots on the floor came from the back, and a moment later Mina appeared, her arms full of books. She slowed at the sight of them, however, and a little frown sprang up between her dark eyebrows. "What is it?"

"The girl," Fox insisted, holding her string out, as if they could somehow share her vision. "You ought to help her. She's going to need it, you know. And then what will you do when the prince arrives?"

Mina and Duncan traded a baffled look. "There isn't a prince," Mina pointed out uncertainly. "Dagmar is Queen of Niune, Fox. Remember? We helped put her on the throne. But she's not even old enough to be married yet, let alone have children."

Fox only shook her head and began to keen softly.

Duncan sighed, shut the record book, and began to maneuver his wheelchair out from behind the low counter where he worked.

Five years of quiet since the fall of the Seelie Court, and now this. An unknown faeling loose in the city, stirring up the seelie fae. Fox begins to prophesy again.

Perhaps they aren't connected.

Perhaps.

"I suppose we had best close the shop early, then," he said grimly. "Fox, can you take us to this girl?"

His mad student stopped her keening at once and smiled.

Chapter Two

Alex was lost.

Her footsteps slowed as she looked around uncertainly. Her original plan had been to locate a modest boarding house where she could rent a room, using the last of the money tucked safely into the bottom of her valise. From there...well, she wasn't entirely sure yet. Finding a job was the highest priority after a room; if necessary, she could try her hand at a servant's position, until she could find something more suited to her skills. Perhaps someone needed a translator of books, or she might find a position mixing chemicals at a pharmacy, or...

First things first, she told herself sternly. The day was getting on towards evening, and she needed to find a place to stay before it grew too late. But her unfamiliarity with the city had betrayed her, and, as she walked, her surroundings had gone from slightly impoverished to downright slumlike.

Rough brick buildings towered up on either side, turning the street into a narrow slot that funneled the winter wind. Icy slush had mixed with the garbage and animal dung on the streets into a morass so thick, she could no longer tell if there were any paving stones beneath it. A herd of pigs foraged in a pile of trash lying at the mouth of an alley, while thin dogs wandered past, whining and snarling. The gray shapes of humans huddled on corners and in doorways, wrapped in rags that hardly seemed adequate to keep out the cold. They watched her as she passed, and she felt a shiver of fear go up her spine.

Please don't bother me. I don't have anything you want. I just want to find some place I can lie down and go to sleep and feel safe...

She couldn't remember the last time she'd felt safe.

Something hit her hard from behind, and she staggered, too startled to do anything but fight to keep her balance. Another rough push sent her to her knees in the slush. Fingers grabbed at her valise, and she let out a cry, snatching wildly for the handle. For an instant everything was a confusion of hard hands and feet; then, she was alone, her assailant fleeing away down the street.

With her valise.

"Stop!" she yelled, struggling to her feet. *It was a child*, she thought, and caught a confused impression of pale blond hair and a rust-colored cap, before the thief disappeared into an alley.

Shocked by the suddenness of it all, Alex stood swaying in the street. The boy had stolen her only possession. Everything she owned in the world was in the valise—the few instruments she'd thought could survive a long journey, the coins she had left over from the sale of her jewelry...and her mother's diary.

Oh, Chernovog, the diary. It's all I had left of her...

Everything else, she could have accepted, although not gracefully. But the loss of the diary...

She clenched her hands so hard that her nails bit into her palms. *I won't cry. Not over this. I didn't cry over poor Gosha, or when I heard the leshy following me, or...*

But the tears refused to listen. Despair settled over her like a shroud, and she sank down to the curb. A mixture of rain and sleet began to spit from the low, iron-colored clouds, and she put down her head, and cried.

* * * *

Fox danced down the icy street as though she owned it, drawing looks from everyone they passed. Mina sighed, reminded herself that secrecy wasn't the imperative that it once had been, and tried to act as if she didn't feel horribly conspicuous.

Not that we wouldn't stand out anyway, she thought, glancing briefly at Duncan, who was determinedly wheeling *himself* along. No matter that they could have taken a half hour to fetch the double brougham, which they'd bought to save him the humiliation of having to be manhandled into a public cab. No matter that they could have said to hell with pride and hired a cab anyway.

When the chair got mired down in some of the muck and slush covering the street, Mina grabbed the handles and pushed, ignoring her husband's protests. "Stop complaining," she said, glaring back at

the loiterers on one corner, who'd abandoned their own conversation to stare curiously. Whether their attention was drawn by Fox's ruined finery, the wheelchair, or the fact that Mina still dressed like a man, five years after she'd last worked in a mill, she didn't know.

Who cares if they stare? It isn't like it matters. It isn't as if the Seelie Court were still in power, just looking for unseelie faelings to catch and kill. It isn't even as if the hunter, whoever the hell he is, has done anything to threaten us. There's nothing to be afraid of.

True. But something about Fox's warning made the small hairs stand up on Mina's neck, and no matter how hard she tried to tell herself that there might very well be nothing to it, the sensation wouldn't go away.

They'd left behind the better neighborhoods of Dere and were headed into one of the city's many poor precincts. Grinder Street, where Mina had briefly worked as a burlesque dancer, wasn't far away, and she found herself wondering if any of the girls she'd known were still there.

Fox stopped, breaking Mina out of her thoughts. "There," said the mad faeling with a crazy-bright smile...and then, with the air of a job well done, she turned and skipped away, her shoes sending up little splashes from the half-melted snow.

What the hell? Mina frowned after Fox, then looked around. Even so, it took her a moment to spot the girl.

She was sitting on a curb, almost hidden behind a pile of trash. Unlike the rag-covered homeless they'd seen along the rest of the street, the girl was dressed in a thick coat, skirts, and serviceable boots. Although the clothing was respectable, if a bit travel-worn, it also had a faintly foreign look to it. Embroidered flowers, done in a style Mina didn't recognize, decorated the hem of the skirt, and brightly colored stripes gave the coat a cheerful air entirely at odds with the girl's demeanor.

Trading a glance with Duncan, Mina approached cautiously. Apparently realizing that she was no longer alone, the girl glanced up sharply and drew back, as if to defend herself. She was young, Mina saw, probably a couple of years shy of twenty. Although it was hard to tell beneath the heavy coat, her round face suggested that she was rather plump. Thick brown hair straggled about her shoulders, falling out of what had probably begun as a no-nonsense bun. Blue-gray eyes blinked owlishly at them from behind a pair of spectacles with the thickest lenses Mina had ever seen. *Poor girl must be blind without them.*

Although she was obviously out-of-place in this area, Mina knew there had to be another reason that Fox had fixated on this girl in particular. Keeping a careful eye on her, Mina cautiously extended her faeling senses.

Yes—there. Like the scent of an underground river, like the faintest wisp of cloud over the moon. Just a thread of power left, diluted by generations of human blood until almost nothing remained...but there nonetheless.

The girl blinked, then shot a frightened look at Mina. *It's all right,* Mina projected, soothing. A brief pang of guilt touched her—she shouldn't be using her dyana powers at all, not against a girl like this, who had no hope of fighting back. *On the other hand, it won't do her any good if she bolts before we have a chance to talk to her.*

"Do you need help?" Duncan asked in a kindly tone.

"I..." The girl stopped, seeming unsure what to say next. "You—you're faelings? Like me?" Although her Niunish was perfect, she had a thick accent that marked her as foreign born.

"That's right." Duncan gave her a gentle smile, clearly meant to soothe. "One of my students—former students, rather—can see things far away, and she said that you needed help. Is there anything we can do?"

The girl shook her head, but it was a gesture of confusion rather than a refusal. "I don't...how many faelings are in this city? I'd never met any others before today, and this is the second time in just a few hours..."

The second time?

"You're new here," Duncan said, which was obvious enough. "I know that we are strangers to you, and you have no reason to trust us, but we mean you no harm. My name is Duncan RiDahn, and this is

my wife, Mina Cole.”

The girl’s eyes went wide, and Mina felt her heart sink. *Whoever she met already warned her about me.*

But the girl barely looked at Mina, focusing all her attention instead on Duncan. “R-RiDahn? Duncan RiDahn?”

He frowned. “That’s right.”

“But—but you’re dead! You were killed by the Seelie Court a long time ago.” Her eyes narrowed into a glare, as if accusing him of lying.

“Certainly they did their best,” he said dryly, but Mina caught the flash of pain in his eyes. His battles with the Seelie Court had cost him everything—his family, the use of his legs, even his onetime love.

Suspicion flared in Mina’s heart. “Who are you? What do you know about Duncan?” she demanded. And, before she even realized what she was going to do, she *pushed*.

The girl’s will was strong, but her magic was slight, and there was no resistance. Some of the forceful personality ebbed from her eyes. “My name is Alexandreya Alekseevicha. My mother—Moirra RiDahn—had an older brother named Duncan.”

Oh, God, I didn’t mean to do that.

Duncan sat very still for a moment, but his shock was written across his face. “That...that isn’t possible,” he said at last. “Moirra was killed.”

“No. She wasn’t. She escaped, even though she was just a little girl. Servants helped smuggle her to Grynith, to your father’s family there. They weren’t faelings...didn’t know anything about faelings, probably. She...she married a Ruskan boyar and went to live there and...and now she’s dead.”

Mina carefully released her hold on the girl. Alex blinked, but she didn’t seem to realize what Mina had done to her.

“She’s telling the truth,” Mina murmured to Duncan.

He gave her a sharp glance, as if he suspected that she had used her dyana power. Then he turned to the girl and held out his hand. “I think...I think it would be best if you came with us,” he said.

* * * *

They took Alex to a small café near the bookstore. The girl seemed relieved to be out of the weather, cradling a cup of hot tea in her fingers and breathing deeply of the steam. The sun began to go down, and Mina could feel her spirits lift as night took control.

Alex had remained quiet since her revelation, although she politely thanked them for the tea and soup that the waiter brought. As they ate, Duncan explained their situation to the girl. Watching them together, Mina could see the family resemblance. They had the same brown hair, the same myopic blue-gray eyes. Although Alex’s features were much softer and rounder than Duncan’s, the delicate sweep of eyebrow and cheekbone were strikingly similar.

“The family lands aren’t much, I’m afraid,” Duncan said, as they ate. Although his voice was calm, Mina could see the excitement in his eyes, in the quick way he smiled. “But they are enough to afford us a comfortable living. We also indulge in a bookstore that usually turns a small profit every month.”

Alex’s eyes lit up at that, and Mina wondered if it were possible to inherit a love of scholarship as easily as hair color.

“And I fear that we don’t, ah, mingle in high society,” Duncan added, with a self-deprecating smile. “We lead a quiet life that would probably seem dreadfully boring to a young woman such as yourself.”

“No.” Alex couldn’t seem to decide whether to look at Duncan or at her soup. Her spectacles reflected back the candlelight, shielding her eyes from them. “I don’t care about that. I just...I like to read.”

“Good, good,” he said with real pleasure, and Mina had to hide a grin at his enthusiasm. “Have you considered university?”

Alex stared at them blankly for a moment, then hesitantly shook her head. “I don’t...I don’t have any money...and they don’t let women in, do they?”

Duncan blinked. “Of course they do. Good heavens, what sort of benighted place is Ruska? And as

for money, as my niece, you are my legal heir. Mina and I may not be living like grand society, but we aren't exactly scraping by, either."

Alex's mouth worked, her eyes growing bigger by the moment. Clearly, she had no idea what to make of them. "I...I didn't come here to...I didn't even know I had any family here..."

"I know. And doubtless would not have, had Fox not steered us to you. But she did, and here you are." He paused, an odd look on his face. "I thought I was the last RiDahn, you know. I had no idea anyone escaped the Seelie Court. I...I wish I had known earlier, while Moira was still alive. I'm very sorry I never had the chance to speak to her again. But at least I can look at you and see the kind of woman she grew into."

"It's all right to feel confused," Mina added. They both looked at her as if they had forgotten she was even there. She couldn't imagine how bittersweet this unexpected reunion must be to them—her own family consisted of a mother who had died when she was a child, and a murderous fae father who had done nothing but manipulate her during their brief relationship five years ago. "We understand you didn't come here expecting this. Think about it for a while, all right?"

Alex nodded slowly. "I...I will."

"Do you have anywhere to stay?"

"No. All my money was stolen, right before you found me. That's...why I was crying." She said the words as if she were admitting to some horrible shame.

"Understandable," Duncan said gently. "You can stay with us until you get your bearings and decide what to do."

Alex shrank back, and fear flickered across her face, quickly hidden. *Damn*. The girl had mentioned her mother, but it hadn't escaped Mina's attention that she remained silent about her boyar father. Nor had she explained what she was doing in Dere alone, nor why she had left her homeland and her remaining family there.

None of the possible explanations that occurred to Mina were pleasant, and she had the feeling that Duncan was thinking the same thing, given that he had tactfully avoided the topic himself.

"It's *your* choice," Mina said, leaning over and catching Alex's eye. "No one is forcing you to do anything." *Not even me. I hope. Damn, I have to make her an amulet.* "Finish your soup, come home with us, and get a good night's sleep before you make any decisions, all right? If you decide to leave tomorrow, that's fine. If you decide to stay and find out more about your family, such as we are, that's fine too. Sound good?"

Alex took a deep breath, and Mina could see the struggle in her. Then she sighed and nodded. "All right," she said, but she didn't sound happy about it at all.

* * * *

For the most part, the Rat Soldiers gathered in one of two places. For heavy drinking, carousing, and celebration, they favored Hatboy's Saloon, an establishment that had made its reputation by selling rather dubious, extremely cheap gin. For almost everything else, including sleeping—for those who didn't have anywhere else to go for the night—they used the Trap.

The Trap was nothing more than a basement beneath one of the hundreds of tenements that lined the Blackrush. Its proximity to the river—with attendant smells—meant that it was cheap enough that even they could afford to sleep there. It also made a very convenient staging area for excursions onto the river, a Rat Soldier specialty.

Pook followed Rose down the rickety stairs into the Trap. The sound of sloshing water and angry voices came from below, and, sure enough, the place had flooded yet again. Melt water and rain sluiced down off the streets or leaked from the yards all around them, leaving the floor soaked in a foul mixture of water and sewage. Chicken bones and rags floated in the dark, swirling water, and a ten-year-old boy, who called himself Raw, splashed around loudly, kicking the flotsam and throwing up plumes of brown water.

Pook breathed shallowly against the stench, glad he didn't sleep here too often. That was probably another strike against him, according to Darcy and the rest of the Soldiers, but he would have gone crazy

if he'd had to spend twenty-four hours a day with them. Sleeping in the Sevens didn't give him any more actual privacy, but there, at least, he was surrounded by strangers, who didn't expect anything from him.

Darcy stood in the center of the room, scowling at the water seeping into the basement, as if she didn't know how to respond to something she couldn't hit. Her skin was dark as ebony, and contrasted sharply with the brilliant strings she had wound around the locks of her long hair. She had a scar on her chin, and her arms were corded with muscle. Like the rest of them, she dressed in the uniform of the Rat Soldiers: a sleeveless undershirt and suspenders, half-hidden for now beneath a coat. Unlike the other girls, she favored trousers, instead of skirts.

As they came down the stairs, Darcy transferred her gaze from the water, which she couldn't pummel into submission, to Pook, whom she could. "Where you been?"

He shrugged. "On the docks."

"Well, we've got *work* to do tonight, b'hoy. You remember *work*, don't you?"

George, a big, dumb boy whom Pook quietly despised, laughed at this. Raw laughed, too, then staggered into George, who shoved him casually. The little boy hit the filthy water and lay there for a moment, twitching.

Barrel fever, Pook diagnosed grimly. Raw had been hitting the gin since long before he'd joined up with the Rat Soldiers.

Hal and his little sister, Meg, clattered down the stairs behind Pook and Rose. Meg was young enough to still be sucking on a dirty thumb, but her eyes were hard as an adult's. Both of them had hair the color of freshly minted copper, along with pale skin and a generous dollop of freckles.

Darcy transferred her gaze from Pook to Hal. "You better be right about this run, b'hoy."

"I am. The old man blabbed the whole thing in front of us," Hal said, with an air of nonchalance. Pook wondered what it must be like to have parents, if it was any better than what he'd had, or if it was somehow worse. Hal's dad beat the crap out of him on a regular basis, and Pook suspected that the bastard was sleeping with little Meg on top of it all. But at least he cared enough to keep them around, which was more than Pook could say about his own unknown mother.

"We're on, then," Darcy said, with finality. "Come on, b'hoys and g'hals, let's make a little money!"

George pulled a couple of loose boards away from one wall, revealing the large, ragged hole that they'd knocked in the moldy brick. A tunnel of raw earth, shored up here and there with broken boards, led out of the basement flat. They had to go through on their hands and knees, and foul water from the flooding basement soaked Pook up to his elbows. By the time they reached the other end of the short tunnel, most of the Soldiers were shivering violently.

The tunnel opened up underneath a short pier. They paused in its concealment, and Darcy passed around a bottle of gin to help them warm up. The sun was setting, and Pook took a deep breath, smelling darkness and dank water. The turbid river called to him softly, its splashes and drips a siren song that beckoned him towards its depths.

Relishing the feel, he narrowed his eyes, letting the power rise in him. The night would help conceal them from the pirates they intended to rob...but fog would help even more; maybe, it would keep them from getting killed.

Don't, said caution. *That's too much power. Bring the dyana down on your head, if she gets wind of it.*

He shivered. Being turned into a mindless slave wasn't something he wanted to risk. But he'd managed to keep one step ahead of the dyana of Dere so far. She hadn't shown up at any of his fights, looking to erase his brain, so the risk seemed slim that she would come after him now. On the other hand, if he did nothing, then the risk of being shot by pirates within the next hour was fairly large.

To hell with it. He took the gin bottle from Rose and threw back a generous swallow. The foul stuff burned his mouth and throat; it hit his blood and eased away the fear of the dyana, of the pirates, and wrapped him in a warm embrace. Closest thing you could get to a mother's arms, he figured.

Pook reached out with his power, found the memory of a thousand foggy mornings in the wooden piers. He pulled it like a shredded shroud from the weeds beside the river, from the dark water, from the slime-befouled stones. The fog rose easily, moving, shifting, its form hinting at faces or shapes within.

“Excellent!” exclaimed Darcy, pulling Pook’s attention back to his human companions. “Look—a fog’s coming up. They’ll never see us.”

Rose shot Pook a questioning look, which he ignored. He could feel the magic in himself, like a butterfly trapped within its chrysalis, wet wings pushing frantically to get out. For a moment, he had a vision of what he might do: freeze the river solid, shatter the pier with ice, bring the full wrath of winter down on pirates and Rat Soldiers alike. The humans would run, shivering as ice ate into their bones, and he would stand alone on the frozen river and scream.

Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath, fighting to swallow it back. This butterfly would never spread its wings to dry. It was impossible, pointless, because giving free rein to his desire would cost him what little he had. None of the humans around him would ever understand.

He thought again about the faeling girl on the docks, her chestnut hair spangled with melting snow. She was unseele like him—would that be enough reason for her to talk to him?

“Pook!” Darcy yelled.

Startled, he blinked and found that everyone was glaring at him. Darcy flung a dirty rag at him; he caught it instinctively. “Quit daydreaming and get your mind on business, or I swear we’ll leave you here and you won’t get any of the cut!” she snapped. “Now cover up and get in the damn boat!”

Stupid, Pook berated himself, hurriedly tying the cloth around his face so that only his eyes showed. Hopefully, the disguise, along with the fog, would prevent the pirates from knowing who was robbing them. *Darcy’s right—no point in daydreaming about some cherry you ain’t never going to see again. No point in anything but the business at hand.*

The Rat Soldiers piled into the three rickety row boats that they used for their excursions onto the river. The dense fog enveloped them, but they went without lights, not wanting to betray their presence. The night and the fog seemed to magnify every sound; the slap of water against the hulls, the whisper of the oars through the water, the sigh of their breathing, all seemed loud enough to alert everyone on the entire river.

At least the wait wasn’t long. Pook’s heart, which had been racing from a mixture of fear and excitement, gave an almost painful lurch when he saw the faint gleam of a light coming towards them through the fog. His palms felt slick on the oars, but his mouth was dry as dust.

Voices came to them over the water, complaining about the fog. The Rat Soldiers quietly positioned their boats so that one was to either side of the oncoming craft, while the third was dead center in its path. But with the thick fog, they were working blind and misjudged the distance. Without warning, the pirate boat—riding low in the water with all its booty—loomed up out of the mist close enough to touch. Rose let out a gasp of surprise, and instantly the shadows in the boat straightened.

“Who’s there?” demanded a harsh voice.

Darcy’s answer floated from somewhere ahead. “Never you mind that!” The loud click of a hammer being drawn back on a gun sounded.

God damn it—she’s as likely to shoot us in this fog!

“Looks like you’re riding low,” said George, who was in the same boat as Pook and Rose. His voice shook, but he had pulled a knife out of his pocket and now waved it at the pirates. “Let us help you out, lighten the load a bit.”

The pirate closest to them held up his hands. “Sure, friend,” he said nastily, and Pook didn’t like the note in his voice. “Just come on over, then.”

George never had been too bright, in Pook’s estimation, and now he proved it all over again by leaning over and reaching towards the other boat.

“Don’t!” yelled Pook, but the sudden roar of a gun drowned out his words.

George jerked back, and Pook caught a glimpse of bright blood, and smelled the reek of powder. Rose screamed a curse and snatched out her knife, Darcy started firing blind, and Pook hurled himself into the bottom of the boat—

Something slammed into the hull from beneath.

The impact cracked the boat into Pook’s chin, sending bright flashes cascading across his vision. Dazed, he tried to push himself away, but the entire boat was being heaved upwards, carrying him along

with it. Rose shrieked, and he caught a glimpse of a body falling past him, an instant before the entire boat went over, dumping them all into freezing water.

The shock of hitting the river cleared Pook's head slightly, even as the cold made his muscles seize. For a moment he flailed blindly, uncertain which way was up; then his head broke the surface. Ripping the wet cloth from his face, he took a deep gasp of icy air.

Something hard and cold as iron closed around his ankle.

He didn't even have time to cry out before it yanked him down. The river current buffeted his body, and he thrashed madly, kicking out in terror. Something big brushed past him; he felt coarse hair, caught a brief glimpse of glowing eyes before it was gone. And still, the grip on his ankle did not relent.

Blind panic erupted in him. He grabbed at anything—the cold currents, the memory of ice, the screams of drowned men—and hurled it blindly at whatever held him captive beneath the water. The hold loosened, then let go; lungs bursting, he propelled himself upwards.

The air was like ice as he gulped it down, but he didn't care. Flailing wildly, he tried to get his bearings, but the fog he had summoned worked against him now. Frantic to get away from whatever had tried to drown him, he kicked towards what he hoped was the bank...and then saw the fae rise up before him.

A faint, nacreous glow clung to her blue-black skin, illuminating her, bright as day, to his sensitive sight. She stood half out of the water, as if solid ground supported her, even though they were far from the river's edge. Black hair trailed down about her naked breasts, and a crown of rank weeds held it back from her face. Her features were coldly beautiful, but her teeth were sharp as knives, and there was nothing of kindness or pity in her huge, slanted eyes.

One of the Gentry...

And unseelie. I've never fought unseelie before, don't know how much I can hurt her.

I'm going to die. She's going to kill me, and there ain't a damned thing I can do about it.

"Get away from me!" Pook shouted, even though he knew it wouldn't do any good.

She laughed, revealing a forked tongue. "If I meant to drown you, little pooka, you would be dead."

"Who are you? What did you do to the boat?" In the distance, he could hear the shouts of the other Rat Soldiers, and he prayed that the sound of his voice would bring them closer. *Rose, what's happened to Rose?*

The fae laughed. "I am fideal, little boy. And I did nothing to the boat. That was the aughisky's doing, and glad of it you should be, for else your blood might be staining the water tonight."

The cold was starting to eat into his limbs, making him sluggish. Had he been entirely human, he suspected he would be drowning by now. "What do you want with me?"

"So many questions, and none of them the right ones." She chuckled softly. "But because I am generous, I will tell you one thing. Seek the sword, little pooka. Seek the sword."

The fideal slipped beneath the water in a single, smooth move. Pook froze, half-expecting to feel her unyielding grip on his ankle again. But instead, heard the splash of oars and looked up to see a rowboat bearing down on him.

"Pook!" Rose shouted in relief.

They hauled him onto the already overcrowded boat. He huddled beside Rose, his head down, as they searched frantically for George. But Pook remembered the huge shadow that had passed him and remembered, too, what the fideal had said about the aughisky.

Aughiskies dined on human flesh, and George had been bleeding already when he hit the water.

Needless to say, there was no further sign of George. Darcy was in a towering rage when they finally put in to shore. Despite the fact that her boat had been too far downstream, and the third boat had not been in the correct position either, she blamed the failure of the mission on Pook, George, and Rose.

"George turned the boat over," Pook lied to her, figuring that George wasn't in any position to argue. And what else was he supposed to say?

Darcy ranted and raved at them for an hour before winding down. His hands shoved deep in his pockets, Pook left the gang and headed towards his own bed in the Sevens, where at least he could take off his soaked clothes. But the whole time, his heart pounded in his chest, and he jumped at every

shadow.

Two fae. Two fae in the river.

Two fae, and one of them tells me to seek a sword. What would I want with a sword? And why would the fideal tell me something crazy like that, anyway? She talked like she knew me, but I sure as hell don't know her.

Don't want to know her. She was unseelie fae. Unseelie, like my mom, whoever she was.

I hate them. I hope they all die. I don't want nothing from them—not a sword, nothing.

I hate them.

* * * *

Alex's head felt like it was spinning, and she half wanted to drop from exhaustion. The sudden turn of events had left her confused, upsetting the tenuous plans she had made and throwing everything into disarray. *Of all the things I imagined might happen once I got to Dere, this certainly wasn't one of them.*

She walked from the café with Mina and Duncan, trying to take their measure without staring. Certainly they were odd...but then, her former life had been so sheltered that almost everyone she'd met since fleeing Ruska had seemed odd. It was hard not to gawk at Duncan's wheelchair; she wanted to take it apart, see how it worked, and preferably put it back together in some more efficient manner. He appeared to get around in it well enough, and she wondered how long he had been confined. Her mother had never said anything about having a crippled brother, but they had been separated for almost forty years, and much could happen in such a long span of time.

Duncan disturbed her though, in part because he *did* resemble Moira, to a large extent. But mostly, he made her uneasy simply because he was a man and a relative. What if she had fled all the way to Niune, only to find herself once again a chattel?

I won't let that happen. I ran once. I can run again. I simply have to be on my guard.

And it isn't as if I have a choice right now. I can risk sleeping on the street tonight, with no money and no way of defending myself. Or I can risk going home with them. Even if they lock me in the basement, at least I'll be out of the cold for one night.

And if they do...they have to let me out sometime. The steamer hasn't left yet—if I have to, I can go with them.

"Here we are," Duncan declared proudly, breaking into her dark thoughts.

They had entered a residential area of the city that, if not the domain of the truly wealthy, was at least more respectable than what she had seen so far. In front of them loomed a two-story house built of dark brick; a high wall enclosed a small yard in front, and a modest carriage house stood beside the short drive. Sleet pinged gently off the slate roof, and the freezing mist, rolling in from the river, shrouded the ornamental turrets. Mina ceremoniously unlocked the gate—bronze rather than iron, Alex noted—and shoved it open.

The house itself had an air of shabby gentility and was built in the traditional Niunish style, which seemed rather plain to Alex's eyes. A simple ramp of wood had been laid over the steps leading to the front door, to facilitate the wheelchair. The freezing rain had made the ramp treacherously slick, and Alex stepped carefully, reflecting that the last thing she needed was to fall and break her leg. Then she truly would be at their mercy.

The front door was of oak, carved into the likeness of a leafy face. *A leshy? But no—Mama said that the fae of Niune are different, not at all like the ones we had at home.*

The door swung open to reveal a large foyer carpeted in faded rugs. Rooms opened off to either hand, their pocket doors slid back invitingly. The walls were covered with dark wood and decorated with faded tapestries.

Most of the furniture seemed to consist of bookcases jammed into every possible space. Tomes bound in cloth and leather lined shelves and spilled over onto tables; scrolls peeked out of vases; and folios blocked chairs and covered desks. A telescope lurked near the door, and an odd and vast array of curiosities filled every surface not occupied by books: animal skulls, pressed flowers, magnifying glasses,

even dried insects. The air smelled like dust and paper.

Brass bars were bolted into some of the walls, and cloth loops dangled from the ceiling. After a moment of trying to puzzle out their function, Alex realized these were strategically placed near chairs, no doubt to help Duncan raise and lower himself.

Does he live down here? I doubt he could make it upstairs.

As if in answer to her thought, Mina gestured towards the opposite end of the foyer. “And here is one of the main reasons we bought this particular house. The previous owner was known to be an eccentric, which I suppose is why he had it installed.”

Alex gasped in unabashed delight. Someone—the mad former owner, no doubt—had ripped out the stairwell leading to the second story and replaced it with what appeared to be a brass cage. From the profusion of pulleys and hydraulics around it, it was clear that the cage was meant to mechanically lift one from the first floor to the second without having to resort to stairs.

“I love it! How does it work? Did he leave behind any schematics?”

“I believe I noticed some in the study,” Duncan replied. Remembering herself, Alex turned hastily, but, to her relief, his expression was amused, rather than disapproving. “You’re more than welcome to look at them. Or the mechanism itself, so long as you promise not to render it inoperable.”

“Of course not!” she exclaimed, offended. *I might be able to improve on it, though.*

If I stay.

I shouldn’t stay. I can’t stay. I can’t.

While Duncan excused himself to one of the side rooms, Mina escorted Alex into the lift and showed her how to operate it. Alex watched the mechanism closely as it ground and groaned its way up to the second floor. Seeming amused by her interest, Mina led her out of the lift cage and down a short hall to a bedroom on the second floor.

“Fox sleeps here sometimes, so everything should be aired out,” Mina said, indicating the small, neat room. The bed had a fluffy comforter and a deep mattress that sank under Alex when she sat on the edge. “As for clothes...I don’t really have anything for you to borrow.” Mina grinned and gestured ruefully at her own costume. “But I could wash out what you have on now, if you’d like. And we even have indoor plumbing, as well as gas, so if you want a hot bath, help yourself.”

“Thank you. You’ve been...very kind. Is there a bannik...” she floundered for a moment, trying to remember the Niunish word, “a brownie of the bath, that I should leave an offering for?”

Mina shook her head and gave her a lopsided smile. “No. To be honest, I’m not interested in attracting the attention of any fae, and thank God they’ve ignored me as well; at least, recently. You’re safe from them here.”

Safe.

Am I?

Ice clicked against the panes of the windows, like the nails of some creature seeking entrance. Alex stood up and went to the window, staring out. Only her own reflection looked back.

I don’t know what to do.

Mina sat down on the bed, watching Alex with a grave expression on her face. After a moment, she sighed and patted the mattress beside her. Feeling a bit uncertain, Alex left the window and sat by her, so that they were on a level.

Alex had never seen anyone quite like Mina before. She was small and thin, built more like a boy than a woman, an image reinforced by her shirt, suspenders, and trousers. Her pale hair was cut short, and made a startling contrast to her dark, almost black, eyes. Now that they were so close, Alex could see what looked like old scars on Mina’s neck and on the knobby ends of her collarbones. After a moment, she realized what had made them.

An iron collar. She used to be indentured. But she’s a faeling—the touch of iron binds our power. I don’t have much magic of my own, but I suspect she might. How did such a thing happen to her?

“How did you...if you don’t mind my asking, how did you come to marry Duncan?” Alex said, hoping the question didn’t sound too nosy. *Better alive than polite. I have to get information if I’m to*

make any decisions. “Did your family arrange it?”

Mina’s mouth quirked. “No. I started off as one of his students. He saved my life, taught me about my powers, and treated me like something more than a factory slave. We fell in love.” She chuckled. “Well, there’s a lot more to it than that, actually, but the full story will wait until tomorrow.”

Married for love? Alex had heard of such a thing, but it was reserved for peasants and servants. She tried to imagine caring enough about a man to freely hand over her life to him, but was unable to conjure up such a wild fantasy. Still, the tale seemed to argue in Duncan’s favor. If nothing else, it told her that he wasn’t obsessed with power and position. Otherwise, surely he would have made a more advantageous marriage for himself and kept Mina as a mistress.

Alex hesitated, wondering how far she could trust Mina. Could she ask questions freely, or would the older woman run back to Duncan with tales of Alex’s impertinence? “Do you think Duncan would really allow me to go to the university, if I decide to stay?”

Mina sighed and ran her hand through her short hair. “I wish I had a cigarette,” she muttered to no one in particular. “*Allowing* doesn’t have anything to do with it, Alex. If you want to go, then I’m sure Duncan will be thrilled. He went himself, and he’s got a real passion for learning. That was one of the things that drew me to him in the first place, and it made him a great teacher. I know he’d want to teach you anything about your heritage, human or faeling, that you’d like to learn. But it isn’t Duncan’s nature to *make* anyone do anything. Not that we haven’t had some disagreements when he thinks I’m being stupid or contrary.” She grinned. “But I usually win those.”

Alex had no idea what to say to that. Moira had never dared openly to disagree with her husband. One did not argue with men; instead, one simply worked around them, as quietly and discreetly as possible, so as to avoid their wrath.

Because, if one did get caught...no one would raise a hand to help a wife who had dared defy her husband. Not even if he killed her.

And yet, Mina speaks of these things as if they are nothing.

Alex swallowed hard, not daring to entertain the hope that perhaps things truly were different here. “And...what do you think he’ll expect, if I take him up on the offer? I mean, you said your marriage wasn’t arranged, but...”

“But, as your only living relatives in Niune, are we going to marry you off to money?” Mina asked. Her voice was neutral, but Alex could hear a trace of anger underneath it. “No. Of course not.” She hesitated, then sighed and patted Alex’s shoulder awkwardly. “I don’t know what you’re running from, girl, and I’m not asking you to tell me. Believe me when I say I know how hard it can be to trust people. I didn’t trust Duncan one damn bit when I first met him. Figured he had to have some ulterior motive. I thought no one did anything without expecting some gain for themselves. But I was wrong.”

Mina stood up and started towards the door, then stopped and looked back. “I found a safe haven,” she said softly. “And now so have you. I don’t expect you to trust us right away. But don’t let fear defeat you, either.” She fixed Alex with her dark, bottomless gaze. “And it isn’t Duncan you have to worry about controlling you. It’s me.”

The door closed quietly behind her.

* * * *

“Move over,” Rose said, and poked Pook in the ribs.

He sighed and scooted over on the hard wooden plank that served him as a bed. He hadn’t been able to fall asleep in the brief time since he’d gotten back to the Sevens—the memory of the terror on the river had been enough to keep him from even closing his eyes.

Sleeping shapes lay all around him in the big basement. Whole families lived there, sharing cots and pallets. The dim glow from a cook fire cast ruddy light over the huge room and added the rank smell of burning cloth to the stench of unwashed bodies and mold. Someone nearby mumbled in his sleep, while across the room a rhythmic groaning sounded from the local whore’s bed.

“What do you want?” Pook asked, sounding grouchy even to himself.

They’d been friends long enough that Rose ignored his tone. “Darcy’s not going to let anybody get a

decent sleep tonight. So I thought I'd come over and flop here."

Pook rolled on his side to give her more room. She shifted uncomfortably on the plank, and he could tell that she wanted to talk. "What really happened on the river?" she asked at last.

"Hell if I know."

"There was something in the water with us, Pook. Something big. And then you just disappeared...Scared me, it did."

"Sorry."

"Something got George, didn't it?"

Pook opened his eyes and stared blankly at nothing. "Yeah. The river ain't safe, Rose. Never has been."

"This never happened before, though."

"Not to us." He shrugged. "It's a risk. It's always a risk. Going on the water, staying off the water...I figure something's going to catch up with all of us, sooner or later."

"Yeah." She was silent a moment, thinking. "But you'll look out for us, won't you?"

I don't want this. Why can't somebody else...

Because there ain't nobody else.

"Course I will," he said.

"I knew you would." Sleepiness was starting to creep into her voice now, and he heard her stifle a yawn. "I wish you was a girl, Pook."

He grinned into the semidarkness. "Wish you was one, too."

She dug a scrawny elbow into his ribs in retribution, then settled into stillness. Before long, the even rhythm of her breath told him she slept. He could feel the heat of her body through their clothes, and a keen sense of loneliness pierced him.

There's something bad wrong with you, b'hoy.

Maybe it was his fae blood; hell if he knew. All he knew was that he longed for things he didn't even understand himself, things he couldn't put words to.

Even his dreams were screwed up. As long as he could remember, he'd had vague dreams about some far-off place that he'd never seen. A land of trees and ice, where snow-coated branches made a net against clear blue sky. Where the summers were brief, and the winters were long and filled with a silence vast enough to blot out the world.

Then he'd hit puberty, and his fae powers had come on, and he thought he ought to have started dreaming about girls. But instead, the dreams of trees and snow had just intensified, until they gained an aching clarity unsurpassed by anything in his waking life.

At least, that was how it had been until a couple of months ago. Right after midwinter, the dreams had changed, for no reason he could figure. The snow and trees had gone away and become what could only be the ocean, a vast stretch of water where great chunks of ice were tossed about by waves.

That was the reason he'd taken to hanging out on the docks. It wasn't the same as being on the ocean, but a lot of the ships came from there, and salt still crusted their decks and ropes when they put in. Closest he could come to his dreams, he figured.

The whole thing didn't make any damn sense. Why couldn't he be normal, just this once? Why couldn't he get away from being a freak, at least while he slept?

Why couldn't he just be human?

Chapter Three

"Mina is a dyana," Duncan explained, cradling his teacup in his long fingers. The early light of morning streamed through the high window overlooking the garden behind the house, finding the gray in his hair and gleaming from the gold hoops in his ears. "In essence, she has the ability to influence the minds of other unseelie faelings, sometimes without even realizing it herself."

Alex stared out the window at the garden. Even though it was dormant for winter, she could see that

it had been allowed to go wild, long before the seasons turned. The dry stalks of briars rattled in the chill wind, and the brown corpses of waterweeds trailed in the thin layer of ice covering the central pool. Birds, their feathers puffed out against the cold, hunted seeds amidst the flowerbeds, or ate berries from the hollies in the corners.

So different from home. Gosha would have flayed the gardeners if they'd let things go like that. And since most of our fresh vegetables came from the garden, he'd have had good reason.

"Why give me the amulet?" she asked quietly, reaching up to touch the small charm she had found this morning with her, now, clean clothes. There had been a note with it, in what she guessed was Mina's hand: *This will protect you from me.*

The woman in question stood a bit away from the breakfast table, staring moodily out a different window. The thin, gray light of a winter day made her hair look even paler, her brown eyes, like dark holes in her face.

"Because I didn't ask to be born this way," she said, and Alex heard the bitterness in the words. "And because I don't trust myself. And neither should you trust me."

Oddly enough, that assertion eased some of Alex's fears. She turned from the window and frowned at the remains of her breakfast, pushing the crumbs around on the plate with her fork. "Mother was very young when her family was killed," she said at last. "She was only five, so there were many things she had never been taught, or just didn't remember. She taught me what she could, but...I've never even heard of a dyana before. There's so much I don't know."

And maybe...maybe if Mama had known more...maybe she could have done something to protect herself...

"I will be glad to teach you whatever you wish to know, naturally," Duncan said gravely. "If that's what you want. But the fae blood is very thin in you, Alexandrea, and, to an extent, that is both a barrier and a protection. I would guess that your powers are very small—a bit of glamour here, perhaps, or a knack for finding things. Am I right?"

"You're right. I don't have much magic," she said carefully.

Just enough to kill.

"She has enough for me to be dangerous to her," Mina said shortly.

Duncan sighed. "You must forgive Mina, Alex. She is feeling inordinately sorry for herself this morning."

"It's my fault you haven't had a student for five years."

Alex shifted uncomfortably. She didn't want to see an argument. Didn't want to see the transformation from quiet scholar to angry husband that would, no doubt, overtake Duncan if Mina provoked him much further.

Run, her instincts whispered, making her hands shake just a little. Hide. Protect yourself.

"Thank you," she said out loud, hoping to diffuse the situation. "I...I need time to think about everything you've said."

"Of course." Duncan offered her an encouraging smile. "We understand. Take all the time you require."

Might as well test the boundaries now, before it's too late. "I'd like to take a walk, actually. By myself."

She watched them from under lowered lashes, waiting for the argument, the denial, the excuse that would tell her for certain that she was once again a prisoner.

"Understandable. There are several lovely parks near the Blackrush, if that suits your fancy," Duncan said. "Mina, my dear, would you find some money to hire a cab?"

* * * *

"She is very frightened," Duncan said quietly. He sat by the front window of the house, watching as Alex climbed into a hansom cab, on her way to one of the parks.

He hoped that was where she was going, at least. It seemed as likely that she would head straight for the docks or the train depot and never return.

The thought brought up an unexpected ache in his chest. He had long ago consigned his family to the grave, had mourned them, and had worked through his own share of guilt for their deaths. To learn that little Moira had survived, had grown up and borne a child...somehow, it brought all the old feelings rushing back.

Mina rested her hand on his shoulder; he leaned his head against it and felt her fingers stroke his cheek. "But not of us," she murmured, sounding vaguely confused. "I mean, not specifically. She didn't seem that scared of me, even though we've both told her I'm the dangerous one. Damn, I wish I knew what she's running from."

"Yes." The ache turned to anger. "There is a great sadness in her when she speaks of Moira. It makes me wonder just how my sister died."

"Me too." Mina sighed. "But we can't push. She'll tell someday, when she feels we've earned her trust."

"If she stays that long," he agreed sadly.

* * * *

"I've got us a job lined up," Darcy declared. "Maybe long term. New guy in town is looking for some muscle, for people who know the score and can make things happen. Even better, people who can move certain items from the river to other places without anybody else being the wiser. I figure that's us all the way around."

Pook, Rose, and the surviving Rat Soldiers sat in Hatboy's Saloon, an establishment of extremely dubious reputation, even among the brothels, gambling dens, and grogeries that surrounded it. The room was narrow but long, with a bar running most of the length of one wall. Sawdust covered the floor, but it had been a long time since it had been changed, and it was liberally stained with traces of blood, beer, and vomit. Even in the middle of the day, a few men and women sat around the card tables clustered near the potbellied stove that heated the place, although the area around the rat pit was empty for now. Pook was glad about the last; the blood sports everyone else seemed to think so fine had always made him ill, although he did his best to hide it. No reason to make anyone think he was a coward, as well as a freak.

Darcy sat at the head of the small table where they gathered, her face grim. To be fair, all of them were in bad moods this morning, after the disaster of the night before. Pook figured nobody really felt like being there, but it wasn't as if money fell out of the sky. They had to hustle if they didn't want to starve or freeze, and finer feelings be damned.

George's body still hadn't been found, and, although no one had yet said out loud that he was dead, the conclusion had pretty much become inevitable. They'd probably have a wake for him tonight or tomorrow, sit around and drink gin until they all passed out. Pook was the artist in the group, so he'd probably draw a picture of George on the wall of the Trap, maybe on a couple of street corners.

And then life would go on, and it would be like George had never existed at all.

And when my turn comes? When I'm the one the wake's for? Will anyone remember me a week later?

Rose will. But she's got her own problems to worry about.

Wonder if they'll find my body, or if I'll end up like George. Killed and eaten by some fae in some godforsaken place.

"The meeting's in an hour or so," Darcy went on. "You're going to be our watchdog, Pook."

"Watchdog?" Pook repeated in disbelief. The post of watchdog was usually given to the smallest, youngest member of a group. Telling him to keep lookout was like saying he wasn't worth much as a fighter. "Damn it, Darcy, I ain't the one who cocked everything up last night! It was the fog, and then George had to be stupid, so quit trying to take it out on me."

"I can be watchdog," Rose said quickly, trying to head off trouble. She turned her empty beer glass around and around in circles, not looking at anyone.

Scared to make Darcy mad. Or madder than she already is, anyway.

"I said it's Pook's job," Darcy said, never taking her dark eyes off his face. "And if you got a

problem with that, Pook, then maybe you ought to stay home. Let us do all the work. Just don't expect to share in the bounty after, got it?"

Pook scowled at the table. The wooden surface was stained and gouged from years of abuse, and for an instant he felt a weird sort of affinity for it. It stood there year after year, people dumping all kinds of stuff on it, and it just had to take it. *Used to be a tree once, living free and tall. Probably wonders how the hell it ended up here.*

"I'm with you," he muttered sullenly.

She's punishing me for nothing, just 'cause she's got nobody else to take it out on. George is dead, can't slap him around or make him look like a fool, and Rose will just roll over, so it's me by default.

Of course, maybe if I hadn't made the fog, we wouldn't have gotten all spread out...

Or we'd all be dead. Those pirates would have shot us, given half the chance. Darcy's the one who ought to be ashamed, dragging us into a stupid scheme like that.

Not for the first time, he wondered if he could make a go of it on his own. But too many who started out like that ended up in jail or, worse, indentured. Just the thought of an iron collar on his neck made him feel sick. Being shackled like that would kill him.

How many times I got to be reminded? There ain't nothing more than this, not for the likes of me. No sense daydreaming.

"Good." Darcy drained her glass of gin and stood up. "Come on, then. It's almost time for the meeting, and I wouldn't want to make our new friend wait."

* * * *

Alex used some of the money she had left over from cab fare to buy a small cup of hot chocolate from a street vendor. The treat warmed her and made her feel a little better, although she told herself that it was a frivolous thing to waste her slender funds on. It would be far smarter to save every coin she could, just in case she had to run.

What should I do? she wondered, as she walked listlessly down the street. Despite Duncan's suggestion, she had decided to avoid the park, and instead, take another look at the city that might become her home. All around her, cabs raced up and down the thoroughfares, the clop of horses' hooves a constant counterpoint to the shouts of children and the singing of vendors. Iron lampposts stood in orderly rows throughout the city, waiting for the fall of night. A great clock tower near the bank of the Blackrush measured the seconds, and she wondered how accurate it might be and if tours were ever given of the interior workings.

A mind of wheels and gears, her mother had said affectionately, during one of the long summer afternoons when they read together. Aleksei usually spent the summer far away, occupying his seat in the Boyar's Council that advised Ruska's Knyaz. That left Gosha in charge of the estate, so mother and daughter were free to spend their time as they liked. Moira never understood Alex's passion for machines and chemicals, a love great enough that Alex had overcome all faeling aversion to iron at a very young age. But understanding was not needed—love and support were enough.

Alex bit her lip, fighting back memories. She couldn't afford to crumble in her resolve now. She had come too far, had suffered too much. *And I have too much blood on my hands.*

She had to look at her situation with clear eyes in order to make her decision. If she fled from her uncle's house, she would have to leave Dere and make her way elsewhere. She had no money to spare, thanks to the thief who had robbed her, and, even if she got free passage on the steamer that she had come to Dere on, she would be unable to pay for anything once she reached the other end of her journey.

If Duncan were being honest...if he really meant it when he said I could go to the university

...

It was an opportunity that she could never have imagined. Ruskan women were never schooled; it had taken subterfuge and an absent husband for Moira to educate Alex. How could she possibly turn down such a gift?

And maybe...maybe things will be better here. Maybe things really are different for women in Niune. Mama said they were. Maybe Duncan is more like Mama, even if he is a man. Maybe...

A flash of pale hair amidst the grayness of the streets caught Alex's eye. Startled, she stopped in midstride, ignoring the angry curses of a man who was forced to step into a puddle of half-melted snow to avoid her. Across the street was none other than the towheaded thief who had stolen her valise the day before.

That little rat! Seeing that he was headed for one of the side streets that angled down towards the Blackrush, she started determinedly after him. The crowds seemed to be against her, but she fought through them until she once again caught sight of him. He was at the other end of the smaller street, happily oblivious as he pulled a cart whose contents were hidden under a tarp.

His ill-gotten goods, no doubt.

For an instant, she hesitated. If she called out to the police, the boy would probably disappear before they had a chance to even spot him. And, after her encounter with the constables the day before, she had little desire to ever see one again.

For all I know, they might end up arresting me for disturbing them.

But simply letting the boy disappear, along with even the slimmest possibility that she could get her valise back, was unthinkable. *The money can be replaced. New equipment can be bought. Even my notes can be rewritten from my memory. But Mama's diary...*

Gritting her teeth, she squared her shoulders and forged ahead.

* * * *

Pook hunched his shoulders, wondering why their "friend," as Darcy insisted on calling him, had the bad taste to pick the middle of the day for a meeting. Of course, he probably wasn't taking into account that he was inconveniencing an unseelie faeling by forcing Pook to wander around when the sun was high.

At least it's winter, he consoled himself. Although the morning had been bright, clouds had since moved in, diluting the sunlight to a gray shadow. The wind picked up, sliding clever fingers to find his skin through gaps in his threadbare clothing. His hobnailed boots had a split in the sole that had let in ice melt from the street, and now his left foot was cold and wet. *With any luck, any seelie who's got it in for me will stay away on a day like this, even if the sun is up.*

"Here we are," Darcy announced. Pook hadn't been paying the slightest bit of attention to where they were going, and now he frowned when he saw where they were. He'd assumed that the meeting would be on Rat Soldier territory, but they were nowhere even close.

What the hell? This street belongs to Firestarters, not Rat Soldiers. Damn Darcy. Just like her to decide to take a job on another gang's ground. She couldn't get us all killed by river pirates, so she's going to start a damn war instead, get us murdered that way. Like I ain't got enough trouble already.

"You all right?" Rose asked him softly. He glanced up and saw the frown of worry on her face.

"Yeah," he lied. If he voiced his concern, everybody would be all over him for being a coward. "Just a headache."

They'd stopped in front of a grocery; now, Darcy walked confidently in, as if she owned the entire block. If any of the Firestarters caught them...Shaking his head, Pook followed. Inside, it was mercifully dark, and his eyes adjusted quickly to the gloom. Barrels of food, from sausages to dried fish to peanuts, lined the walls, underneath shelves stocked with oil, soap, candles, cigarettes, and crockery. Near the back was a greasy counter where liquor was served in crusty glasses. There was a cast-iron stove close to one wall, and several men huddled around it, warming their hands and drinking. Much to Pook's relief, no Firestarters seemed to be in attendance.

Darcy stopped at the counter and exchanged a couple of words with the grocer himself. "In the back," she said to her followers, tipping her head towards a nondescript door behind some billiard tables. "Pook, outside."

He'd half hoped that his obedience earlier would have made her change her mind, but she was

clearly going to make good on his humiliation. Probably thought that sitting out in the cold would teach him a lesson, too. Lighting a cigarette, he stomped back outside and leaned against the brick wall.

There were few people out on the street right now, although he doubted it was the weather that kept them away. Later on, when all the day laborers and servants and factory slaves got off work, it would be a different story. Only the bitterest nights would keep them away from the booze and the whores.

For now, a few people pushed carts up and down the nearly deserted street, an urchin tried unsuccessfully to sweep the stoop in front of a closed dance hall, and a couple of drunks argued over the best way to make a fire out of a pile of rags and broken wood. The tolling of church bells sounded from a distant part of the city, marking out the hours. The smell of cooking meat wafted out of one of the nearby buildings, mingled with the omnipresent stink of privies and garbage.

A well-dressed man wandered by, eating a sandwich as he walked; God only knew what business had brought him to this part of Dere. Under normal circumstances, Pook would have tried a bit of pickpocketing on the gent, but he couldn't very well leave his post now.

The fates decided to smile on him for once, though. Not six feet from Pook, the man threw the uneaten portion of his sandwich into the muck of the street and went on his way. Hardly able to believe his good fortune, Pook darted out and snatched it up, stuffing it into a pocket for later on.

At least something's gone right today.

Magic brushed across him, like a beam of sunlight glinting off water. Startled, his head snapped up, and he scanned the area around him frantically. His wards were already good and tight, but he drew strength from the brick at his back and the earth under his feet, ready to fight back when the second probe came.

Nothing happened. After a moment, he relaxed, peering carefully up and down the street. No one was there that he could see, and he realized that the probe hadn't been aimed at him.

And that touch, like sunlight, like a hot wind. *Seelie.*

Damn it.

He hesitated, torn between keeping his post and investigating the magic he'd felt. Darcy would have his skin if he wandered off, and with good reason. Letting down his friends, going back on his word—that wasn't something he really wanted to do.

But something's up—got to be, for a seelie to be that blatant about it. If I don't do nothing—if I just stand here—who knows what will happen. Somebody might get killed.

He would be quick, he decided. He'd take a fast look around, and then come straight back to his post. Darcy would never even know.

* * * *

Alex quickened her pace, determined to catch up with the thief. He'd led her into a strange part of town, and she was starting to seriously question how much longer she ought to follow him. Although she wanted to recover her belongings, getting her throat slit in some back alley was not an appealing alternative.

The child dragged his cart to a narrow alley and disappeared inside. Taking a deep breath, Alex slipped closer and peered around the corner. In the narrow slot between two rows of tenements, the young thief and his cart had come to rest at last. An old tinker burdened with a cart of his own was talking to the child; across the alley from them, a young man watched their transaction with a faintly superior air.

Unlike almost everyone else she had seen in this part of town, the youth was not dressed in beggar's rags or laborer's clothes. A spotless silk hat perched atop his smoothly brushed blond hair. His stiff-collared shirt was covered with a yellow silk vest, which in turn was half-hidden beneath a fine blue frock coat. A cigar hung from the corner of his mouth, and his features were sharp and cruel.

"Let's see what you've got, then," the tinker said, gesturing to the towheaded thief. The little boy proudly pulled back the tarp, revealing a large number of oddments stuffed into the cart: purses, hats, horse tack, coats...and Alex's valise.

A flare of rage swept over her at the sight. Damn them for taking it from her. She imagined dirty

fingers touching her mother's diary—worse, imagined them throwing it into the slush of the street, like a piece of trash.

With an angry hiss, she darted out of her hiding place and seized the valise.

The thief let out a startled yelp and grabbed her arm. "Let go of me!" she shouted, and aimed a furious kick at him. But her skirts fouled the blow, and her boot connected with his shin instead of his crotch, as she had intended.

"Put that down, you little slut!" shouted the tinker, coming around the cart with his hand raised threateningly.

Fear clutched at her heart, but she only gripped the valise tighter. "It's mine! He stole it! You have no right! I—"

Her protests died in her throat, cut off by a thread of fiery power. Shocked and afraid, she looked up and saw that the well-dressed youth had left his position against the wall and was approaching her. His eyes were bright, almost metallic in color, flat and unforgiving as a mirror of brass. The scent of hot metal filled the air, and she could *feel* the power gathering in him, a flame that would burn her from the inside out...

"Hey! You found it!" exclaimed a cheerful voice.

The youth's head jerked up, and Alex felt his spell break. Shaking, she turned frantically towards the intruder, not caring if he were another thief or a blackguard, knowing only that he had probably saved her life.

It was the beautiful stranger from the docks.

He strode confidently into the alley, his smile brilliant in his dark face. So close, she could see his eyes were gray, the color of wet ashes, but spangled with flecks of pale silver. *Like stars against an evening sky.*

Without any hesitation, he put one hand to her arm and took the valise with the other. "Sorry to disturb you b'hoys, but my sister here just can't keep track of her things. A little touched in the head, you know? Misplaced Dad's old bag here, and we can't go home without it, or else we'll get a beating."

His sister? The lie was beyond outrageous—she'd probably have a hard time finding anyone in Dere who looked less like her.

Apparently the thieves were equally thrown by the sheer audacity of the lie and the total confidence with which it was delivered. The tinker made a confused sound, but before anyone could protest, Alex's stranger had wheeled her around and dragged her out of the alley, valise in hand.

His long legs forced her to almost run to keep up with him. "You need a keeper," he remarked mildly, making a sharp turn into another alley and hauling her with him.

An angry flush heated Alex's face. "I do not," she snapped haughtily, jerking her arm away from him.

"Then why is it every time I see you, you're about to get arrested or attacked?"

It was hard to argue that point. "It isn't my fault," she muttered. "Give me my valise."

"It's heavy," he replied, not slowing his pace at all. They ducked down another alley and came to a dilapidated fence with several boards missing. Cutting through the gap, they crossed the yard behind a block of tenements. Her rescuer calmly opened the back door to one, led her down the hall, and exited out the front. "We got to put some distance between us and that seelie faeling. He might not be chasing us—might figure that, with it being winter and all, he don't want to push his luck against us both. But that's counting on him being reasonable, which I ain't going to bet my life on." A frown marred his brown face for a moment. "Plus, I think he might've been a Firestarter."

"A what?"

"That's the gang around here," he said, as if that explained anything. Probably it did to him. "I heard their leader was a fancy b'hoy. Why'd you go up against a seelie faeling like that?"

"I didn't know what he was at first." The pace he set was beginning to make her pant, and she could feel the strain in her legs. "They'd stolen my valise. I had to get it back. And I'd thank you to hand it over."

He sighed, took a quick look around, and slid into yet another alley. The garbage that formed the

roadbed of the street outside was even deeper here, perhaps because it hadn't yet been mashed down into a single mass by hooves, feet, and wheels. Fighting to hold her breath against the stink, Alex followed him but remained near the entrance, wary and ready to run if she had to.

Why did he save me? What does he want?

"Here." He held out the valise, and she snatched it back quickly, before he could change his mind. "I don't know if that seelie b'hoi followed us or not, but I don't like being out and about with him on the loose. Especially not with his guard up. You got anywhere near here to lay low?"

I don't even know where "here" is. She shook her head uncertainly. Mina and Duncan had given her enough fare to hire a cab to return to their house, so she could just give the address and hope the driver knew where it was. But she had seen few cabs on these dank streets.

"Do you think he would have killed me?" she asked. As her heart slowed, she could feel herself starting to shake a little, and the extent of the danger she had been in began to dawn on her.

"In front of witnesses? Hard to say." The youth frowned at the grungy wall across from him, as if it had done something personally offensive. "That tinker is the biggest fence in Dere, and word would be sure to get around fast if a faeling used magic in front of him. Unless the seelie bribed him. Or they were in on it together."

"I see." Alex shivered. "I...thank you for rescuing me. And yesterday, too."

He flashed her a brilliant smile that made her feel weak in the knees. Up close, he was still beautiful, although he looked—and smelled—as if he hadn't had a bath in some time. His clothes were patched and frayed, and it was hard to guess what their original color had been under the layers of grime. Even covered with dirt, though, she could tell that his brown skin was flawless, and she wondered if she ought to hate him on principle. *Probably never had a pimple in his life.*

"No problem," he said, waving a hand as if rescuing young women were his full-time occupation. "I'm Pook, by the way."

She gave him a skeptical look. "Pook. That wouldn't be short for 'Pooka,' would it?"

"Maybe."

"Surely that isn't your real name."

He shrugged and dropped his night-sky eyes to the ground, kicking absently at some bit of garbage. "Only one I got. And I guess it's served me well enough."

Idiot. Good way to thank someone for saving your life. "I'm sorry—I didn't mean—"

He shrugged again. "It's all right. You got a name?"

"Alex."

"That your real name?" he asked, with a teasing grin.

"It's short for Alexandrea."

"Yeah? That's pretty."

The only thing about me that is. She shook her head, angry with herself for having such thoughts. *This boy is a distraction.*

He had been drumming his hands absently against his lean thighs; now he straightened, all restlessness and controlled grace. *Like something wild put in a cage and left there to while away its life in boredom.* "We ought to keep moving, just in case. We ain't too far away from the Sevens—that's where I sleep. We can hide there until after dark."

Alex hesitated. Following him around the streets was one thing, but going back to his house was another altogether. He had helped her twice, so she didn't think he intended to murder her, but...

"Why are you doing this?" she asked. "Helping me? You don't even know me."

He fished a cigarette out of his pocket and offered it to her. When she shook her head, he lit it with a match struck on the brick wall, and took a drag from it himself. "You're welcome," he said, one corner of his mouth crooking into a smile.

Alex blushed, realizing what she must have sounded like. "Thank you."

Tucking his cigarette between his lips, Pook loped past her and back towards the street. "Coming?" he called.

It was go with him or wait for someone else to find her. Taking a deep breath, she hefted the heavy

valise and followed him out.

Chapter Four

“What is this place?” Alex asked.

Pook had led her down towards the Blackrush, close enough to the river that she could smell water and sewage on the freezing air. The building in front of them hulked like some crouching giant, an imposing five-story edifice of brick and stone. Its windows were high but narrow, and most of the glass had been broken out long ago. It was much larger than any tenement she had seen, although, judging by the lines of wash hanging outside, that was its current use. Faded numbers painted onto the brick above the door proclaimed that this was 77 Coracle Street.

“That’s the Sevens,” Pook said, frowning faintly at the building, as if he had just noticed its dirty facade and garbage-strewn yard for the first time. “Used to be a factory or something, but it shut down years ago.” He waved vaguely towards it, as if shunting aside a history that was irrelevant to him. “People moved in, broke up the big rooms into smaller ones, that kind of thing. I rent a cot in the basement.”

“Oh,” she said, telling herself that it couldn’t really be as bad as it looked.

Unfortunately, it proved to be far worse. The first thing she noticed when they went inside was the stench. It was a mixture of unwashed bodies, cooking food, rotting garbage, alcohol, urine, and filth. The interior was murky, at best; the walls constructed to divide the old factory into halls and rooms ensured that only the outermost units had windows, leaving the interior completely unlit.

And unventilated, she thought, trying not to breathe too deeply. A miasma of smoke crawled around the ceiling, and she wondered if the place were on fire. Pook, however, didn’t seem worried, so she squared her shoulders and followed him.

The floor was littered with newspapers, garbage, muck tracked in from the streets, and other things that she didn’t want to look at too closely. Handbills papered the walls, either for decoration or in a pitiful attempt at insulation. If the latter, they did little good, for bone-deep cold poured in through every gap. An open door stood almost immediately to the left as they entered; glancing inside, Alex saw what looked like some kind of bar set up by an enterprising resident. The fumes coming from within were enough to make her eyes sting; she couldn’t imagine anyone willingly drinking something that bore more resemblance to paint remover than to gin.

Chernovog! No domovoi here, or whatever the Niunish have instead. At least I hope not—any house spirit that could live here would surely have gone mad and evil a long time ago.

“Can you see in the dark?” Pook asked. From anyone else, the question would have seemed nonsensical, but she had heard that stronger faelings—unseelie ones, at least—needed very little light.

When she shook her head, he obligingly lit a match and led her further into the building. They had not gone far before she realized that every door was open because there *were* no doors, although a few people had hung up filthy curtains in an attempt at privacy. Some of the rooms were dark; others were illuminated by oil lamps or by open cook fires, which were no doubt the source of the smoke. The floors were uniformly covered with rubbish, displaced only by sleeping bodies, and most of the units were so small that her father would have disdained to kennel his dogs in them.

A pair of rough-looking men called a greeting from a table where they were playing cards, and Pook nodded and replied cheerfully. A prostitute was entertaining a customer right in the hall; Alex blushed hotly and looked away, but not before she saw the woman give a smile and a wave over her oblivious lover’s shoulder. A small girl dressed in nothing but a filthy shirt ran out of a room, and Pook laughed and used glamour to make it appear as if he had pulled a dirty ribbon from her ear, when it had in fact come from his pocket. The child shrieked in delight.

A narrow stair led them to the dank basement. Haphazard walls once again turned it into a labyrinth, but before long they reached a room crowded with straw pallets, makeshift beds, and even a hammock or two. A woman was cooking over an open fire, while her daughter peeled potatoes with filthy fingernails. Another girl lay on a pallet, her face painfully thin, but her belly bloated by sickness.

“Here we are,” Pook said, hopping up on a bed that was in fact nothing more than a wooden plank held up at either end by a pile of bricks.

Alex shook her head, speech beyond her. *I never imagined people could live like this. Never knew anything like this existed.* For the first time since fleeing Ruska, she realized just how far she could have fallen. *I should beg Mina and Duncan to take me in. Chernovog, this is terrible.*

And there sat Pook in the midst of it, a smile on his mouth. “Not too bad, huh? No seelie is going to come down here.”

“No,” she agreed. Such dank environs would be anathema even more to a creature of light and fire. “Thank you,” she added.

He nodded and indicated that she should sit on the other end of the bed. A little reluctant to touch anything, she gingerly lowered herself onto the dirty blankets. *There must be fleas and lice everywhere. How can he possibly stand this?* The plank was hard underneath her, and she shifted uncomfortably.

“You’re safe, now,” he said again, as if he thought that might explain her reticence. “That seelie faelag ain’t going to find you. Oh, and hey, I got something here to eat, if you want.”

He fished in the pocket of his dirty coat and triumphantly produced a half-eaten sandwich. “Bloke threw this in the street right in front of me, can you believe it?” he asked, as if astounded at his good luck. Frowning in concentration, he carefully pulled it apart into two equal halves, then held one out towards her.

For a moment, the only thing she could think of was that he was trying to give her something that had lain in the street, something that a stranger had chewed on. Revulsion overwhelmed her; she wanted to strike it from his hand. Then she looked past the sandwich at the thin fingers that held it.

This is a real windfall for him. Gods of darkness and light, this is all he’s got, and yet he’s trying to share it with me.

Why? What sort of boy is this? She couldn’t imagine any of the pompous boyars’ sons she had known offering such kindness to anyone.

“No, thank you,” she said quietly. “I had a good breakfast. You go ahead and eat, though.”

His black brows drew down into a worried frown. “You sure?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

He shrugged and bit into the sandwich, devouring one of the halves like a starveling wolf. The rest, he put back in his pocket for later.

Wiping the last crumbs from his mouth with a dirty sleeve, Pook drew his legs up under him, tailor-fashion, and propped his chin on a fist. Star-speckled eyes regarded her curiously, and she looked away, vaguely embarrassed. *Probably wondering why he couldn’t have rescued a pretty girl, instead of me.*

“So, you’ve traveled a lot?” he asked.

She shrugged, hoping he wasn’t going to ask any pointed questions. “A little.”

“You from Ruska?”

“How did you know?”

“The accent. But you speak Niunish real good,” he added. “Don’t feel bad—half the people I know ain’t from Dere originally. They come here from all over, looking for work or just something different.”

“But you’re from here?”

A sudden grin lightened his face. “Och, nae, me lassie, cain’t ye tell a highlander when yer hearing one?” he asked in a brogue so thick, she could barely understand him at all. Then he laughed and went back to his normal tones. “Nah. But I been here awhile, and I was young enough when I got here to pick up the local accent, I guess.”

His smile faded, and darkness stole back into his eyes. “I mostly grew up in Gloachamuir. Biggest city in the north end of the country, almost as big as Dere. Lots of mining goes on up that way, and most of the steel mills are there.”

Although his tone was light, Alex could hear the edge of pain beneath, like a reef hidden under the tide. Clearly his memories were not happy ones. “Your parents were from there, then?”

A bitter smile quirked one corner of his mouth. “Don’t know. Never met my parents. I was a

changeling.”

Alex cocked her head to the side, searching her memory for the word. “Changeling?”

“Yeah. The fae...well, sometimes they’ll steal off a human baby, and leave one of their own in its place, right?”

“I see.”

“Anyway, this family went to bed one night, and the next morning their real baby was gone, and there I was in the cradle. I guess they must’ve tried some of the usual things to get rid of me and get their own back, but none of them worked. One of the older girls felt sorry for me—figured it wasn’t my fault, right? So she took care of me when I was real little. But later on, she died, and the clan didn’t want to get stuck with somebody who wasn’t blood, so they apprenticed me off.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, not sure how to respond to his story. “The clan...I mean, were they sure you were a changeling?”

Pook smiled faintly. “They was a bunch of blue-eyed redheads, so yeah.”

“Oh.”

“Don’t matter no more, though. It was a long time ago.”

The past doesn’t stay buried, no matter how much we wish it could. But she didn’t argue. After all, he’d had years more practice at putting things behind him than she did; maybe he was right.

But she didn’t think so.

* * * *

Pook had an old deck of cards, so they passed the hours playing. Alex showed him some of the games she’d learned from her mother, children’s games for the most part, and he showed her some sleight-of-hand tricks that he had taught himself. He also demonstrated how to use glamour to cheat, although he claimed not to use it for that purpose, himself.

“Some of these card players are too damn serious,” he explained. “Shoot you first and find out if you was cheating or not second. There are safer ways to earn dinner.”

Alex was unable to mark the passage of time in the murky depths of the Sevens, but apparently Pook had enough fae blood in him to feel the setting of the sun, even if he couldn’t see it. Once it was completely down, he led her back outside. The foul air of the courtyard seemed fresh after the noisome interior, and she breathed deeply, glad to once again feel the cold wind off the Blackrush. A few grains of ice spat from the sky, dissolving into water on her skin.

“Thank you,” she said awkwardly. “You didn’t have to help me, and you did. I really am grateful.”

He ducked his head almost shyly and shrugged. The white flecks in his eyes seemed to glow in the dark, a corona of stars around a black sun. “You got anywhere to sleep?” he asked.

“I’m staying with relatives.” She hesitated, suddenly reluctant to leave. *I can’t ask him if I’ll see him again. What would he think?* It would sound as if she had mistaken his kindness to a stranger-in-need for interest in her as a female. Which was ridiculous—no one was going to look at her twice, certainly not someone like him. *He’s probably got girls lined up around the block, just waiting for a chance.*

“The streets can be dangerous at night. Maybe I should walk you over?” he asked, sounding a little uncertain, as if worried that she might think he was being forward.

I’m not that self-deluding. “Thank you. I’d feel much better,” she said, half truthfully. In fact, she had planned to find the closest cabstand, but a walk with Pook sounded much better than a ride by herself. She felt a little guilty for making him go out of his way for no good reason, but it wasn’t as though he would ever have to even think about her again after tonight. Surely it wasn’t too much to ask for a single hour of pleasure, the chance to just talk to someone her own age and forget about all the worries that hung over her head.

They walked along the Blackrush. The main wharf area, where her steamer had put in, was downstream from where they were going, and this stretch of the river was almost peaceful. The streetlamps reflected dimly in the dark water, occasionally spotlighting a bit of flotsam. The intermittent splash of oars came to them from somewhere in the darkness, and Alex wondered what business anyone

could possibly be on, this time of night. *Nothing legal, most like.*

As they strolled, Pook pulled an empty sack out of his coat pocket and carried it loosely in one hand. His dark eyes ceaselessly scanned the muck-covered streets; whenever something caught his attention, he'd stop and pop it into his sack. The things he collected made no sense to her: nails, frayed pieces of rope, discarded rags, stray bits of coal, and even broken bottles.

He must have seen her look of bafflement as he paused to inspect a bent nail. "Good way to get a little extra money," he said, picking it up rather gingerly and dropping it into the sack as soon as he could. "Damn iron. Anyway, you can sell this stuff to junk dealers down by the docks. You don't get much for it, of course, but it's better than nothing."

"Oh," she said, feeling vaguely stupid. *What would I do if I had to live in the city by myself? There's so much I don't know. The god of the waning year must have been looking over me—I never realized how unprepared I was for this.*

During her flight from Ruska, all of her energy had been focused on survival. The relentless struggle to stay alive and free had drained her, both mentally and physically, until there were days when she half wished that she had stayed home.

Pook had been facing that struggle for years, and he could probably expect to do so for the rest of his life. From what he had said, it was clear he had no home to return to, no escape if the fight became too much for him. Beside him, she felt ashamed of the moments of weakness when her own problems had seemed insurmountable.

Yet he saved me. He would have given me his own dinner.

What an odd boy.

As they neared their destination, Pook's footsteps slowed, and a faint frown creased his face. "You sure this is right?" he asked.

The valise was getting heavy, but Alex had refused Pook's offer to carry it. Which was foolish—if he'd wanted to rob her, he'd had ample opportunity to do so. But she had developed an almost superstitious paranoia about her baggage, as if it would disappear as soon as she let go of it. Wondering how much farther she could lug its weight around town, she looked about carefully, noting landmarks. "I'm certain. Why?"

He chewed on his lower lip a moment, then ran a hand back through his hair in a nervous gesture. "It's just that the dyana lives in this part of town."

"I know. She's married to my uncle."

Pook gaped at her. "Are you crazy? You can't go back there!"

"Why not?"

"She's a dyana! Don't you know what that means? She'll suck your brain out through your eye holes!"

Alex burst out laughing at the image. Pook's face darkened, and he drew away from her. "She's got you under her influence," he accused. "She sent you to find me!"

Realizing that he thought she was laughing at him, she sobered quickly. "No." Setting down the valise for a moment, she withdrew the little amulet Mina had given her from where it was tucked into her bodice. It was nothing more than a plain leather bag, tied tight with red and black string and decorated with tiny bones and feathers. Whatever was inside clicked softly, and she caught the faint scent of herbs. "Mina—the dyana—gave me this. My uncle has one, as well."

Pook frowned and touched it reluctantly. "Yeah...that's good stuff," he admitted, after letting his long fingers linger on the bag for a moment. "But why'd she give it to you?"

Alex tucked the amulet back under her bodice. For a moment, she imagined that it had retained some of the warmth of Pook's fingers, and the thought made her blush furiously.

"She said that she didn't ask to be born that way," Alex said, hoping her voice sounded steady. "I don't have much power myself, but you seem to. You could probably hurt someone with it, couldn't you?"

"I suppose." The frown eased a little but didn't disappear.

"Do you want to?"

“Not usually.” He turned away and looked out over the Blackrush. His hands were shoved deep into his pockets, and the fall of his dark hair hid his expression from her. “I see what you’re saying, I guess. But I ain’t real comfortable with the idea of a woman who could break my mind and make me a slave.”

“I know.” She sighed, feeling suddenly sad. It seemed certain now that she’d never see him again. “You don’t have to go any farther.”

“I said I’d walk you home, and I will.” His lower lip jutted out in a mulish expression. “Are you sure you want to go back, though? Even with the amulet?”

Alex thought about what she had seen that day. The depths of squalor and poverty that Pook was subject to had brought home the precariousness of her situation. “I’m sure,” she asserted finally.

Pook looked as if he were questioning her sanity but didn’t voice any further objections. They walked the rest of the way in silence, until at last the wall around Duncan and Mina’s home loomed up before them. The gates stood wide, and light streamed from the windows.

The door swung open even before they had passed inside the wall, as if someone had sensed their presence from afar. *And they probably did*, Alex thought. It reminded her yet again just how small her own powers were. Before it had never mattered—there had been no other faelings in her world besides herself and her mother. But now she suddenly found herself surrounded by them, by people who saw and felt things that she could barely perceive.

In some ways, it was worse than being purely human. At least then she would have felt as if she belonged to some group, instead of being forever caught in the borderlands between.

The wheels of Duncan’s chair rattled on the ramp leading down to the yard. “Alex, are you all right?” he called, sounding worried. “We wondered—”

He stopped upon seeing Pook, and Alex heard a soft gasp. She glanced uncertainly at the boy at her side, only to find that he was staring past Duncan, up at the figure in the doorway.

Mina paced down the ramp, her head cocked quizzically to one side. Alex felt power like a cold snake slithering past, but she couldn’t tell which one of them it came from. A low growl sounded in Pook’s throat, and his eyes seemed to darken, the flecks in them changing from stars to sullenly burning coals.

Mina hissed softly, like a cat. “Don’t start a fight with me, boy.”

Pook took a step back, then another. Tearing his eyes from Mina, he glanced at Alex. “You know where to find me if you need to,” he said. He started towards the gate, then stopped and pointed an admonishing finger at Mina. “And you do anything to her, I’ll come back and kick your ass!”

And was gone, as if the night had swallowed him whole.

“Dear God,” Duncan murmured. “Where on earth did you find him?”

* * * *

Damn. I don’t like this, Pook thought. He kicked viciously at a bottle lying in the street, sending it flying against a wall, where it shattered into a thousand glistening shards.

Up until now, he had managed to avoid catching the dyana’s attention. He’d heard the rumors about her when he first came to the city. The few unseelie faelings who had seen what she was capable of—and had survived—were more than willing to warn him off. She had defeated the Seelie Court, they said—but only by enslaving the minds of the unseelie faelings around her and forcing them to fight. Some of them, rumor had it, had even been *changed*, made over into horrors with no will but what she gave them.

Most of the unchanged faelings who had survived the battle had fled, and the few he had talked to were frantically trying to make arrangements to get out of the city as well. So the decision to remain in Dere hadn’t been easy for him. But in the end he’d had little choice; at least here there was some work to be had, even if it was only as a newsboy or a bootblack. So he’d taken the chance, stayed clear of the dyana’s end of town, and hoped to hell that she never took any interest in his battles with the fae.

But now...she knows who I am.

First a couple of unseelie fae in the river, now the dyana. What next? Trouble really comes in

bushels, don't it?

He sighed, hunching his shoulders against the icy wind off the Blackrush. Turning away from the river, he entered the maze of buildings that formed the slums. Hunger gnawed his stomach hollow, and he pulled out the rest of his sandwich and wolfed it down. It didn't fill the void, and he wondered if he could swindle some gin. He had no money in his pockets, having spent the day sitting around on his ass, and he'd have to hustle now if he wanted a couple of coins to buy booze with.

Not to mention, Darcy will throw a fit when she catches up to me. But it was worth it.

He grinned, remembering the sight of Alex in the alley, standing up to that seelie b'hoy and his cronies. *Girl's a real hellcat, all right. And stubborn, insisting on lugging around that stupid valise, when the damn thing was about half as big as her.*

Cute, too. A real girl, not some skinny thing like Rose.

But she was living in the dyana's house...

The amulet had been good, at least; he'd been able to perceive that much when he touched it. He still wasn't sure that he trusted the dyana to behave, though. And he wasn't about to take the risk himself; after all, Alex was the woman's family, but he was just a stranger.

And we all know what that means. If you ain't blood, you ain't nobody. Nothing. Except maybe a freak.

Still, maybe he ought to go back and check on her sometime. Just to make sure everything was all right. Alex might be ballsy, but in his opinion she still needed some looking after. Anybody who'd just walk out and challenge a gang of thieves like that might have guts; but at the same time, it showed a serious lack of judgment. Fate, or chance, or whatever, had already put him in the position to help her out twice, so it only made sense for him to continue in the role.

The sensation of power, like the scent of black water, like the feel of a cobweb on his face, broke him out of his musings. Startled, he looked up sharply, half expecting to see the dyana come to devour his mind.

A youth stood before him, blocking the deserted street. This particular lane was a serpentine slot between tenements, too narrow for carts. Rows of drying laundry hung above them, most of it frozen stiff by the cold; rather than flapping in the wind, it swung ponderously back and forth. No gaslight dispelled the shadows here, but Pook's sharp eyes could still make out every detail of the stranger.

The boy was around his age, although shorter and stockier in build. His short-cut hair was the color of a starless night, and his skin was dark. Cold anger lurked in his velvet brown eyes, and his full lips were twisted into a sneer of disdain.

Pook stopped, suddenly wary. "Who are you?" he asked.

"Who are you?" the boy repeated, matching every inflection of Pook's voice.

"This is Rat Soldier turf, b'hoy," Pook said testily. "You better answer to me before you start asking questions."

"This is Rat Soldier turf, b'hoy. You better answer to me before you start asking questions," the youth parroted back at him.

Pook ground his teeth together in annoyance. "You better stop that."

"You better stop that."

"Fine."

"Fine."

Pook stepped to his right, intending to go around the irritating faeling. But the youth mimicked his movement, a perfect mirror that blocked his path. And now that it was called to his attention, Pook realized that the stranger was imitating even the small movements he made, down to the way he stood.

This was no chance encounter, he realized. This b'hoy, whoever he was, had come looking specifically for him. Why, he couldn't even guess. Not just to drive him crazy with stupid games, though, that was for sure.

Pook pulled power out of the slime beneath his feet, out of the icy clouds swirling high above, out of the shadows concealing a dead body in the nearest alleyway. Holding it close, he fainted to the side, intending to go back the other way and give the boy a good sting of magic—

Magic hit him first, so tight and concentrated, it was like a blow to the chest. Pook flew back, his own power unraveling along with his thoughts. For a moment, he couldn't get a breath, and everything turned black at the edges. Then his lungs remembered how to work, and he sucked in a great gasp of icy air, scooting wildly back on his butt in an attempt to put distance between him and the other boy.

But the youth was not pursuing him. Instead, he perched atop a pile of broken crates that someone had used as a ladder to burgle one of the buildings lining the alley. Contempt radiated from his sneer and dripped like acid from his voice when he spoke.

"You're not so great," he said. "You're nothing. Ignorant. Stupid. Weak."

"Who the hell are you?" Pook snarled back. His body trembled, and he could feel his fur face coming on.

The youth smiled like a razor. "My name is Dubh. Remember it."

Then he was gone.

Chapter Five

Stifling darkness closed about Alex, imprisoning her as surely as iron bars. Soot sifted down past her face, its grit stinging her eyes and filling her mouth. She struggled to breathe freely, but hot, rough brick trapped her, compressing her lungs, refusing to let her escape.

I'm stuck in a chimney! How did I get here? How—

It's a dream.

As if the realization had set her free, she was suddenly able to breathe more easily. Twisting, she found that she was able to look around now. The shadows turned to dim twilight, as if she had suddenly been gifted with Pook's ability to see in the dark.

This is ridiculous. A chimney, by Chernovog.

Perhaps if I can get out of here, the dream will change to something more sensible.

Climbing down seemed the easiest route. In a twist of dream-logic, she was somehow able to see below her, even though her body should have entirely blocked the narrow flue. It was then that she realized that she was not alone in the hellish darkness.

A smaller body was silhouetted against the thin thread of light coming from beneath. The other person was so covered in soot that she could not make out any details of either flesh or clothing, but by the size, she guessed it must be a child. One skinny hand clutched a wire brush, while the other dug at the cracks between bricks, desperate for any purchase.

"What are you doing here?" she blurted, shocked for a moment before remembering it was, after all, only a dream.

Although she couldn't make out the child's face, she could hear the terror in his voice. "Help me! Please, don't let it happen again."

"I'll help you." She stretched down a hand, but the dream warped, and she found herself unable to actually touch him.

A faint moan came from deep inside the boy, and he shook his head. "No. It's too late..."

"Help!" came a muffled voice from nearby. "I'm stuck! Help, please, I'm stuck!"

Although the cries must have been shrieked, only a thin thread of sound came into the chimney, filtering through cracks in the brickwork from some other flue. "'Tis all right, Collin!" the boy below Alex yelled back, clinging to the brick and pressing his mouth to the crack. "I'm coming to get ye! Just hang on!"

A man's voice boomed from somewhere beneath—probably from the fireplace below. "Get back to work, ye two layabouts! I'll show ye what's for—"

The boy screamed, a sound of terror so wrenching that Alex knew she would never forget it. Fire bloomed below them, rushing upwards in a scorching blast of air. The howls of the trapped Collin came to her dimly, and she knew that he was being roasted alive.

It was too late for him, but perhaps she could still save the nameless boy below her.

Desperate, she reached for him again, and this time her fingers scraped across the soot-coated back of one of his hands.

But then he was falling, plummeting away from her, down into that fiery hell, and she heard his cry of despair even as the dream fragmented...

* * * *

Alex sat inside the double brougham across from Duncan, watching through water-streaked glass as the dismal streets passed by. It was a blustery morning with a sky full of rain, and she couldn't help but wonder where Pook might be sheltering in this cold. Although the downpour had melted most of the snow, the temperature felt barely above freezing. Standing water swirled in the roadways where the gutters had become clogged, and the wheels of the carriage flung great plumes of slush onto anyone who strayed too close. Few people had ventured onto the streets, however, although Alex caught a glimpse of shadowy figures huddled in doorways or around meager fires.

The scene left her vaguely depressed, although her bad mood might also have been an aftereffect of the horrible dream she'd had the night before. She had waked before dawn, drenched in sweat and shaking with fear. Normally, her dreams were utterly boring and prosaic, filled with little more than everyday activities or the occasional experiment she had read about in a book. The one last night, however, had been anything but normal.

It felt so real. She'd even gotten out of bed and peered into the mirror, half expecting to find her hair full of soot from the chimney. *Why would I dream something like that?*

There had seemed no point in attempting sleep again, so she had sat at her window and watched the sun come up. When she had finally gone down to breakfast, she had been tired and cranky, wishing simply to be left alone. Duncan and Mina, however, had wanted to rehash her adventure of the day before. For the second time, she told them about her meeting with the seelie faeling, and about Pook's impromptu rescue. Neither Mina nor Duncan seemed to know what to make of the seelie, but she could see the unease in their eyes, and she guessed that they were remembering their struggle against the Seelie Court.

"You said the faeling was some sort of...of gangster?" Duncan had asked.

"According to Pook." Alex shrugged, disavowing any personal knowledge.

"Yes, the boy." Duncan steepled his fingers in front of him, tapping his chin thoughtfully with their tips. "He seemed quite...strong."

"He's our hunter, all right," Mina said. She stared blankly out the window, half lost in her own thoughts.

"I don't understand," Alex said.

Duncan sighed and glanced briefly at Alex, his eyes dark. "For a while, now, someone has been hunting the seelie fae of this city. We have never succeeded in finding him, however."

"And you round him up in one day," Mina said with a faint smile. "I guess I should have realized that the easiest way to get his attention would be to parade a girl down the street."

Alex flushed, suspicious that Mina was making fun of her. "That isn't it."

"Sure. That's why he's going to...how did he put it? Kick my ass if I don't do right by you?" She didn't sound terribly concerned by the threat.

"He was just being nice," Alex said. "Why were you looking for him?"

"To talk. To find out what the hell he thinks he's doing."

"I don't...He was kind to me. There's no reason to harm him." Alex's voice was quiet, but she could feel her heart knocking against her ribs. *Whatever his reasons, he helped me and asked nothing in return. I won't let them hurt him.*

"We have no intention of harming him," Duncan had replied, taking a sip from his tea. "Really, Alexandrea, why would you think such a thing? The boy *is* courting danger by interfering with the ways of the fae, however. It is unwise to draw too near any fae, unseelie or seelie, for they don't have the same morals that we do. Knowingly or not, by defying them, he is making himself a target for retribution."

"Oh." Alex took a bite of her toast, trying not to look too embarrassed by her assumption. "You

don't think the seelie faelings are organizing again, do you?"

Shadows flickered in Duncan's eyes. "I hardly think the appearance of a lone faeling, no matter how aggressive, constitutes proof of a larger scheme."

"Maybe." Mina pulled herself away from the window and looked soberly at her husband. "But Camhlaidh—my father—said that there is a war in Faerie."

"Which may have nothing to do with us or the boy. It's been five years, Mina."

But what is five years to an immortal? Alex wondered silently now, staring out of the brougham at the gray streets.

Duncan is right—one lone faeling means nothing. I'm just being paranoid. It was the dream last night—it upset me, and now I'm jumping at shadows.

The brougham rocked slightly as it came to a halt, jolting her out of her thoughts. Mina, swaddled heavily in an oiled cloak and hat, leapt down from the driver's seat and opened the door for them. Alex climbed out and stood aside while Mina hauled the wheelchair from its basket on the back of the carriage and helped Duncan into it.

The street they were on was not the most prosperous, but it was a far cry from the slums that were Pook's home. An eclectic mix of small, two-story shops lined the cobblestone lane. Directly across the street was a bakery from which delicious smells wafted; a tea shop with steamed-up windows sat a few doors down. There were a dressmaker, a cabinetry store, an apothecary, a chandler, and even what looked like a tiny art gallery. Newsboys ranged up and down the walks, waving their papers, and a young girl dutifully swept the sidewalk in front of the bakery.

The store that they had pulled up in front of was obviously a bookseller's. Through the wide glass windows, Alex could see long rows of floor-to-ceiling shelves, all of them crammed with volumes. Gilt lettering on the window informed her that this was *Blackthorn Books, by Appointment of Her Majesty*. Beneath the lettering was a stylized silhouette of what she supposed must be a thorn tree.

"Here we are," said Mina, unlocking the door and throwing it open with a ceremonious flourish. "Welcome to our little insanity."

Alex followed them hesitantly inside. The wooden floorboards creaked under her feet, and the smell of dust, age, and paper filled the air. As Mina lit the gaslights, the shadows slowly gave way to reveal tall shelves, wide tables, and squat lecterns, all of them crowded with a profusion of books. Small signs in neat lettering denoted the different subjects to be found on the shelves, and with a cry of delight Alex ran to the section labeled simply "The Sciences." There were treatises on astronomy, physics, chemistry, and almost any other subject she could imagine. Pulling down a book on engineering, she began flipping through the pages.

Alex had meant only to glance at the text, but some of the schematics distracted her. By the time the sound of a tinkling bell over the door caught her attention once again, her neck was starting to ache from the awkward position she had held to read. Looking up, she saw Mina coming back in from the cold; the brougham was gone, and Alex guessed that she had taken the horses to some local stable for shelter.

"Oh! I'm sorry," she said, closing the book quickly.

Duncan had gone behind a low counter, whose wooden top glowed softly with polish. A smile flashed over his flexible mouth as he glanced up at her. "No need to apologize, Alexandrea. You may, of course, help yourself to any book here that catches your interest. Simply let me know which you intend to keep for yourself, so that I can remove them from the inventory."

Alex clutched the book to her chest. A part of her wanted to ask if he really meant it, but the rest of her was afraid to give him any opening to change his mind. "Th-thank you."

Mina and Duncan exchanged a look she couldn't interpret. "We've been thinking," Mina said. "You might have noticed that most of the buildings along this street are two-storied, the bottom for a shop and the upper for living quarters for the shopkeepers and their families. Although we converted the lower floor here into the bookstore, we really don't have any need for the upper floor."

"Because you already have a house."

Duncan smiled slightly. "That is true. And because there really is no practical way for me to get to the second floor."

Alex flushed sharply, feeling stupid. "I wasn't thinking."

Duncan waved his hand dismissively. "At any rate, there are perfectly good rooms upstairs which are not being put to any use. It occurred to us that a young woman such as yourself might not be greatly interested in being stuck in a house with a pair of boring ancients. If you would prefer to take over the upstairs rooms here for your own abode, you may do so. You are not required to, of course, if you would rather stay with us. We certainly have no objections to your presence, and I hope that you will frequently come for dinner, even if you do decide to live here."

Alex could hardly breathe, unsure if she understood his proposal correctly. Ever since meeting her uncle, she had felt like an animal risking a trap in exchange for a bit of food. Having a place of her own would be like knowing the cage door was open, should she choose to leave.

"In exchange for what?" she asked softly, refusing to allow herself hope.

"Well, seeing as you will not be able to attend university until the start of new classes next autumn, you can spend your time working here in the shop with us. As rent on the rooms, you will help us dust, sweep, inventory books, assist customers, and the like."

Alex's arms tightened involuntarily on the book she held clutched to her chest. That didn't sound so bad. She glanced at Mina, who gave her an encouraging smile. "I... You aren't... worried about me being here alone?" she asked carefully.

"Trust me, this place is so surrounded by wards and guards that nobody gets in easily, human or fae," Mina said grimly. "Since I knew it would be obvious that nobody lived here after hours, I thought the store would be a magnet for thieves. So Duncan and I covered every entrance with spells to keep people out. I even did the upstairs windows. You'll be safe here."

That isn't what I meant. But perhaps they realized that a chubby, bespeckled bookworm such as herself was unlikely to be having immoral liaisons with young men in her room, whether she wanted to or not.

"And besides," Duncan added with a faint smile, "you'll have a roommate."

When Alex gave him a blank look, he pointed towards a stack of books in the window. A black and white cat lay beside them, her paws tucked up under her for warmth. A little hesitant, Alex extended her hand towards the animal. The cat gave her a polite sniff, then regarded Alex steadily from her single eye.

An eye that glowed briefly blue-green, without iris or pupil.

Alex gasped and jumped back. "What... is she magic?"

Mina wandered over and scratched the cat affectionately behind the ears. "We think one of her parents was a cait sidhe. A faery cat."

Alex had never heard of such a thing. "So... she's a faeling cat?"

"Most likely. She showed up in the street one day, skinny as a rail and with one of her eyes gone. We took her in, fed her up, and named her Vagabond. She's part of the protections on the store, in her own way."

"She's lovely," Alex said. She petted the cat awkwardly, felt the steady thrum of a purr beneath her fingers, like the distant rumble of machinery. "I think she'll make a good roommate."

"Before you decide, you might want to see the rooms," Mina said. "No one except Vagabond has been up there for years, and they're probably under five feet of dust."

The stairs were in the back of the shop, off a small kitchen with a potbellied stove and a table. Dust lay thick on the treads, and the tracks of Mina's boots showed clearly as Alex followed her up the creaking steps.

There were only two rooms; Alex guessed the larger one at the back was a sitting room, and the front was meant to be the bedroom. They contained no furniture, so it was impossible to tell for certain. The walls were of exposed brick, and the floor creaked and groaned with every step, although it seemed sound enough. Dust shrouded everything, and the air smelled of disuse and mouse droppings.

"There are privies and a pump out back," Mina said, pointing out the sitting room window at the yard behind the row of shops. "The attic at home is crammed with furniture the previous owner left behind—I'm afraid most of it's so hideous it ought to be burned, but you're welcome to it."

“Thank you.” Alex looked around with shining eyes. The sitting room would be perfect for a workshop, she thought, already envisioning a sturdy table and racks on which to put her instruments. *And the best part is, I won’t have to worry about anyone finding out. I can do whatever I want.*

A heady sense of freedom gripped her, and it was all she could do not to laugh out loud. “Chernovog look on you both.”

* * * *

Duncan glanced up from behind the counter as Mina came back to the front of the shop alone. Alex had stayed behind to finish looking over the rooms, decide what sort of furniture she needed, and get started on the massive amount of cleaning that would be required before the rooms were even habitable.

“Did she accept?” he asked, setting aside the account ledger he had been perusing.

Mina nodded, grinning at Alex’s enthusiasm. “Yeah. You’d think we’d given her a palace of solid gold, from the look on her face.”

To her surprise, a troubled expression clouded Duncan’s blue-gray eyes. “I see,” he murmured softly.

“What’s wrong?”

He sighed and shook his head, long hair rustling softly over the shoulders of his frock coat. “Think a moment, Mina. I know that your upbringing was very different from mine, so it may not have occurred to you that Alex should be in tears, rather than in ecstasy. She was noble-born, and even though the RiDahns are hardly overburdened with money, her mother was married to a Ruskan nobleman who seems to have had some wealth. Of course, I’m simply guessing at the last, on the basis of some of the things she has said, but...at the very least, she should be used to far better conditions. Two filthy rooms, which she is going to have to scrub clean on her own hands and knees, should hardly be cause for celebration.”

Mina winced. Duncan was right—she hadn’t seen it from that perspective. Hell, before she married him, she would have thought the upstairs rooms a veritable mansion. Even in their current condition, they beat leaving underneath a bridge, for damn sure.

If she *had* thought about it, she would have hesitated to make the suggestion, worried about offending Alex’s sensibilities. But she hadn’t, and it had been obvious to her that Alex needed space. Hopefully, the girl would be far less likely to bolt if she didn’t feel pressured to stay, and the little apartment above the bookstore had seemed the perfect answer. This way, they could keep in daily contact with her, without hemming her in and awakening whatever fears had made her flee to Niune in the first place.

When Duncan had agreed with Mina’s suggestion that morning, she hadn’t realized he had seen the offer as a test, of sorts.

“I wish I knew what happened,” Duncan said quietly. His gaze went to the rain-streaked window, but Mina had the feeling he wasn’t really seeing it. “Poor little Moira.”

“I know. But we can’t ask. She’ll run if we push too hard.”

Duncan nodded and turned back to his work. But Mina suspected that he wasn’t done with grieving for his lost sister.

Not by a long shot.

* * * *

Pook knew he was going to be in trouble with Darcy, so he avoided her and the rest of the Rat Soldiers assiduously all day. His tactic would only delay the inevitable, of course; but with any luck, a couple of days would give Darcy a chance to cool down. And if somebody else did something in the meantime to make her mad, well, maybe she would take it out on them instead.

A little voice in his head tried to point out that maybe Darcy had a right to be pissed, but he ignored it as best he could. Okay, yeah, he *had* let the rest of the gang down by abandoning his post as lookout at the meeting. But none of them were faelings—they just didn’t understand that if you felt a seelie hanging around, you had to go check him out, just to make sure that he wasn’t causing any trouble.

Besides, if he'd stayed his post like a good little b'hoy, Alex would have been in a tough spot. He'd gotten her out of a bad situation, and even if she hadn't seemed all that impressed, well, it was still worth it. A couple of hours talking to a pretty girl wasn't a bad way to spend the day, especially not for a freak like him.

And speaking of freaks, better keep an eye out for that Dubh. Pook didn't know what the boy's problem was, but he didn't want any part of it. *Dere's crawling with faelings—and fae—all the sudden. It's like I can't go four damn steps without tripping over one. Wish to hell I knew why.*

Pook hoisted his coal sack higher on his back. He was on his way to see the only other faeling he'd known in Dere, up until a few days ago. Kuromori Goro had come to Niune from one of those weird eastern countries with names that Pook couldn't pronounce. Kuromori lived in a little enclave of easterners, in easy walking distance from Rat Soldier territory, although Pook was the only outsider he knew of who went there very often. None of the gangs even tried to claim it; legend had it that an enterprising b'hoy, who'd once had the balls to try, had ended up in a stewpot somewhere. Pook thought the story was nothing more than the usual lies people made up about other people they didn't understand, but it allowed him to go there without worrying about other gangs, so he didn't complain too much.

Cold rain had been drizzling all day, keeping most people inside; but here, a few figures shielded by umbrellas walked purposefully along the street. The signs on the buildings were written in foreign symbols—not that Pook could read Niunish all that well, either. Painted curtains shrouded the windows, hiding from prying eyes whatever business went on inside. The smell of strange spices wafted from restaurants, carried along on great gouts of steam. A few pairs of almond-shaped eyes stared at him curiously, but most were used to seeing him, at least once a month, and no longer paid him any attention.

Kuromori Goro lived on the second floor of a building that seemed to house both apartments and the local version of a groggery. An outside stair went up to a small covered balcony, and Pook used this, rather than taking the long way through the interior. In the summer, potted plants stood serenely on the balcony; this time of year, only a small, gnarled tree braved the elements. A collection of stones worn smooth by water lay in the center of the floor. Pook had no idea what they were for, but it was obvious that their placement was deliberate, so he skirted them before setting his sack down.

A sliding door led off the balcony; Pook knocked and waited for acknowledgment from within before pushing it to one side. "Hey, Kuromori, got your coal here!" he called, as he bent and untied his boots. Kuromori was real particular about not wearing shoes inside, even though Pook knew his boots would be cold as ice when it came time to put them back on.

Kuromori was seated on the floor, which was covered by reed mats. His face was angular, with high cheekbones and eyes that had a slightly more-than-human slant. Shining black hair was drawn back from his face into a neat bun. His skin was brown and weathered, as if he had spent a lot of time outdoors, but no lines showed on his face to give Pook any clue as to how old he might be. He held a shining sword in his hands, which he had apparently just finished cleaning. If the iron blade bothered him at all, he had never given any sign of it to Pook. Sliding it into a black lacquered sheath, he carefully placed it back onto a stand that already held another, shorter, sword.

"Greetings, Pook-kun," Kuromori said at last, turning and nodding in Pook's direction.

Pook bowed, a trick he'd picked up from watching some of the other easterners. He wasn't sure if the gesture pleased Kuromori or not, but Pook figured there was no harm in trying to be polite. After all, Kuromori's swords looked sharp as hell.

"Cold as a witch's tit out there," Pook said, closing the sliding door behind him. "You might think about buying extra, just in case."

Kuromori smiled slightly. "Ah, Pook-kun, you are quite the salesman. Would you care for tea?"

Pook grinned and sat down at the low table to one side of the room. "Can't blame me for trying," he said, while Kuromori carefully poured tea into two small, delicate cups. The cups were pottery, but so thin, they verged on translucent, and Pook was always scared he was going to break one.

"There's a seelie faeling in Dere," Pook said, picking up his cup. Kuromori raised an eyebrow—apparently Pook had once again blundered over one of the thousands of rules of etiquette that

surrounded everything Kuromori did. But either Kuromori was resigned to the fact that Pook was a savage with no hope of ever being civilized, or he'd mellowed in the years he'd lived in Niune, because he didn't say anything about it, only took a sip of his tea.

"You forget that I am not of your kind," he said gently, as he set his cup down in the precise spot it had occupied before he picked it up.

Kuromori had insisted from their first meeting that he wasn't unseelie—said that the fae in his homeland were a race different than the ones in Niune and Grynith. He'd tried to explain it, but the only thing Pook had really gotten was that his grandmother had lived underneath a lake. But to Pook, water meant unseelie, so he figured Kuromori was just being particular.

"You say that, but if they come calling, they ain't going to see it that way," Pook pointed out. "I'm guessing you're more like me than like them."

He didn't know for sure—Kuromori's magic *was* different enough that it wasn't real obvious without pushing past his wards. But doing that would be considered an attack, whether the faeling was eastern or Niunish, so he'd let it lie.

"Why do you expect there to be trouble?" Kuromori asked, neatly sidestepping Pook's implied question.

"Cause the bastard tried to rough up an unseelie girl. Well, I mean, he was going to—he'd just started in on her when I got there. She wasn't doing nothing to him. Just trying to get her stuff back that he'd helped steal, I guess."

"I see. So this seelie faeling is a thief, and when he was cornered by an unseelie girl demanding the return of her property, he defended himself. That is indeed grounds for alarm."

Pook made a face. "Well, when you put it that way, it don't sound quite the same. But I don't like it. He was up to something."

Kuromori took another sip of tea. "And I suppose this girl was not unattractive, Pook-kun?"

Pook looked at him to see if he were laughing, but Kuromori kept an aggravatingly straight face. "That ain't the point."

Kuromori didn't say anything, just looked at him, but Pook got it all the same. "Just trying to warn you," Pook muttered, setting aside his cup and climbing to his feet. "Now, how much coal you want?"

"Forgive me if I have offended, Pook-kun."

Pook waved his hand, negating any offense, although, truth to tell, he was a bit put out. Then again, maybe if Pook had a sharp sword and the ability to use it, he wouldn't feel so worried about the whole thing, either.

Kuromori bought the whole sack at a good price, maybe because he felt bad about their conversation. Pook left the way he'd come, humming softly to himself as he felt the weight of coins in his pocket. He'd eat good tonight, all right, maybe even have enough left over for a bottle of whiskey and some more cigarettes. Or he and Rose could split a bucket of gin. So pleased was he, that it wasn't until he was well into Rat Soldier territory that he became aware he was being followed.

He had just turned into a narrow alleyway between tenements when he felt something behind him, like the flash of sunlight off water. Startled, he paused and cautiously extended his faeling senses. There had been someone there just a moment ago...

A boot squelched in the muck at the other end of the alley, and Pook spun in surprise. A human youth lurked there, muffled heavily against the cold, his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his coat. Pook cursed himself silently. He had gotten so distracted searching for a seelie faeling that he had been blind to any nonmagical threat.

Damn fae blood. Can't even carry a knife. Not that he'd need a knife, if it came down to it, but he wasn't about to let on that he was anything but human, unless he were sure it was his life on the line.

"Hey," Pook said cautiously, peering uneasily at what little he could see of the other's face. "This is Rat Solider turf, b'hoy. You need to move along, unless you're looking for trouble."

"Oh, I found what I'm looking for," the boy said, taking his hand out of his pocket.

The blast from the gun was almost deafening in the narrow confines of the alley. Something slammed into Pook's gut, as if a horse had kicked him in the belly. He staggered back, but his legs wouldn't work

right, and he fell to the slushy ground. Agony tore through him, and he tried to scream, but only a moan came out. Warm liquid trickled out over his hands when he put them to his belly, and he deliriously wished that it would cover his entire body, keep away the cold...

Got to change, he thought dimly. Just got to change, that's all...

But something was inside of him, a white hot fire down by his spine, as if he'd swallowed a live coal. *The bullet...still inside. It's just lead...shouldn't be doing this to me...*

It ain't iron...is it?

Rough hands grabbed him, rolling him onto his back. Blinking against the darkness closing in around his sight, he saw his assailant bend down. A moment later, a hand thrust into his pocket, searching around until the fingers found the money Kuromori had given him.

Pook tried to protest, but there was no strength left in him. The gunman didn't stop to count the coins, just put them in his own pocket and strolled away unconcernedly. As his footsteps faded into nothingness, Pook felt his eyes sliding closed.

Get up! Get up, or you're done for!

It hurt worse than anything he'd ever felt in his life, but somehow he forced himself to his feet, clinging to the rough brick wall for support. The world spun around him, and he felt a fresh gush of warm blood soaking into the waistband of his trousers, but somehow he managed to keep his feet. Taking a deep breath, although even that sent splinters of white pain through his body, he made himself take a step, then another.

Goddamn idiot. Too slow. Didn't see the gun.

It was your life on the line this time, b'hoy, how about that? Ain't no fae that's going to do you in, no way. Just some damned rowdy with a gun.

Either night was closing in, or his vision was starting to fail. Wrapping his arms around his middle in an attempt to hold in his own blood, he staggered down the streets. No one bothered him—either they thought he was seriously drunk, or else they saw the blood coating his shirt and trousers and knew to stay clear. Blood dripped behind him, swirling away in the water rushing into the gutters, and he knew that time was running out fast.

Have to get there. Have to go. Alex...she'll help me. I know she will. Just got to get there, that's all.

By the time he found himself in the right neighborhood, he was barely able to lift his feet. If the crushers saw him here, they'd drag him off to jail for sure, and his only chance to live would be gone for good. But either the bad weather kept them indoors or he was simply lucky, for no one came out of the gathering gloom to question him.

Then a pair of bronze gates loomed up in front of him. By this time, his whole body was shaking violently, so he simply collapsed against the bars. *I'll get up in a minute. Just got to rest first...*

The rain changed to snow and sifted slowly down onto the dying boy.

Chapter Six

Alex leaned back against the brougham's seat, feeling better than she had in a very long time. She'd spent most of the day cleaning the two rooms that would soon be hers. Because the bad weather had kept most customers away, Mina had been free to help with the scrubbing, and between the two of them, they had made a great deal of progress. When they finally closed the shop at dusk, they had gone to a small restaurant on the same street for a quick dinner and now were on their way home.

Although she tried to keep her mind on conversation with Duncan, a belly full of warm food after a long day of unaccustomed work was making Alex drowsy. Duncan didn't seem to mind; pulling herself from a doze, she caught a glimpse of a small smile.

He's so different from Father, she thought, tugging the lap rug closer. Maybe things will be all right after all.

The brougham jerked to an abrupt halt. "What the hell?" Mina exclaimed

Startled, Alex sat up and looked out. The high walls surrounding the house loomed up, lightly dusted with ice and snow. Something dark leaned against the gates, although she couldn't make out what. The ice around it was sprinkled with red.

Then the shape moved, and the light from the brougham's lanterns fell over it.

"Pook!"

Alex scrambled out of the carriage and ran to the boy. Even in the bad lighting, she could see the pallor that underlay Pook's cocoa skin. Tremors shook his limbs, and his breathing was fast and shallow. Realizing that something was seriously wrong, she knelt in the snow by him and touched his wrist. His skin was ice-cold, and the pulse under her fingers fluttered like the wings of a bird.

His eyes opened at her touch, but they had a glazed look, as if he weren't seeing her clearly. "A-Alex? Help me..."

"*Help me, Dreyal!*" Gosha's last words or, at least, the last words heard by any ears but his own. "*Don't leave me here to die!*"

Mina crouched down opposite Alex. Letting out a low hiss, she pulled Pook's arm away from his midriff. The front of his shirt and pants were soaked in blood.

For an instant Alex froze, panic fluttering in the back of her brain. She didn't know what to do, didn't know anything about doctoring—

He was going to die just like Gosha, begging for help she couldn't give.

"Help me get him inside!" Mina ordered, grabbing one of Pook's arms and dragging it over her shoulders. Grateful for the direction, Alex did the same. Pook moaned as the two women hauled him to his feet; his head lolled back, and for a moment Alex was sure he would lose consciousness altogether. Somehow, though, he managed a few stumbling steps.

"You'll have to take his weight while I unlock the gate and help Duncan," Mina instructed. Alex nodded and braced herself as Mina slid out from under Pook's other arm. The boy was a lot taller than she, but he was also much skinnier, and for once her sturdy figure stood her in good stead. Mina hastily swung open the gate, and Alex took a step forward, tugging gently on Pook's arm.

They had not gotten far—Pook couldn't manage anything more than a halting stumble—when Mina caught up with them again. Between them, the two women wrestled him up the walk and into the house.

"Lay him on the table," Duncan instructed as he shut the door behind them. "Mina, please get my doctor's bag. Do we know what happened?"

Alex carefully helped ease Pook down onto a low table that Duncan could easily reach. The boy was shaking even harder now, and his breathing had become more labored. "Sh-shot," he managed to gasp out through chattering teeth. His lips and fingernails had taken on an alarming bluish tinge.

His face grim, Duncan slit open the ruined shirt with a scalpel and pulled it carefully away from the wound. Alex pressed her hands to her mouth to keep a moan of despair from escaping. There was a ragged hole in Pook's abdomen, from which blood leaked sluggishly. Even though medicine had never been one of her interests, she knew that the bullet must have destroyed every organ in its path.

"Is there...will he...?" She couldn't make herself say the words.

Duncan blue-gray eyes were grave. "The wound is very serious. We can make him comfortable—I have some morphine that will at least ease the pain. But...even the finest surgeon in the world could not fix this. I am sorry, Alexandreya."

Oh, Chernovog, no. Please.

"No." Pook's voice was nothing more than a whisper; blood bubbled around his lips. "I can...heal myself...but the bullet...iron..."

Duncan's brows drew together. "There isn't an exit wound. The bullet must still be inside."

"Take...it out...I can heal..."

"That's why he dragged himself all the way here," Alex guessed. Hope surged in her, and she clenched her hands so hard the nails bit into her palms. "Please, we must help him!"

To her relief, Duncan nodded firmly. "Very well. There is little time to waste." He glanced up at Mina. "The boy cannot lose consciousness if he is to heal himself."

Mina nodded, as if he had given her some instruction. "He won't."

"I'm afraid I'll need your help as well, Alexandrea," Duncan went on. Now that he had determined a course of action, he was dragging various instruments out of his doctor's bag. "Pook is very close to death, and any hesitation on our part may well be his undoing."

"Tell me what I must do," she said, casting a glance at Pook's drawn face.

"*Help me, Drea...*"

Will saving Pook balance the scales? Can saving the life of one man make up for having murdered another?

Pook screamed when Duncan slid a pair of forceps into the wound, forcing it open. Mina, who stood at his head, bent swiftly over him. Alex felt...something, a sensation as if the light had suddenly gotten dimmer, even though her eyes said it hadn't.

"Don't fight me, boy," Mina whispered, and her voice was a sibilant reptile hiss. Looking up in surprise, Alex saw that the older woman's eyes had gone completely black, without iris or white. "Don't fight me if you want to live. Yesss."

The temperature in the room plummeted, as if someone had opened the door and let winter inside. Pook stared back at Mina as if transfixed, but he didn't so much as flinch as Duncan continued working.

The next minutes were hellish for Alex. Afterwards, she had no clear idea of how long they worked; the time seemed to stretch on forever. Her world narrowed to one of blood and flesh as she helped Duncan dig for the bullet. Although the pain must have been unspeakable, Pook only whimpered occasionally, his will held captive by Mina's terrible power. His breathing became progressively more labored, however, and blood now bubbled from his nostrils as well.

We're killing him faster, Alex thought, and her hands shook as she took the forceps from Duncan, holding open the wound while he slid a long pair of hemostats in. *Oh, Chernovog, god of the waning year, please...*

"There," whispered Duncan triumphantly. A moment later, he held up a misshapen lump of metal, black with blood.

Alex pulled the forceps out and stepped back, feeling as if her breath were stuck in her throat. Mina blinked slowly and moved away as well, letting go of her hold on Pook.

For a long moment, nothing happened. *It's not going to work. Maybe he was delirious, and he doesn't have any special healing ability.*

"Pook?" she whispered.

His eyes met hers, and she saw the stars in them flare a moment, then turn to sullen red coals. All other color drained away, leaving them black as Mina's had been, and the temperature in the room dropped even further. Frost raced across the table, crystallizing the blood that had pooled on the wood.

All of the shadows waiting in the corners seemed to rush forward, gathering around Pook. For a moment, he was obscured utterly; then the shadows shifted, but what they revealed was not human. There was *something* on the table: a shape so dark it seemed to drink in the light. It might have been a black dog, or a goat, or some demented dream of a pony. There was fur, and teeth, and horns, and black eyes flecked with dull, bloody red.

It was madness and night and howling winter.

It was beautiful.

Then, just as abruptly, the shadows abandoned him, fleeing back to the corners where they belonged. Pook lay on the table, covered in dried blood, but whole once again. The brown skin of his belly was flawless; not even a scar marked where the gaping wound had been.

Pook moaned and started to sit up—then collapsed bonelessly, his head striking the table hard. Alex cried out, and for a moment she thought he had died despite everything. But then she saw that his bare chest rose and fell, smooth skin sliding easily over the painfully clear outline of his ribs.

Duncan pressed a finger to Pook's throat, checking the pulse. "His heartbeat is strong," he said after a moment, "and his breathing is good as well. We should try to make him a bit more comfortable. At a guess, I'd say he will be in dire need of rest and will probably sleep the remainder of the night."

Duncan went and fetched blankets from a linen closet. Alex helped Mina carry Pook's limp body into the study, where they carefully laid him out on a divan near the fire. "Pants are ruined," Mina said,

wiping congealed blood off her hand where she had accidentally brushed against them. “Why don’t you make us all a pot of tea and let Duncan and me get him settled?”

Alex did as she was asked. By the time she returned, carrying a small tea tray, Pook lay bundled in blankets. His bloody pants burned down to ash on the fire.

They retreated to the dining room, sliding the panel doors closed behind them so as not to wake the sleeping boy. Once they were settled, Duncan accepted a cup of tea from Alex, holding it cradled loosely in his long hands. His brow was furrowed, and she could see him staring out the window at the falling snow, as if it held some special message for him.

“Quite a useful trick, being able to heal yourself like that,” Mina remarked, sitting down on an ottoman with her own tea.

“Indeed.” Duncan frowned, looked down at his cup as if surprised to find it in his hands, and took a sip. “I cannot say that I have ever seen such a thing in a faeling before. No wonder his battle with the fae has not killed him yet.”

“He’s human,” Mina said. “At least a little bit. I could tell. But he’s more fae. A lot more.”

Duncan nodded, as if she had confirmed his suspicions. “He would have to be. Most faelings—and fae, actually—use glamour to alter their appearance, but they never truly change their bodies. Human blood would resist such a thing quite strongly, I suspect. There could be very little in him, or else he would not be able to do it.”

Alex looked back and forth between them uncertainly. “So what does that mean?”

“I don’t know. Nothing, perhaps. From what you have told us, I would say that his heart, at least, is human.”

Alex blushed and looked down at her cup. “He was nice to me.”

“Precisely. The fae may be many things, but they are not kind. What do you know about him?”

She shook her head. “Only that he was a—a changeling.”

Duncan sighed, took off his glasses, and polished them absently on his shirt. “Changelings are something we know very little about. Some of them are faelings born to faery mothers, no doubt, but some of them are pure fae. Why they are exchanged, why the fae have any interest in abducting human babes and leaving their own offspring behind...no one knows, that I have ever heard.”

“Maybe it’s what you said,” Mina suggested. When they both looked at her, she shrugged. “You said he had a human heart. I’m not sure some people would say even that about me.” A faint smile tugged at her lips, but something about the look in her eyes told Alex that she wasn’t making a jest. “He wouldn’t have done too well in Faerie if that’s true, so maybe his mother left him with humans, where he could fit in.”

If so, she didn’t do a good job of it, Alex thought. But she wasn’t going to go into details with them—Pook had confided in her, after all, and she wasn’t about to tell his secrets to anyone else.

“We can speculate all night,” Duncan said, setting aside his now-empty cup. “For now, however, I suggest we go to bed and get some sleep. We can talk to the boy tomorrow.”

Mina nodded. “Yeah. I have a lot of questions for our hunter. To start with, I’d like to know who shot him. The bullet was iron—made especially to kill a faeling. Somebody obviously wants him dead.”

“The seelie fae of this city certainly have reason enough.”

“But a fae wouldn’t touch a gun. And they don’t need human intermediaries for something like this.”

“True.”

“So if it wasn’t the fae, who was it? And was it Pook they wanted to kill—or would any unseelie faeling do?”

Until that moment, Alex had been too concerned with Pook to consider the implications of his ordeal. But at Mina’s words, a little shiver went through her, and she felt as if all the happiness of the day had been nothing but a dream.

* * * *

Alex awoke to the cold, gray light that precedes dawn. For a while, she lay in her bed, listening to the soft creaking of the house as it settled. The wind howled outside, moaning around the chimneys and

rattling the panes of glass in the window. She thought of Pook sleeping on the divan downstairs, then wondered if he were still there, or if he had waked and seized the opportunity to vanish into the night as abruptly as he had come.

The air of her bedroom was chilly as she dressed, but it was nothing compared to the bone-devouring cold of a Ruskan winter. As soon as she was clothed, she hurried out, twisting her hair into its habitual bun as she went.

Pook lay where they had left him, still deeply asleep, and the relief she felt at seeing him surprised her with its intensity. Exhaustion had traced dark circles under his eyes, and his untidy mop of black hair straggled into his face. Even so, he remained achingly beautiful, from the delicate points of his ears to the graceful-looking toes that peeked out from underneath the edge of the blankets. There was a tiny line between his arched brows, as if his dreams troubled him.

His sleep must have been restless, for he had twisted partially out of the shroud of blankets, so that one shoulder and most of his chest were exposed to the cold air. His collarbones stood out, and she could trace every rib with her gaze. Even so, lean muscle lay beneath the tight mocha skin, and she remembered the ease with which he had hefted her weighty valise. A tattoo wound around his upper arm in a band, and she leaned closer, trying to make it out. It looked like a flowering briar of some sort, but it was too highly stylized for her to identify further.

The light in the room grew gradually stronger. A faint sigh came from the fire, which had burned down to ash. Outside, snow fell over the unkempt garden, but within, all was still and peaceful and silent. Alex watched him sleep, and an odd feeling of contentment stole over her, as if she would have been willing to suspend time and simply remain in that quiet moment forever.

Then Pook's brows quirked together, and he shifted slightly. Thick lashes fluttered like bird wings, blinking the sleep out of his eyes. "Hey," he mumbled, sounding as if he were still half in dreams.

"I'm sorry—I didn't mean to wake you," she said hastily, trying to give the impression that she had just walked in to check on him, instead of having stared at him for an hour.

"S okay," he said, sitting up and rubbing at his eyes. The blankets fell to his waist, so she turned away and hastily started stoking up the fire to hide her blush.

"How are you feeling?" she asked the fire irons.

"Like somebody beat the crap out of me. Which I guess is pretty good, considering."

"Yes." The fire was roaring by now, so she stood up and wiped her hands absently on her skirt. "You, uh, you look a lot better. I like your tattoo," she added, then cursed herself. *Brilliant.*

He seemed pleased she had noticed. "Thanks. My friend Kuromori done it a couple of years ago. He's a faeling, so the change don't erase it. I drew the design myself."

"Can I ask you what it means?" she asked tentatively. "You don't have to tell me if you don't want to. But many of the sailors I met on the steamer had tattoos, and most of them had some sort of story behind them."

He turned his head to look at the tattoo, as if he hadn't paid much attention to it until now. "I don't mind. I...well. I got it as kind of a reminder about life. See, it's got thorns, and they can hurt you pretty bad, but it's got flowers too. And maybe the flowers make putting up with the thorns worthwhile." He ducked his head and laughed self-consciously. "It sounds dumb, now. I'd had a bunch of gin at the time, and it seemed pretty smart then, though. Guess you know where to come if you want some really bad philosophy, huh?"

"No. I liked it." She wanted to ask him what thorns and flowers life had given him, but it wasn't the sort of thing one asked a virtual stranger. So instead she said, "Can I get you anything?"

"Nah. You done a lot for me already. Thanks."

"Anything for a faeling in trouble," she said, struggling to keep her voice light. "And I owed you from before."

"Yeah." He tugged the blankets up around his shoulders. "I guess some clothes would help, though."

"You can borrow some of Duncan's for the moment," said Mina, as she walked into the room. Alex jumped—she had been so focused on Pook that she hadn't even heard the lift operating. "And I have something else you might want."

Mina held up her hand; an amulet like the ones Duncan and Alex wore dangled loosely from her fingers. For a moment, she and Pook stared at each other, and something about their expressions and posture reminded Alex sharply of a pair of angry cats sizing each other up. There were undercurrents of power in the room that she could barely sense, and she felt an unexpected stab of envy.

Even here, with them, I'm an outsider. Too human to feel what they feel.

"Thanks," Pook said, but there was a guarded quality to his voice that hadn't been there just a moment before. "And for last night, too."

Mina nodded. "We owed you for helping Alex."

The mulish expression Alex had seen on his face before, threatened to reappear. "That ain't why I did it."

"Didn't say it was, did I?" Mina leaned back against the wall, hands in her pockets. "I doubt you would have threatened to kick my ass if you thought you'd be back asking for help a day later."

"Speaking of which," Duncan added, as he wheeled into the room, "I don't suppose you'd like to tell us who it was that shot you."

Pook's face became even more closed than before. He shrugged awkwardly under his blanket, his eyes going anywhere but to Duncan or Mina. "Didn't know him."

"I see. Some random person just happened to accost you with specially made bullets that coincidentally are highly effective against faelings?"

Pook frowned slightly, then shrugged again. "I ain't saying he wasn't gunning for me, am I? Just said I didn't know him. He was human, though."

"Do you think the fae sent him?" Mina asked.

Pook started, but hid it quickly. "Why would any fae do that, huh?"

"Not just any fae, boy. You've been hunting seelie fae in this city for a while now. Maybe all the trouble you've stirred up has come home to roost."

Distrust flared in Pook's ash-colored eyes. Alex unconsciously took a step closer to him, half-afraid that he might bolt. "Somebody's got to do it, don't they?" he asked. "And I sure as hell don't see you doing it."

Duncan frowned. "I don't see any reason why anyone has to disturb the fae. They are very powerful and very dangerous."

"No reason?" Pook asked, and although his voice was soft, it had an edge to it. "Guess you don't see one, do you? Fae kills eight homeless kids, why should you give a damn? Wasn't anybody important, was it? Just dustbin kids, that's all."

Alex swallowed against a sudden constriction in her throat. "No one said anything to me about the fae killing people. Why wasn't I told this?"

Duncan frowned uneasily. "The fae are dangerous," he said carefully. "And they do kill. They do not understand morals as we do, and even if they did...some of them prey on humans. They give no more thought to feeding on us than we give to eating a piece of toast for breakfast. *However*," he added as Pook opened his mouth to say something further, "I am not aware that there has been much in the way of fae activity in this city at all."

Mina was staring at Pook with an odd look on her face. "Eight children? I don't...Are you certain?"

Pook just nodded.

"How did you find out? Did you feel it kill them?"

"Didn't have to do that. It was in the newspapers, wasn't it?"

"The newspapers!" Duncan exclaimed. "What on earth do you mean?"

But Pook's face had taken on a surly look. "Read it yourself. I ain't responsible if you can't see what's in front of your own noses."

It was obvious from his tone that Pook believed they simply didn't care. Alex wasn't so certain of that, but she thought it better to let the matter lie and head off an argument. "So the fae—or at least the seelie fae—know that you're a faeling and have reason to want you dead."

"Probably just kill me themselves, though," Pook said doubtfully, echoing Mina's words from the night before.

“Who else knows you’re a faeling, then?”

“My friend Rose—but I’ve known her since we was kids. Easterner who lives over off Crevice Street, but I’ve always gotten along with him. And besides, guy’s got the scariest pair of swords you ever seen—he’d just cut my head off and be done with it, if he wanted to kill me. You three. Another guy I ran into a couple of nights ago that seems to have some kind of problem with me, though damned if I know what. And that seelie b’hoys who wanted to make toast out of Alex.” Pook glanced up at her. “I’m laying bets on him.”

Alex had to suppress a shiver at the memory of flat, metallic eyes. “But why didn’t he do it himself?”

“He’s the leader of the Firestarter gang. Fellow like that ain’t going to bother dirtying his hands when he’s got plenty of b’hoys ready to do it for him, is he?”

“Why do it at all?” Mina countered.

Pook shrugged. “Hell if I know. Maybe he was pissed about me interfering with Alex.”

Alex’s heart went cold. *How could I have been so stupid? I should have just let the thieves have the valise and the diary.* Because of her foolishness, Pook had almost been killed.

“Perhaps.” Duncan didn’t look entirely convinced. “But I don’t think it wise to dismiss the other possibilities out of hand. It would be advisable for you to lie low for a time.”

Pook’s expression said he knew that well enough without Duncan having to tell him so.

“Do you think...if it were this seelie faeling, do you think he might be after me, as well?” Alex asked carefully. *Damn it. Just what I need.*

Duncan only shook his head. “I don’t know. I simply don’t know.”

Chapter Seven

Mina had expected Pook to vanish as soon as he reasonably could. Duncan lent him some old clothes; they didn’t fit particularly well, but anything was better than the bloodstained rags he’d had on the night before. They set a place for him at breakfast while he was dressing, and he devoured everything put in front of him with incredible gusto.

But he continued to loiter afterwards, and at first she wondered if he meant to steal the silverware. It didn’t take long to notice, though, that he seemed more interested in talking to Alex than in helping himself to their belongings. Remembering the look he’d gotten when Alex suggested the seelie faeling might have designs on her life as well, Mina decided it was more likely they’d gained an ally than a thief.

Not that he might not be that, too.

He kept right with them as they set out for the bookstore. Mina stood by the horses while Alex climbed into the brougham. As she lit a cigarette, she saw Pook cast her a look of such longing that she laughed and gestured for him to climb up onto the drivers seat beside her.

Before taking up the reins, she passed him a crumpled pack of cigarettes and matches. The boy struck a match with a graceful flourish, then took a long pull from the cigarette, exhaling the smoke with a happy sigh.

“You’re worse than I am,” she said, guiding the horses out into the road with a click of her tongue. By now, they were familiar enough with the path to the bookstore that they hardly needed any attention from her.

Pook grinned, revealing a slight gap between his front teeth. His black hair blew back wildly, and the fact that he wasn’t freezing showed his fae nature as clearly as his slanted eyes and pointed ears. Either he’d decided that he trusted her after all, or he was putting up a good front. If nothing else, at least he was smart enough to know that she’d had him in her power last night, and the fact that she’d let him go again seemed to count for something.

Finally, my power was useful for something good. Something I don’t have to feel guilty about

Pook struck up a conversation about the horses, asking Mina their names, if they were hard to keep, and how fast they could run. He had a perpetual glint of mischief in his eyes, as if he were

constantly on the verge of doing or saying something completely outrageous, and by the time they got to the bookstore, they were swapping stories and laughing like a pair of maniacs.

As soon as they pulled up, Pook sprang down, opened the carriage door, and offered his hand to Alex. She looked at him as if he'd taken leave of his senses, but she accepted his help. Pook pulled the wheelchair out of its basket on the back without being asked, ignoring Duncan's rather ungrateful glower.

Mina had no sooner unlocked the door than Fox appeared, dressed in her usual bedraggled finery, with the exception of the bright pink house slippers that peeked out from below her emerald gown. Her step wandered from side to side, as most of her attention seemed to be on the cat's-cradle in her hands.

Duncan cleared his throat delicately, causing her to look up. "Fox, this is my niece, Alexandrea. Alex, Fox is the one who alerted us to your presence in the city. And this is, er, Pook."

"Fox—that's a great name," Pook said, with a smile that probably had girls swooning at his feet on a regular basis.

Fox blinked at him a few times, then a slow smile of her own blossomed over her face. "Ooh, Duncan, I like him. Can we keep him?"

"We are making the attempt," Duncan said dryly. Fox clapped her hands and skipped happily into the shop, as if she'd just been given a present. Pook cast a mystified look at Mina, who only shrugged.

Pook followed them inside, glancing warily at the books as if they might come to life and attack him. He looked so profoundly out of his element that Mina started to feel sorry for him. But when Vagabond wandered out of the back to greet them, his face lit up.

"A moggie!" he shouted, and flung himself full-length on the floor, to be at her level. Within moments, Vagabond was washing his face, as if she had suddenly discovered him to be a long-lost kitten.

"That's Vagabond," Alex said, a bit uncertainly.

Pook touched noses with the cat. "She says her name is Destroyer-of-Mice-and-Devourer-of-Bugs, Queen of the Fence," he offered. Mina had no idea if he was joking or not.

Mina stepped over him, went into the back, and put tea on. When she returned, Duncan was saying, "I shall be instructing Alexandrea on her faeling heritage, and it would be as easy to have two students as one. Your battles against the seelie fae show that you are accomplished in the use of your magic, but I can also teach you the history of the fae, such as is known, and their various types and kinds."

Pook sat on the floor now, Vagabond in his lap. Sparing a glance from the cat, he shrugged. "Why would I need to know that?"

Duncan and Alex both looked taken aback. "It's your heritage," Duncan finally said.

Pook shrugged. "Nah. I'm mostly human. Just cause somebody way back in my family was fae don't mean that I am."

Mina blinked in surprise. *Can he really not know?* "Pook, you ought to realize that you're too strong to—"

"Be running loose with no training whatsoever," Duncan cut in smoothly.

Mina gave him a startled look, but Duncan didn't return the glance; his eyes fixed on Pook. The surly expression the boy had worn earlier had come back. "I ain't completely stupid. I done well enough on my own so far."

"I could use some help, though," Alex said unexpectedly. Then, realizing that everyone was looking at her, she ducked her head to hide the blush spreading across her pale face. "I mean...I don't have much power or anything...but..." She trailed off and stared at her feet.

"Course I'll help you," Pook said immediately, as if there could be no question. He flashed her a grin, teeth bright in his dark face, and she ducked her head again.

God save us, Mina thought grumpily. The boy practically had "trouble" stenciled on his forehead. Still, he'd helped Alex, and both she and Duncan seemed determined to keep him around, as if he were some lost puppy they'd found on the street.

Duncan misses having students, she realized with a guilty stab. *And he's trying to replace them*

with Alex, and now with Pook. As for Alex's reasons for wanting to keep the boy around...that's obvious enough. God, I hope her mother told her all about using preventatives, because that is not a conversation I want to have.

Well, whatever their reasons are, I suppose it won't kill me to go along with them for now. Hell, I owe the faelings of Dere something after what I did five years ago. Maybe this is my opportunity to pay something back.

"Do you have a job?" she asked.

The wariness was back on Pook's face in an instant. "Not really. I don't, uh, work strict hours or nothing," he said, with a false smile.

Mina sighed and reminded herself that she'd been on the wrong side of the law now and again, and that it certainly wasn't her place to judge if he were, too. "We could use someone to lift heavy things," she said, which was true.

Pook seemed to think about it for a moment, then nodded. "I can do that. On a per-job basis, or whatever."

At least he wasn't afraid of hard work. "You can help Alex clean the rooms upstairs, to start with, then."

"I'm going to move into them," Alex said, in response to Pook's inquisitive look.

"Place of your own, huh?" Pook said, obviously impressed. He put Vagabond gently aside; she meowed in displeasure, then trailed after, as Pook followed Alex towards the back. Mina could hear their voices as they ascended the stairs, Pook's cheerful and loud, Alex's quiet and subdued.

"What do you think?" Duncan asked once they were gone.

Mina leaned her hip against the counter and wished for another cigarette. "I think Bryan would have gotten along with him very well."

Even after five years, her heart still ached to think of her friend. Bryan had died badly, enslaved by the Seelie Court and forced to betray Mina and Duncan both. She hated that her last memories of him were so tainted, darkening every other recollection of a soul whose bright cheerfulness had never failed to raise her spirits.

"Yes, I suppose he would have." For a moment, Duncan looked old, the lines in his face etched deeper by grief and weariness. Then he shook his head, as if dismissing some thought.

"Why did you cut me off when I tried to tell Pook that he's more fae than human?" she asked.

"Forgive me, my dear. I didn't think it would do any good, and I feared it would simply start an argument." Duncan's mouth twitched into a thoughtful frown. "He hates the fae."

"Do you think so?"

"It seemed plain to me, although I could be wrong. Why he feels that way...I'm not yet certain. There is a great deal that I'm not certain about. Between Alex and Pook, our lives are suddenly thick with secrets."

"Yeah. Do you...do you think he was telling the truth? About the fae in Dere killing people?"

Duncan maneuvered his wheelchair out from behind the counter, pointing it towards the stack of newspapers in one corner. "There is only one way to know for certain."

It didn't take long to find. Together, they dug out the issue that bore the date of Pook's battle with the seelie fae in the chandler's shop. As they poured through its contents, Mina's eye came to rest on a small paragraph buried deep in the back section, almost lost beneath the classified ads.

"Damn it," she said quietly, and passed it to Duncan. He scanned the brief article, his face going grimmer by the moment. When he was done, he flung the paper to the ground.

"Pook was right," he said, after a moment of silence. "It was right there, in front of our eyes, and we missed it."

Mina winced. "Why would we even have looked for something like that?"

"Pook did. And we should have. I should have. After the fall of the Seelie Court, I assumed that all danger was past. That Dere would remain free of anything else inhuman. And here is the result of my folly—children dead. God only knows how many others have suffered."

Mina rubbed tiredly at her eyes. "You can't blame yourself. Neither of us knew."

“Pook knew.”

“Pook is practically a damned fae himself! If anyone in this city’s going to be attuned to things like this, it’s him.” She took a deep, calming breath, telling herself that it was irrational to feel guilty. “And now that we know, we can be on the lookout. We’ll tell Pook to come to us, too, if he suspects something.”

The look Duncan gave her was oddly sad. “Do you think he would?”

“Why not? The more of us there are, the better odds we have in a fight. He can’t have lived this long and not had at least a bit of sense.”

“No. But he may not see it that way.” Duncan shook his head, his earrings catching the gaslight and reflecting it back from the shadow of his hair. “He will ask himself if it is better to go into battle alone...or with potential enemies at his back. Because Pook doesn’t trust us, Mina, no matter what face he puts on it. He doesn’t trust us at all.”

* * * *

Pook left the bookstore that evening whistling merrily. Despite his exhaustion after a long day on his hands and knees, scrubbing years of accumulated filth off Alex’s floors, he felt oddly buoyant. He’d gotten paid for spending time with a pretty girl—not the worst day he’d ever had, not by a long shot.

’Course, you almost didn’t make it to this day at all.

Pook’s mood turned sour as his feet carried him back to the slums and Rat Soldier territory. He’d bet his eyeteeth that the seelie Firestarter had sent one of his b’hoys to do him in, and once the faeling found out that the attempt had failed, he was bound to try again, one way or another.

Not that he’ll get the chance. Because that was what being in a gang was all about, wasn’t it? To have somebody to watch your back, somebody who’d help you even the score. As soon as he told Darcy what had happened, the Firestarters better watch themselves, because nobody brawled like the Rat Soldiers.

He went straight to the Trap, no detours. As he pounded down the steps, six faces turned up to stare at him, and conversation suddenly died. Startled by the extra body, Pook almost missed the bottom step and had to catch his balance to avoid falling on his face.

Dubh was seated next to Darcy on top of a pile of old rags. His arm was around her waist, and the smile he gave Pook was sly and cruel. He looked exactly as he had when he’d confronted Pook in the alley two nights ago, except now he wore the undershirt that was the Rat Soldiers’ official uniform.

Pook blinked, taken aback. “What the hell is *he* doing here?” he blurted, too surprised to think before the words came out of his mouth.

For a moment, no one said anything, and it was only then that Pook realized how much trouble he was really in. Darcy rose slowly to her feet, her dark eyes narrowed with rage, and for a moment Pook considered just bolting back up the steps. But that wasn’t how it worked—if he didn’t hold his ground now, show that he wasn’t scared, they’d be done with him in a heartbeat. And then what would he have?

“*He* belongs here,” Darcy said, never taking her eyes off Pook. “He’s a Rat Soldier now. Which you would know if you had bothered to act like you were one, too. But instead, you just do whatever you please, don’t you, Pook? Just run off, desert your post, and leave the rest of us to get knifed in the back.”

Pook winced. “I’m sorry, Darcy. I saw a Firestarter go past, and I followed him—didn’t want them catching us unawares, did I?”

It was as much lie as truth—more, really—and Darcy wasn’t buying it. “Then you should have sounded the alarm, if you were that worried. I’ve had it with you, Pook. Always running off, never sharing your tricks with anyone, acting like you’re above the rest of us.”

His heart started to pound, and his temper rose, like a basilisk that lived coiled in his belly, ready to strike whenever something woke it up. “To hell with that. I bring back as much gin, as much food, as much everything, as anybody else does, don’t I? *More*, don’t I? Have I ever backed down from a fight, huh? Have I ever said I’d just stay home and let everybody else take the risk? Have I? Have I? Then

don't come and fucking put your problems on me!"

Darcy lunged, and if it had just been her, he might have managed to come out on top. But this wasn't a fight—this was punishment, to get back at him for leaving his post, to remind him what his place was. No sooner had Darcy's hard fist bruised muscle down to bone, but the rest were on him, too. Dubh landed a blow to Pook's jaw, Hal slammed a knee into his kidneys, and even Raw and little Meg started kicking and punching. Only Rose hesitated—but she wasn't exactly coming to his rescue, either.

Pook let out a wild yell of pent-up fury and fought back, ignoring the two smallest Soldiers but laying into the rest as hard as he could. He felt his knuckles split against someone's teeth, heard Hal cursing and Darcy snarling. But it was no good. Within moments they had him on the ground, kicking viciously at his ribs, and he curled up on himself instinctively, arms raised to ward off their blows.

And for an instant, just an instant, he was back in the basement with the taste of soot in his mouth, wondering if today would be the day Fergus would go too far, and he'd be dead.

Freeze their blood, their bones! Let the winter inside go, just this once, and see how they like it...

"He's had enough!" Rose yelled, yanking Hal back. "Stop it! Stop, damn you!"

One by one, they backed off. Pook tried to scramble to his feet, but staggered and went down on his knees, as agony flared in his ribs and back. A steady stream of blood trickled out of his nose, and a knot was forming on his jaw where Dubh had hit him.

"You get it, don't you?" Darcy demanded. Her eyes were wild with bloodlust, and her breathing came quick and hard.

Pook stayed in a crouch, trying to breathe without pain. "Yeah," he muttered through swollen lips.

"You ain't going to let us down again, are you?"

He wanted to run, to say to hell with them all and just leave. *But they're all I got. Unless...*

He killed that thought, fast. Alex, Mina, and Duncan might have saved his life, might be offering him a chance to earn a bit of cash, but that was as far as it went. They lived in a big house and had clean clothes and were nobility, to boot. They were being nice to him because he'd helped Alex and because he was a faeling, but there was no denying the truth. Folks like them meant something, while those like him were nothing.

Been nothing all my life. Die nothing, too. There ain't nothing more, not for me.

They'd given him access, however briefly, to a different world. But he had to remember that it wasn't the *real* world, not for him. *This* was reality: the Trap, the Rat Soldiers, the cold, and the filth. And here he had only one set of allies.

"I won't let you down again," he agreed quietly. "I promise."

"You'd better not. Or else next time, we won't be so gentle." Darcy spun and grabbed Dubh's arm, pulling him roughly to her and kissing him on the mouth. A few moments later, they were down on the pile of rags, going at it like crazy.

Everyone else drifted away from Pook. Hal and Meg broke out the gin and started drinking, joined moments later by a screeching Raw. Rose sat rocking and humming to herself, unwilling to meet Pook's gaze. Deciding that he should probably stick around for a while, prove to everybody that he was still one of them, Pook found a relatively clean place on the wall and started his memorial to George.

At first, anger still rode him, a thing of ice and claws. He thought about telling everyone else about the Firestarter who'd tried to kill him, but his rage at the other Soldiers kept him silent. *Screw them. They don't give a damn. Be just as happy if I'd died, probably.*

But after a while, as a charcoal outline took shape on the rough brick of the wall, everything else started to fall away. Pook had never cared for George, but the boy had been a good Rat Soldier, and he drew on those memories to make the drawing come to life. The cocky stance, the proud sneer, the cold eyes that said life was hard and short, all slowly coalesced out of charcoal and damp brick. The pain of the beating ebbed away, forgotten along with hunger and cold, until there was nothing else in the world except for Pook and the wall he used as canvas.

He had no idea how much time had passed when he finished. As he stepped back to look at his handiwork, he became aware of the pain in his body, the exhaustion weighing down his soul. A good

likeness of George stared back at him, taut and angry as he had been in life.

“That’s really good, Pook,” Rose said at his elbow. Her large eyes were round with wonder.

Pook grinned. “No way near as good as what we did in Triumph Square,” he reminded her. They’d painted makeup on General Gladstone’s statue a couple of years ago, terrified that they would be caught by the crushers but, at the same time, elated by their own daring. The prank had made all the papers, too.

Most everybody else had either settled down or left, so Pook decided it was okay to head out. He ducked out the tunnel instead of going back up the stairs. Beneath the pier outside, it was dark and quiet—safe for him to change and heal.

It was like stepping from a beam of chill sunlight into cold shadows, then back out. It hurt, too, as if somebody were stripping his muscle off the bone, one fiber at a time. When he took back his two-legged shape, his jaw still ached, although all the other hurts were gone.

Damn Dubh.

For the most part, he’d always healed—even his scars had gone away the first time he’d shifted. Hell, more than that—the family he’d been left with as a changeling had taken him to the priest, trying to get rid of him and get their own baby back. The priest had dunked him in water, blessed him with salt—even cut him, just like any human boy, though none of it had done any good.

So damn, was I in for a surprise when I got up to take a piss the next morning after I changed, Pook thought wryly.

But it had taken only his first battle with a fae to teach him that any damage they handed out didn’t go away, no matter how many times he put his fur face on. And Kuromori’s tattoo had proved that vulnerability extended to faelings, as well.

Something moved in the tunnel behind him, and he spun automatically, ready for an attack. Dubh’s eyes gleamed like coals in the darkness, and his smile was far, far less than human.

“Not much of a fighter, are you?” he hissed, in a voice like grating pebbles. “Not much of anything at all, that I can see.”

Pook’s hands curled into fists, and he felt the anger coming back. “What do you want?”

“Everything.” Dubh chuckled softly. “I hope you don’t mind that I helped myself to Darcy.”

“You can have her,” Pook said. A puzzled look flashed over Dubh’s face, quickly hidden. *Wonder if he thought I was screwing her? Like I’d want to.* “Besides, she’s got the clap,” Pook lied cheerfully.

Now Dubh looked worried. Muttering a curse, he turned and stalked away into the night, disappearing into the shadows down by the river. *Probably going to scrub himself raw. A little late for that, b’hoy.*

Wanting to put as much space between himself and Dubh as possible, Pook went around to the front of the tenement. Rose was standing there, smoking a cigarette and watching the street. The night was cold and wet, but even so, throngs of people wandered up and down the street, ducking into saloons, dance halls, gambling dens, and brothels, then emerging to weave unsteadily on to the next one in line. Despite the cold, the air reeked of dung, smoke, garbage, and raw gin. A small child pelted past, his rag-wrapped feet splashing loudly in the slush. A moment later, a diminutive mob dashed after him, screaming for blood.

“You need to watch your step, Pook,” Rose said, as he came up. She was shivering a little in the cold, despite her layers of clothing. “Where’d you go the other day? I tried to defend you to Darcy, but...” She shrugged. What he’d done had no defense, not to any of the Rat Soldiers.

“Just drop it,” Pook said testily. He pulled out a cigarette and lit it from hers, then sucked the smoke aggressively into his lungs. *I ain’t afraid of you.* “What’s the story with Dubh?”

Rose shrugged. “I don’t know. He just kind of showed up—new in town, they say. Darcy seems pretty taken with him.”

“He’s a faeling.”

“Really? Damn.” Rose frowned, as if uncertain how to take the news. “You know, I thought he kind of resembled you.”

Pook snorted, thinking of short, pale Mina. “Just ’cause he’s a faeling don’t mean he looks like me. You must have been drinking some bad gin, to think we’re anything alike.” He paused, wondering what he should say. “I got a bad feeling about him.”

When she just shot him a questioning look, he told her about his first meeting with Dubh. Somehow that led to telling her about how he’d almost gotten killed, and how he’d been saved. By the time he finished, Rose’s expression was worried.

“Maybe you ought to tell this to Darcy,” she suggested tentatively.

“What am I going to say? ‘Hey, Darcy, your new boyfriend is part fae, and by the way, so am I. And the lead Firestarter is, too, only he’s a different type and seems to think it’s his mission to kill me.’ She’d just tell me to go sleep it off.”

“You could prove it to her. You know, do that...thing...you do.”

Pook sighed, feeling suddenly tired. “Listen to you, Rose. You’re my friend, and it makes you act all weird. How well do you think Darcy would take it? Or any of the rest?” He kicked restlessly at a fragment of brick, sending it spinning off into the street. “I’m just going to have to deal with this on my own, I guess.”

“What about those other faelings you met today? The ones that helped you? Would they be willing to lend a fist?”

Pook tried to imagine Alex brawling in the street like a g’hal and failed. Besides, she had almost gotten hurt in one encounter with the seelie—no way was he going to endanger her again. And Duncan wasn’t going to be much good in a fight, either.

But Mina...oh yeah. Mina struck him as more than ready and willing to mix it up a bit. How she would react to such a proposal he really couldn’t say, at least not yet. Maybe take a few weeks, get to know her better, but then...

“Maybe,” he said, flashing Rose a grin. “Not tonight, though. You got any money on you?”

“Nothing worth mentioning.” She linked her arm with his and pulled him down the street. “I’m thinking it’s time to relieve a few of these fine revelers of theirs. After all, they’ve clearly had plenty to drink already, and we ain’t had none, so it would only be fair.”

Pook snickered. They had been pickpockets together practically since the day he arrived in Dere. “You read my mind, Rosie-girl.”

“Light reading, faery-boy, light reading it was.”

Chapter Eight

I’m starting to believe that maybe this will work out after all, Alex thought, looking around at what would be her new bedroom as soon as the furniture arrived. She had spent most of the last two days finishing the cleaning, then poking around in the mansion’s attic with Mina and selecting what she needed. As Mina had warned her, the furniture was, indeed, utterly hideous. Most of it was covered with ornamentation, from flowers that resembled nothing in nature to cherubs so ugly that Mina said God would boot them out of heaven.

But, with some perseverance, she had managed to find a bed, a mirror, a small wardrobe, and a couple of chairs that she felt she could live with. One of the frilliest tables had proved to be surprisingly sturdy, so she had claimed it for a worktable, on the reasoning that any experiments of hers could hardly disfigure it any more than the original artist had.

They’d hired a cart, and Pook helped the driver carry the furniture down from the attic. Alex grinned, remembering his imitation of the expressions on the cherubs’ faces.

Hearing his voice outside, she moved to the window and looked out. The cart was in the street, as there was no side alley to pull it into, and it was still about half-full of furniture. Despite the cold of the day, Pook had stripped off his jacket to reveal a sleeveless undershirt, and the coffee-and-cream skin of his arms and shoulders gleamed in the winter sun.

All five of the sisters who helped run the bakery across the street were gathered around him. Steam

rose off the hot chocolate and sweets they were trying to press into his hands—although none of them seemed to be urging him to put his coat back on against the cold, Alex noted wryly. Their lone brother was gesturing frantically at them through the bakery’s window and pointing at the line of waiting customers, but all five seemed bent on ignoring him.

“Alex?” asked Mina at her elbow, and she jumped in surprise.

“Sorry—I didn’t hear you come up.”

“I’ve been calling you for five minutes,” Mina said with a puzzled frown. “Is anything wrong?” She glanced out the window, then made a small sound of exasperation. “Never mind.”

Alex felt her face heat. “I was just, uh, trying to decide if the windows needed cleaning.”

“Why? Can’t get a good enough look now? Oh please, I’m not *that* ancient,” she added at Alex’s attempt at denial. “I know twenty-nine sounds like an old hag to you right now, but I’m not blind or senile yet.” She turned her attention back to the window and shook her head. “Boy’s going to drive that bakery right out of business. For God’s sake, those girls are shameless.” A sudden look of concern passed over her face. “Damn. There’s probably a small army of faeling bastards toddling around Dere.”

Alex flushed again and looked at the floor. Although, being realistic, she knew Pook had probably slept with half the girls in the city—and, for all she knew, half the boys too—it still gave her an odd, almost queasy, feeling in the pit of her stomach. Not jealousy, exactly, because that would imply she thought she had a chance with him. She just...didn’t like to think about it.

Muttering something about fetching Pook before he was dragged off and shagged senseless by the sisters, Mina clumped away down the stairs. Pulling herself from the window, Alex started to follow, then stopped when she caught her reflection in the mirror.

Why did I even want a mirror? Chernovog knew she had no real use for it; certainly she wasn’t going to be primping her hair or trying on any fashionable clothes. Perhaps its best use was in reflecting back the harsh truth: a plump, squat girl with frizzy hair and thick glasses. Somebody even a homely boy wouldn’t look at twice, let alone someone as beautiful as Pook.

She remembered the parties in Ruska, inescapable burdens of her rank as a boyar’s child. They usually took place in the spring and the fall, when Aleksei and his fellow noblemen were on their way to or from the capital. To please her father and keep peace with him, she had tried to take an interest in the boyar’s sons, one of whom would no doubt have been her future husband. But they all had been stupid, or boring, or both.

So their rejection should not have hurt. She didn’t genuinely like a single one of them. Their interminable conversations about hunting and fighting, the only two topics any of them seemed to know anything about, had struck her as repulsive. Even if she had dared to broach a subject she found interesting—the latest discovery about the dynamics of gases, for example—she would have been met with nothing but contempt. Ignorance was one thing, but willful ignorance, such as most of those boys had displayed, made her stomach turn.

Yet the fact that they had sneered at her, laughed at her behind her back, still burned inside like acid dripped onto her heart.

Pook’s voice sounded from downstairs—apparently Mina had dragged him inside, in an attempt to save the bakery from bankruptcy. A moment later, there came the clatter of someone running up the steps, and he appeared, arms laden with a wide assortment of cakes, trifles, and pastries.

“That’s quite a haul,” she said wryly.

“Yeah, the girls from the bakery just gave them to me. People in this neighborhood are really nice,” he said guilelessly. As if he believed that they just handed out sweets to anyone who wandered past. “So, anyway, I figured this would be a good time for a lunch break, and you haven’t had lunch either, so I brought them up.”

Lunch? Alex stared at the mountain of sweets. *Chernovog! My teeth are falling out and I’ve gained three inches around my waist just thinking about it.* She liked sweets as much as the next person—too much, according to her father—but this was a bit extreme.

Pook, however, acted as if this were perfectly natural. *This must seem like a windfall,* she thought, remembering the half-eaten sandwich he had devoured the day he took her to the Sevens.

They spread out a blanket and had an impromptu picnic on the floor. Alex wondered briefly what the baker sisters would think, if they knew he had shared their gifts with her. As they ate, Pook launched into a very funny—and highly improbable—tale about a wicked miser, a dog, and a talking hearthrug. His ash-colored eyes shone bright with laughter, and Alex found herself smiling back at him despite everything.

He's a creature of the moment. Someone who didn't spend his life reflecting on the past or worrying about a future that probably didn't seem very likely to come. Who didn't overanalyze every action, half-paralyzed from the desperate need to be as certain of the outcome as possible.

We couldn't be any more different, she thought ruefully, casting a covert glance at him through her lashes. He was tall and lithe—a dancer's body—where she was short and stocky. Impulsive, while she was analytical. Kind, while she was hard. Magical, while she was about as ordinary as it was possible for a faeling to be.

But at least I have enough magic for this. She had no doubts that he would never even have noticed her if she hadn't been a faeling. At least one good thing had come of her mixed blood. *If only...*

No—there was no point in fantasies. In the fall, if Duncan had not lied, she would go to university. Pook would forget about her quickly and move on with his life. The best Alex could hope for would be to live out her years in quiet spinsterhood.

But even so, she knew that the sweetness of that afternoon would linger in her memories long after all the cakes were gone.

* * * *

It was very dark in Alex's dream. Which, given the overwhelming stench that assaulted her nose, was probably just as well; she didn't think she wanted to see the source of the odor. The scent of rot was the worst, and she could feel something slimy and wet underneath her where she sat on the floor. Trying not to gag, she carefully felt around, hoping to discover her whereabouts.

Damp earth met her fingers. She ran her hands up the raw wall, until they unexpectedly met wooden boards only a few inches above her head. It would be impossible to stand up in this confined space, and for a moment she was assaulted by claustrophobia. She flung her arms out blindly, searching for some exit—and instead found warm, living flesh.

She jerked back with a muffled gasp. "Who's there?"

"Don't be scared." The soft voice sounded familiar, and after a moment she realized that it belonged to the same child she had dreamed of before, trapped in the chimney.

Thank Chernovog—it's just a dream.

Please let me wake up soon.

But as the minutes slipped past, with only the soft sound of breathing to indicate that she wasn't alone, she gave up waiting to awaken. Instead, she sank back onto her haunches, trying not to think of what was on the floor under her—trying to remind herself that it didn't matter, because none of it was real. "What is this place?"

"This? It's the pit." She heard the boy shift—heard, too, the soft clink of chains. "Fergus puts us down here if we've been bad."

Alex swallowed hard. Everything in the dream seemed so incredibly real that she couldn't just ignore the quiet pain in the child's voice. "That's...that's terrible."

"It ain't so bad. I don't mind the dark. I just...I can't sleep here, 'cause of the rats, you know. They'll bite if I don't stay awake and keep them off."

Feeling ill, Alex reached blindly in the dark until she found a hand. It was small and thin, nothing more than bone with a little skin stretched over it.

"It's okay," the boy said again, as if trying to convince himself along with her. "Collin dripped some water down through the cracks this morning, so I could drink. I'll be okay."

But Collin's dead, she wanted to say. He died screaming in the fire.

That seemed too cruel, though. Instead, she asked, "Why did Fergus put you here?"

She sensed the boy's shrug and heard the dull clunk of heavy iron. "Mick was feeling

bad—kept throwing up, until it started coming up blood. So I snuck out the window. I tried to go to a pharmacy, but they wouldn't let me in. One of the men threw a bottle at me. So I stole an apple—I thought maybe that would make Mick better, you know, if he had some good food. But it took too long—Fergus knew I'd been gone. So he got out the belt and whipped me, and put me down here. Said this would show everybody what happens to 'prentices who run off. He kept the apple for himself."

"I-I'm sorry." Alex squeezed his hand a little, fighting off a mix of rage and tears. It would be stupid beyond words to cry over the plight of someone who didn't even exist. Why can't I wake up?

"S'okay. Makes it easier, having you here."

Enough of this. Dream or no, she wasn't just sitting here waiting for things to play out. "Come on—we're getting away from here." She reached for the trapdoor above her head and felt along it, searching for a catch to open it.

"Can't. It's padlocked from the other side. And even if you get out, I'm chained." Then the boy fell abruptly silent, as if listening. A moment later, the heavy tread of boots came to Alex as well. "It's Fergus," he whispered. "Quick! You have to leave! You can't see this!"

* * * *

Alex jerked awake, as if she had been bodily ejected from the dream. Her heart was pounding, and her fists clenched the soft bedcovers. For a moment, she didn't know where she was or how she had gotten there, as if the small room around her were somehow less real than the pit and the boy.

Moonlight streaked the floor of her bedroom, illuminating the ugly furniture and leaching color from the lurid rug so that it looked almost bearable. Vagabond's single eye glowed an eerie green from the foot of the bed, where she lay curled against Alex's feet. The air smelled of soap and polish, but a faint mustiness still rose from the walls. The clop of hooves on the cobblestone street outside grew loud, then faded away again, as a cab made its way past. Otherwise, all was silent.

It's my first night in a new place—I just have the jitters, she told herself uneasily. But that explanation didn't fit the first dream she'd had. *All right then, it's everything. Running away from home, coming to a new land, finding relatives I didn't know I had...no wonder I'm having inexplicable dreams. But that's all it is. There is no deeper meaning.*

Still shivering, she burrowed deep into the coverlets and tried not to think.

* * * *

The Rat Soldiers were on a mission.

They strode down Grinder Street in a pack, a swagger in their step, laughing and yelling and calling out abuse to anyone who looked at them the wrong way. Pook could feel his heart beating strong, the blood surging through his veins. He felt wild and alive, invulnerable, as if he could fly away. Rose passed him the bottle of gin they were busy polishing off, and he took a deep swallow. It burned a line of fire down his throat and pooled heat in his gut.

A path cleared before them through the crowded street. It was a Saturday night, and most workers had gotten their week's wages earlier in the day. All of the brothels, grog shops, gambling dens, and dance halls were going strong, packed with bodies looking for some way to forget their cares. But even the most drunken reveler got out of the way as the Rat Soldiers came through. Anyone who went too slow got shoved to one side, but none stayed around to fight over the offense; they just muttered a few curses and left.

It gave Pook a heady feeling of power, to see all those people getting out of the way of *his* gang. He laughed, drunk on it, even more than on the gin. A g'hal threw a kiss in his direction as he passed by, and he winked at her, letting himself forget for a moment that he was a freak. *Wouldn't it be good if that had been Alex?*

Oh, yeah. He would have grabbed her hand and pulled her into the group with him, let her see people getting out of the Rat Soldiers' way—let her see that he was part of something that was

respected. Or feared; but what the hell, this was his fantasy, he'd call it respect if he wanted to. And if that wasn't enough for her, he'd do something else to impress her. What, he had no idea—something, anything, no matter how crazy it might be.

Darcy turned down an alley, and the rest followed her into the shadows. Pook resented the interruption—he was drunk, and hard, and would rather have wandered the streets and fantasized than go down to the river for the night's work.

Got to pay the rent, b'hoy, he reminded himself. *And dreaming won't do that.*

The soft slosh of water against the banks grew louder, and he caught a whiff of the river. *Wonder where the aughisky and the fideal are tonight,* he thought, unease starting to fight through the haze brought on by drink and desire.

Maybe I ought to ask Duncan or Mina what she might have meant. What all that shit about some sword means.

Maybe I ought to stay off the water, in case she's out there, waiting. Or something worse is.

But that wasn't possible, he thought, as he helped the others drag the boats down the bank. The river was the Rat Soldiers' road, and they used it to make their way in the world, stealing crap off the docks or robbing anybody who passed by and who didn't look too tough. Not to mention that it was the best way to move smuggled goods from one place to another, which was their job tonight.

At least this scheme hadn't been one of Darcy's half-cocked ideas. This had been prearranged by "Mr. Summer," the mysterious benefactor she'd met the day they'd gone into Firestarter territory. Whether he was trustworthy or not was a whole other question, to Pook.

As they ran the boats out onto the water and started rowing, Pook felt trepidation building in his stomach. The dark water that normally soothed him seemed to hide unknown dangers, and every bit of flotsam that bobbed by seemed to take on the shape of a horse's head. He wondered if the aughisky had devoured George's body—and if George had been alive or dead when it happened.

Damn the unseelie fae, anyway, he thought resentfully, throwing himself into rowing so that the boat shot suddenly forwards. *My whole life, they've ignored me, done nothing for me. Nothing but leave me with a family that didn't want me. I hope I never see another one. I hope they all die.*

The Rat Soldiers' tiny flotilla put ashore upstream, on the very edge of town. A cart waited there, accompanied by men swathed in dark coats, mufflers, and hats. The back of the cart was filled with wooden crates, which Pook discovered were surprisingly heavy. The mud of the bank was slick, and Rose and Hal both fell as they lugged the crates back to the boats.

The rowboats rode much lower on the way back. The exertion of rowing made Pook sweat, despite the fact that his boots were now soaked with icy water; but everyone else passed around yet another bottle of gin for warmth. In another boat, little Meg began to sing tipsily; a harsh slap from her brother silenced her.

Let her sing, Pook wanted to say, even though he knew that their lives depended on secrecy. If the crushers caught them now, they would all be hanged as river pirates for sure. *Or don't give her the bottle.* Probably the little girl would end up like Raw, suffering the tremors, sweats, and hallucinations of barrel fever before she even hit puberty.

Not that he hadn't done the same thing himself. After he'd arrived in Dere and found himself just another of a thousand children fighting for life on the streets, he'd taken up the bottle pretty hard. He and Rose would go to Minnow Theater over on Pennywhistle Lane, where somebody had set up a theater and saloon that catered especially to the young bootblacks, newsboys, and orphans who roamed the city. For the first few years, he'd spent half his time drunk, trying to blot out the memory of everything he'd run from.

Because if he fell asleep instead of passing out, then he dreamed. And in the dreams, he could still hear the screams. Far, far better to drink until sweet oblivion took him. All the pain from all the hangovers in the world was preferable to returning to Gloachamuir, even if it was only in his head.

All that had changed when he put on his fur face the first time. Just as it did with wounds, his body wiped away all the traces of alcohol and addiction when it put itself back together. Completely sober for the first time in years, he'd discovered that he could function on his own, after all.

But he still had the dreams.

The gang put in at a small, dilapidated dock behind a darkened house. No one was there to meet them, but Darcy had her instructions from Mr. Summer. They hefted the crates out of the boats, cursing and groaning the whole time, then carried them inside the house and left them in a back room. The place smelled of mice and dust, but Pook had the feeling that it wasn't abandoned, no matter how it looked.

In fact, he would have sworn that he felt eyes watching him the entire time.

Getting paranoid, b'hoy, he told himself uneasily. *This ain't no place any seelie fae's going to be hanging about in, for damn sure. Too close to the river, for starters.*

"Hey, Darcy, how about we take a break?" Hal asked, as they manhandled the last crate inside. He bent over, hands braced on his knees, gasping and panting.

Darcy drained the last swallow out of the bottle, glared at it as if angry it was empty, and then flung it hard against one wall. It shattered into a thousand shards that gleamed in the faint light coming from outside. "Sure. Maybe there's some booze here somewhere."

"Place is deserted," Pook said. His skin had started crawling now, although it was hard to say why. *Damn, but I don't like this house.*

Rose shrugged. "Maybe they left something good. Let's take a look."

Meg and Raw both ran for the stairs, laughing and giggling, as cobwebs tore down and draped their tiny bodies. The rest of the gang spread out, leaving Pook alone in the room with the crates, listening to the bangs and crashes they made as they casually destroyed what little had been left in the house.

He swallowed hard, heart pounding. He felt as if all the noise would wake up...something. Something better left sleeping.

"You're helping out the wrong side, boy."

Pook jumped—the sibilant whisper had sounded right in his ear. But no one was there, nothing at all that he could see, under glamour or not. *I'm imagining things. Gone around the bend. The change heals the body, but my mind's finally snapped, that's all.*

Very slowly, a door on the other side of the room swung open.

Pook froze, certain that something horrible was about to come through. But he saw nothing but shadows on the other side.

Haunted.

Swallowing against a lump of fear in his throat, he cautiously crossed the room and peered through the open door. A set of rickety wooden stairs led down into what he assumed was the basement.

The whisper sounded again: *"What are you waiting for? Scared, child?"*

Hell, yes. Going down there would be pure madness.

Taking a deep breath, he put his foot on the first step down.

The stairs groaned like the souls of the damned, and he hoped they didn't collapse and kill him. Or worse, leave him with two broken legs and at the mercy of whatever was down there. But the rotting wood held under his boots, and he carefully descended to the dirt floor of the cellar.

It was so black that even his unseelie eyes had trouble piercing the gloom. Old shelves hung askew on the rough brick walls, and a few shattered glass jars lay underneath them. The moldy remains of what might have been dried meat dangled from the beams above, but they were so old that they had no scent left. Only the smells of dirt and damp and the nearby river remained.

For a moment, he thought that he had been tricked and that nothing was down here, after all. But as his eyes adjusted to the blackness, he became aware of something squat and hairy crouched in one corner. Its shape was vaguely human, but its arms were grossly elongated, while the rest of it was dwarfish and stunted.

Cold eyes gleamed at him, like a rat's, in the dark. "Who are you?" Pook asked, and his voice quivered despite himself.

A cold chuckle, like the rattle of dry bones. "It's names we're after, is it? I'll tell you mine if you'll tell me yours."

Pook hesitated—but what harm could it do? "Pook."

"Wrong!" The creature screamed with laughter, rocking back and forth, its long arms wrapped

around its misshapen body.

What the hell? The thing—the fae—was crazy. “What do you want?”

“Such a surly tone, and here I’m giving such good advice.” It shook its head in mock sadness, wagging a finger at him. “I want many things. A quiet place like this one, where the sun never comes. The old man who owned this house murdered his wife and buried her in this basement, did you know? Her bones were sweet. And I want the seelie fae to go away, to leave me alone. I want to find a mate and have younglings. Does this answer your question, boy?”

Pook took a deep breath, but his temper was getting away from him. *Not smart, not smart, not with something like this.* “I mean, what do you want with me?”

“You don’t know yourself, yet you seek to know me. But it doesn’t seem fair that one will have help and one will not, does it? The fideal has spoken first, so I shall speak second. Look for the weeping woman, and she will point the way.”

What the fuck? Pook started to curse in frustration—then stopped when the stairs behind him creaked. Startled, he spun, and saw Dubh making his way down.

For once, he was glad to see the other faeling. “Maybe you can make some sense out of this,” he said, turning back towards the thing in the corner.

Only it wasn’t there anymore.

Dubh’s eyes narrowed in suspicion. “Make sense of what?”

“Damn it! There was a thing in the corner—some kind of unseelie fae. It spouted all kinds of crazy talk at me, and I figured maybe you could get some sense out of it, but now it’s gone.”

Dubh’s mouth twisted. “Why would you think I could get some sense out of it?”

Pook frowned, not liking the other boy’s tone. He sounded as if Pook had accused him of something wrong. “Never mind, then.”

He started to push past, but Dubh grabbed his arm roughly. “What did it say? Tell me!”

“Piss off!” Pook wrenched his arm free and headed up the stairs, anger seething in his veins. *Should have known better than to ask that bastard for any help. I hope the whatever-it-was eats him.*

But of course he wasn’t so lucky. Dubh came back a little while later and stared at Pook, as if certain he had some kind of plot afoot. The two boys glowered at each other in silence until the rest of the Rat Soldiers returned. Once in the boats, Pook found himself trying to keep a careful eye on Dubh and the river, both, and although neither offered him any further reason to worry, he didn’t let himself relax until the little flotilla had safely made the trip back to the Trap.

At Darcy’s instruction, the gang had kept a single crate, which they now lugged through the tunnel and into the main room. It hadn’t rained in a few days, but the dirt floor was still a bog that sucked at their shoes. As the portrait of George watched with hollow eyes, Darcy told everybody to stand back, while she wrenched the top off the crate with a crowbar.

It came loose with a scream of nails. Darcy smiled, tossed the crowbar casually into the muck, and grabbed the kerosene lantern from its hook on the wall. “There,” she said with satisfaction, as the light fell over the contents of the crate.

Although cotton cloth had been used as packing, the top level was exposed, and even in the dim light, Pook could see the sullen gleam of iron. He took an instinctive step back, but the exclamations of the others drew him forward again. Cringing inside, he joined them and cautiously leaned over to take a look.

The crate appeared to be packed full of guns and ammunition. Most of them were revolvers that could easily be hidden in a coat pocket, but there were also rifles and shotguns. The memory of his own encounter with a gun made Pook’s stomach turn over queasily, and he shied away from the box.

“Take what you want, b’hoys and g’hals,” Darcy said. She pulled out a revolver herself, hefting its weight in her hand. “These are a bonus from Mr. Summer for a job well done.”

Pook didn’t want to touch any of them, and he could tell that Dubh didn’t, either. The other faeling was hanging well back, and all the color had drained out of his face. But Darcy wouldn’t understand if they didn’t show the same enthusiasm as everyone else. Dubh might appease her temper in bed; but if Pook crossed her again, there would be hell to pay.

Swallowing hard, he reached in and picked up one of the revolvers. The effect was immediate—he felt hollow, as if all his insides had been scooped out, leaving behind only a shell. Cotton packed his ears, his sinuses, even filled the space behind his eyes. All sense of the night, of how many hours he had left until dawn, vanished.

His fingertips burned where they touched the metal, as if it had been dipped in acid. Determined to get rid of the gun as quickly as he could, Pook tucked it into a pocket, where at least its effects were muted.

“Forgetting something?” Darcy asked dryly, pointing to the ammo. Flushing, Pook took a pouch and stuck it in his other pocket.

To celebrate their good fortune, Hal suggested a visit to Hatboy’s Saloon. Pook went with them, but as soon as the drinking had gotten seriously underway, he slipped out. With any luck, everyone would assume that he had just gone off to take a piss or throw up.

There were a dozen fences within easy walking distance, the most notable being Kerry the Gouger, who wouldn’t ask any questions or tell any stories. Kerry operated out of her flat on the third floor of one of the nearby tenements, and she might even be home at this time of night, given that she had a husband and child.

For once, his luck held. Kerry was in and awake. She greeted him with enthusiasm, dragging him inside. Three boarders slept on the floor, forcing Pook to step over them as he followed her back to the kitchen. Kerry’s brass claws, which she used for digging out the eyes of her enemies in fights, lay on the kitchen table like the shed carapace of some fantastic insect.

“Tea?” she asked. When he nodded, she poured him a cup from the kettle hanging over the fire, adding a healthy dollop of whiskey before passing it to him.

“So, Pook, you got yourself a g’hal yet?” Kerry asked, making her own tea and taking a seat across from him. The question wasn’t unexpected—Kerry had taken a liking to him years ago and had gotten as bad as Rose about bugging him over his lack of a social life.

He shrugged, thinking about Alex. “Not really.”

Kerry arched her brow. “What’s that mean? Got somebody in mind? I can give you some pointers if you like. Or I’ll get Archibald in here—he sure knew what he was doing when he courted me, I tell you.”

“You met in a fight over pigs.”

“And he put up a hell of a struggle, didn’t he?” Kerry grinned, revealing the few teeth she had left after a lifetime of hard brawling.

Somehow, Pook doubted that Alex would be very impressed by Archibald’s methods. “Maybe later,” he temporized. “Got some business for you tonight.”

He took out the gun and laid it on the table, glad to have it off him. Kerry immediately became serious, picking it up and examining it carefully. “Good condition. Got any ammo to go along with it?”

Pook nodded and reached into his pocket, drawing out the cloth bag.

And realized that, even through the insulation of the bag, he could feel iron within.

The greater presence of the gun had masked the effect of the bullets, but now there was no question. His blood ran cold, although he tried to keep his expression neutral as he handed over the bag. *Iron. Iron shot. Just like the gun that Firestarter b’hoy used.*

But why? Lead would have to be cheaper, maybe even better, for all I know.

Could it be a coincidence? His knowledge of guns was pretty much zero—maybe there were manufacturers who routinely used iron instead. But what if they don’t? What if somebody’s bringing in guns to kill faelings?

And what is this Mr. Summer up to? Is he just a pawn? Or does he know something?

What’s going on?

* * * *

Mina was sitting in the back room of the bookstore, sorting a large box of books and entering them into inventory, when Pook approached her.

It took a few moments before she realized that she was being watched. Startled, she looked up and

saw him standing like a ghost in the dark doorway, the light from the room outside reducing him to a silhouette. Except for his eyes—she could see the silver flecks gleaming in them, like stars on a winter's night.

“Don't mean to bother you,” he said quickly, and flashed her a lopsided grin meant to appease.

“Come on in,” Mina said, leaning back. He drifted in, silent as a shadow. The gaslight glowed off the white shirt he wore during business hours—the same shirt that Duncan had given him. It stayed at the store; Pook swore that he wouldn't be able to keep it clean, otherwise. So he showed up every morning dressed in suspenders and a sleeveless undershirt gone gray and threadbare from use, stripped them off, and washed up in the icy-cold water from the pump in the back yard.

Since his rather dramatic entry into their lives, the boy had quickly settled into their routine. Glad not to have to carry heavy boxes of books around all the time, Mina had started paying Pook for the odd job, a practice that had expanded, until now he was sweeping the floor and carrying large purchases for customers. His quirky charm had gone over well with most of the regulars, and Mina would swear that Lady RiTor came around twice as often as she had before.

Rummaging in his pocket, he came up with a cigarette and lit it, after first offering it to Mina and being politely refused.

“Can I talk to you for a minute?” he asked. His ash-gray eyes were uncharacteristically serious, and for once his mouth was set into a straight line.

“What's on your mind?”

He took a drag from the cigarette and blew the smoke out his nose. *Nervous. But why?*

Why does Alex get that look in her eye sometimes, like she thinks we're going to turn into monsters? They've both got old ghosts that nobody's even tried to exorcise before.

But at least Alex trusts us...or I think she's beginning to, anyway. Pook puts on a good front, but he's just waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“Something's up,” he said at last. “I've...got reason to think that maybe someone's bringing guns and iron bullets into Dere. I don't know why they're doing it, but thanks to the seelie b'hooy who had me shot, I got an idea of where I might be able to find out. Only I don't got anyone to watch my back.”

Mina cocked her head slightly, scrutinizing the boy. He wasn't telling her the entire story, that was clear. It occurred to her that he might even be fabricating part of it, making a personal quarrel seem like a larger threat to gain her cooperation.

Only one way to find out. And it would be so good to get out again, stretch my wings...

Mina felt a slow, predatory smile cross her mouth. She still remembered the days of hunting with her pack, of tracking down seelie faelings transformed into Knights and Hounds and sending them straight to hell, where they belonged. To run in the night, to indulge in everything it meant to be faeling...

In everything it meant to be *her*.

“So why did you come to me alone?” she asked lazily, although she damn well knew the answer.

Pook smiled, not his usual friendly grin but something sharper, more dangerous. The silver flecks in his eyes shifted color until they glowed softly, like sullen coals. “Cause if I had to pick somebody I thought was spoiling for a fight, that'd be you. You're the one who broke the Seelie Court, ain't you?”

“I had help.”

“Yeah. But you're the one who led them.”

“Maybe. There's more to it than that, though. And remember the price I paid. Duncan nearly died. *I* nearly died. A good friend of mine was killed.

“Whatever you've heard about me, it's probably true. In that last battle, those who joined me freely, I left alone. Those I could coerce to join me, I coerced. And those who were too powerful for simple coercion...I transformed. I did it to save Duncan's life, but that doesn't change the fact that I did it. And if he knew I was out chasing down some seelie faeling with you, there'd be one hell of a fight.”

“We probably shouldn't tell Alex, either,” Pook said regretfully. “She's some kind of genius, but I don't want to see her get hurt, you know?”

Mina chuckled at his assumption of her cooperation. “All right. Do you know where to find this seelie faeling?”

He grinned roguishly, no longer the dark fae, but just a kid ready to do a little fighting. And maybe prove his manhood to himself along the way; God only knew what kinds of things were going on in his head. "Oh, I might have an idea or two."

Chapter Nine

Mina strolled down Grinder Street, her hands in her pockets and the collar of her coat turned up. The street was familiar to her, although it had been five years since her stint as a burlesque dancer at the Sailor's Widow. Many of the saloons and dance halls had changed names and ownership since then, but, even so, there was a sameness about the crowds that made her feel as though no time had passed at all. Their feet had trodden the afternoon's dusting of snow into slush, so the street was a treacherous morass of filth so thick that no cobblestones could be seen. The stench of privies and garbage was muted only a little by the cold air.

"Hey, love, you looking for some fun?" asked a man with a week's worth of stubble on his chin. He lurched out of an alleyway and grabbed her elbow. The gloves he wore had lost most of the fingers, and Mina saw blackened and cracked nails.

She gave him a cold look and invoked a wisp of power. Not much, but enough that he took a step back, whimpering like a dog and shaking his hand where he had touched her.

Mina sighed and kept walking. *Why couldn't Pook be some wealthy dandy instead? For once, I'd like to be invited to the good part of town.*

Well, to be fair, Duncan's noble blood was enough that they could be part of the social set if either of them had the inclination. *Sad thing is, I fit in here a hell of a lot better than I ever would there.*

The entire area was a maze of brothels, saloons, and dance halls, so it took her some time to find the groggery she was looking for. One of the many prostitutes thronging the corners gave her directions to Hatboy's Saloon, along with a suggestion that she might find any number of places better suited to spending any coin she might have. The reason for the warning became clear as soon as Mina stepped through the door; even in this slum, surely Hatboy's was far from the best entertainment to be found. The sawdust on the floor was mixed with mire tracked in from the street, and the stench of that filth mingled with the smell of blood from the rat pit in the corner.

The crowd that thronged the groggery was younger than Mina had expected. Children, still years away from puberty, brawled, cursed, and drank, their presence largely ignored by the teenaged customers. A red-haired youth, whose unbuttoned pea coat exposed a dirty undershirt and suspenders much like Pook's, made an obscene gesture with his tongue in Mina's direction. She rolled her eyes and kept going.

She found Pook leaning against the bar, talking with a girl who looked to be near his age. The girl, too, was dressed in the same style, and Mina wondered what it signified. As she approached, the girl turned towards her and put on a false smile. "Buy us a drink, love?"

Pook punched her lightly on the arm. "Leave her be, Rose. This is Mina." Mischief glinted in his eyes. "Though it is a cold night, and I bet she'd like a spot of something to warm up with, yeah?"

Mina hesitated, then shrugged. What the hell—it'd been a long time since she'd been in a groggery, but she'd done some serious damage to a bottle or three back in the day. The slovenly looking barkeep slouched over at her signal and plunked down three dirty glasses, two of gin and one of whiskey.

Rose drained hers in a single gulp, then flashed a grin at Mina. "You ain't too bad. See you around. And you, faery-boy—stay out of trouble."

Mina took a cautious sip of her whiskey. The stuff was rough and raw, and it burned her mouth and throat. She passed him a cigarette, then lit one for herself, as well. "Pretty girl," Mina said, nodding towards the door through which Rose had departed.

"Rose?" he asked dubiously. "I guess. I like girls with a little something more to hold onto, though. No offense," he added, with a quick glance at Mina's own thin figure.

"None taken." She paused, wondering if she ought to pry or not. The memory of the bakery sisters'

blatant flirtations came back to her, along with the comment she'd made to Alex about faeling bastards. "Not to sound nosey, but you and I both know that faelings, with no idea of who or what they are, can end up in a lot of trouble. I was a bastard—my fae father had his bit of fun and then left my mother to be turned out of her home when she started to show with me. She ended up whoring to support us, then died when a customer got too rough. I was lucky enough to be put in an orphanage, instead of winding up on the streets, even though it meant being indentured. Thanks to the iron collar, I didn't even know that there was anything odd about my heritage until five years ago, when the Seelie Court finally found me. It was...confusing. Frightening, to find out that so little of me was human."

She stopped and took a sip of her drink. Pook had finished his gin, but held the dirty glass loosely in his long fingers, as if he'd forgotten it. His black brows were drawn together in a look of puzzlement. "I don't understand what you're trying to tell me."

Mina ran her hand back through her short-cropped hair, absently pulling it into spikes. "I'm just saying that everything we do has consequences, even if they are for other people. There are spells, you know, to prevent pregnancy. If you don't know any, I'll tell them to you, gladly. But if you even think there are any bastards of yours running around the city, maybe you ought to look into it. Let them know early that they've got magic in their blood, if nothing else."

Pook sighed and set his glass gently on the bar, as if afraid it might break. "Do you ever dream?"

Mina blinked, caught off guard by this apparent non sequitur. "Yeah. Of course I do."

"When I was a real little kid, I used to have these dreams...of snow, and ice, and wind. Someplace far away, where the trees grew thick and tall. It was pretty, but like I was seeing it through a fog, you know? And then I grew up, and my powers came on, and the dreams got so clear it was like they was real. I could feel the wind, taste the snow. Crazy, huh?"

"Yeah."

"Do you ever dream about that place? Or...or about the ocean, maybe? Where the water's black, and chunks of ice kill boats and send their crews to lie on the bottom?"

Mina finished her whiskey. "Can't say that I do."

The smile that touched Pook's mouth was startlingly sad. "Figures," he said wistfully. Then he sighed and absently tried to pat his black hair down around his pointed ears. "Don't worry about it, Mina. I guess my mama didn't want me, and I can't say as I blame her. Wanted a baby that was all human, so she took one and left me behind. I ain't going to put nobody else through that. So no bastards."

Mina still didn't have any idea what Pook's dreams had to do with their topic of conversation, so she simply shrugged it off. "We should probably get moving."

They slipped out of the crowded saloon and into the streets. Pook took the lead, deftly navigating between oyster-sellers, beggars, drunks, and harlots. Bursts of music spilled from the open doorways of dance halls, and she saw his long hands twitch, as if he wanted to fling open his arms and dance there in the street.

After a few minutes of walking, they came to Box Circle, a small public square with a fountain in the center. Pook paused beside the weatherworn statue of an angel that stood close to the fountain. Her wings were folded tight to her back, but her arms were outstretched, pleading.

"We're just on the edge of Firestarter territory now," he said. "We'd better put a glamour over ourselves. If I'm seen, we'll end up in a brawl with the human Firestarters, long before we ever get near their leader."

"Why is that? I thought you said you didn't know the boy who shot you."

Pook shrugged. "Didn't. But I ain't a Firestarter. They might...you know, think I was part of another gang or something. Hit first and ask questions later."

Is there something you aren't telling me, Pook? she wondered. But his expression betrayed nothing, so she let it go for the moment.

They both spun new shapes out of shadows. Mina disguised herself as a young boy but left her clothing untouched. Pook went further, making himself into a pale, blond-haired, blue-eyed man, dressed in unremarkable laborer's clothes. Feeling sure that no one would take note of them, they headed down the street and into Firestarter territory.

“How long has this seelie faelng been here?” Mina asked as they walked.

Pook shrugged, his eyes sweeping back and forth, alert for danger. “The Firestarters are a pretty new gang. They organized and took over some turf that used to belong to the Scallywags. I didn’t think anything of it at the time, of course—gangs come and go, right? Start off fast and hungry, but then they get slow. Somebody bigger and stronger comes along, and that’s the end of it. But if the faelng was behind it from the start, then he’s been here at least since last summer.”

“Which makes sense. A seelie faelng is going to make his move in the summer, when his magic is at its strongest,” Mina put in. “Next question: How long have you been hunting the fae?”

He shrugged. The night painted his dark face with shadows, but the silver sparks in his eyes gleamed. “Longer than that.”

A bunch of kids ran down the sidewalk at them, traveling in a pack. Pook snarled a warning at them before they got close. One five-year-old spat out a stream of abuse in return, but they all swung around and went in another direction. “Pickpockets,” he said when they were gone.

Mina nodded, unsurprised. She thought about the tiny paragraph in the newspaper, the only memorial to children who had probably been every bit as feral and hard as the group that had just tried to set them up. “Why did you decide to start?”

The look he gave her bordered on suspicion. “You mean why do I give a damn what happens to a bunch of dustbin kids?”

Mina felt her temper start to rise and reined it back hard. “That isn’t what I meant at all.”

Pook remained silent for so long that she thought he wasn’t going to answer. “I don’t know,” he said at last. “Lots of reasons, I guess. I seen lots of people die lots of ways, and all of ’em bad. Nobody did nothing for them. Nobody did nothing for...well, it don’t matter. After I got a little older, and I came into my magic, I started to think a lot about the fae. And when I realized what was going on, I figured it was on me to do something about it.”

“Why you?”

He shrugged again. “I’m what I am, Mina. No denying I ain’t all the way human. I got the blood, and I got the magic—that makes it my responsibility, don’t it?”

Boy makes me feel about three feet tall, Mina thought grumpily. “You know that what you’re doing is dangerous, don’t you?”

Pook grinned then, easy and confident. “Nah. Or at least, not yet. I ain’t gone up against any of the Gentry, you know? The great ones. Just the little sprites and such.” Then he sobered. “Besides, I figure I’m going out one way or another. Might as well be while taking a stand.” He came to a halt. “Here we are.”

The street they stood on was not that different from the rest they had wandered through. Pook pointed towards one building that Mina at first thought was another saloon. “I know that the Firestarters hang out a couple of different places, but I got a hunch. I want to check the back room of the grocery—maybe there’s a window or something we can look through.”

He led her back through a small side alley that let out into a yard behind the tenements, saloons, brothels, and grocers that made up this block of buildings. The yard stank like a cesspool, and Mina found herself trying not to breathe too deeply. Lines of laundry swung overhead like ghosts, and the sound of rats came from garbage heaps and privies.

A small light shone from a window that might open onto the grocery’s back room. Pook paused well back in the shadows of the yard, seeming uncertain. “What do you think?”

Mina stole past him. “I think we should see what we can see.”

Like two shadows, they drifted closer to the building, staying just out of reach of the light. Someone had draped a sheet over the window to block the view from outside, but it didn’t fit tightly, and it would be possible to peek through the crack. If they were pressed right up against the window frame, that is.

Most of the empty crates discarded by the grocery were long gone, no doubt scavenged for firewood, but Pook found a pair in the garbage that might hold a little weight. Mina helped him pull them into position, then stepped onto one and peered inside.

There were two people in the room, she saw immediately. The first was a youth, dressed in fancy

clothing that matched Alex's description of the seelie faeling who had accosted her. But the other...

The other wasn't human at all.

He wore a glamour meant to make him appear nothing more than an ordinary businessman, but what Mina saw beneath sent a chill through her blood. His eyes were far too large, the irises the color of molten brass. Reddish-blond hair raced back from his angular face like flames, crackling as he moved. His teeth were sharp as knives, as were his glass-like nails, and his thin mouth looked as if it had never smiled. He had wings of light that stirred the air, and little waves of heat rose off of them as if from a stove.

She remembered Prince Roderick, and how frighteningly inhuman she had found him beneath his glamour. But compared to this creature, he had been the very picture of comforting normality.

What did Pook say about never having faced one of the Gentry before?

Pook cast her a desperate glance. His brown face had taken on a grayish hue, and she saw the fear in his eyes. Keeping her own worry from her features, she gave him a nod of encouragement. He nodded back, swallowed visibly, and returned his attention to the room.

"You are mistaken, Nigel," the fae was saying in a voice like desert wind, like breaking glass. "I have confirmed that your agent failed. Tamnais is still alive."

The faeling—Nigel—shrugged. "What does it matter? He isn't a player in this game."

"Not yet. But he is here for a reason. I hardly believe it to be a coincidence that one of Finn Bheara's brats has become involved. It would have been best if you had killed him yourself, rather than leaving it to an underling who botched the job."

Damn it. It's not just Pook they're after, then.

Bloody hell.

Nigel sniffed haughtily. "Would you stoop to killing a rat yourself, or would you have one of your servants do it?"

"If the rat were about to bite me, I would kill it in an instant."

Nigel frowned. "Very well. But you seem to think Tamnais knows more than he should. Wouldn't it be wiser to discover what, exactly, it is that he knows, before we kill him?"

A contemplative look crossed the fae's inhuman face. "Aye. That is indeed a thought, sister-son. Capture him first, then. But as for any others of his ilk that you find...you know what to do."

Pook clambered down from the crate, clearly having heard enough for one night. Mina followed him back out to the street, her blood thrumming in her veins.

This could be another war. Another war like the one with the Seelie Court.

Another chance to hunt and fight...

No. There was no sense in that, none at all. She didn't want to be hurt, didn't want any of her friends to be hurt. *And yet...*

No.

"Did you hear that?" Pook demanded, once they were well away. "They want to kill us all! That—that *thing* is out for blood!"

"I heard." She put a hand on his upper arm and felt how tense the muscles were. "Don't panic yet. Did you recognize any of the names they spoke? Tamnais? Finn Bheara?"

Pook shook his head. "Nobody I know, but they've got to be unseelie faelings like us, don't they?"

"Maybe. I don't like that a full-blooded fae is involved, though. There's something going on here, something more than what we've figured so far."

"Do you think...do you think the aughisky would help us against the seelie fae?" Pook asked hesitantly.

Mina pondered that. Pook had heard the stories of how they'd defeated the Seelie Court—and how the aughisky had helped them. "I don't know," she said at last. "I never completely understood what her motives were for aiding me against the Seelie Court, to be honest. You have to remember, Pook—the fae do things for their own reasons, and kindness is never one of them. Never."

"Oh," said Pook, looking faintly dejected.

Mina took a deep drag from her cigarette. "Back to the other two faelings that the fae mentioned. I

have the power to find them, if they are in Dere. But if I try...there's a risk that it will lead the seelie fae right to me."

"Don't do it then," Pook said decisively. "We'll find some other way."

She cast him a sideways look. "You might leave the city. It would be safer."

Pook's face flushed sharply, deepening his color. "I ain't scared!"

"I didn't say you were."

"No, you said I might leave Alex and Duncan and you, and probably Kuromori, all in the lurch, while I run off and save my own skin!" he snarled back.

Mina held her hands up in a warding gesture. Damn, but the boy had a prickly temper. *Almost as bad as mine.* "Calm down, Pook, it was just a suggestion. So you're staying. Good. Just remember, the fae aren't omniscient—they have to *find* us first. Dere is a big city, and it's easy to lie low in it. I did that when the Seelie Court was after me."

"Yeah." But he didn't look convinced.

* * * *

Mina left Pook at the fountain and turned her steps toward the Blackrush, heading down through the steep streets of the slums. Hostile eyes watched her from doorways, but she ignored them. Nothing human frightened her anymore. Soon the streets gave way to the docks; she avoided them and joined the river in a quieter, less populated area.

The black water gurgled softly as it slapped the banks. Flotsam bobbed up and down, revealed here and there by flashes of moonlight: a shoe, a sodden newspaper, something that might once have been alive. The stink of slime and sewage wafted from the polluted river.

She half expected to discover Camhlaidh lurking in the shadows around the bridges or to see the aughisky breach the water below. Or, more disturbing, to catch a glimpse of the bean-nighe, the fearsome washerwoman who cleaned the shrouds of those about to die. But the night remained free from fae of any kind.

The river turned and twisted through Dere, and she followed its winding course for some time, until at last she caught a glimpse of her goal. The ruin of the ancient palace of the RiLlyns stood in a curve of the river, its blackened timbers like skeletal fingers against the sky. In the five years since it had burned, only the least-damaged portions had been rebuilt, and the result was a freakish mismatch, part opulent abode, part charred ruin.

Mina used glamour to hide herself from the eyes of the human guards on the walls. Stone parted before her like water, and she found herself on the grounds. Other than the partial restoration of the palace, little had changed since she had last walked there, at least so far as she could tell.

Instinct took her through gardens gone dormant in the winter, past expensive greenhouses stocked with strange plants from all over the world, around a lake dotted with sleeping swans, and into the deserted ruins. Burned beams leaned drunkenly against one another, and a mix of ash and fallen roof tiles made footing treacherous. The upper floors had collapsed into the lower, confusing things further, and Mina was forced to pick her way slowly. The smell of smoke was still strong after all this time, and she suspected that her clothes would be ruined by this little foray.

The wind rose, and a threatening creak came from the unstable walls. Mina stopped, her heart hammering, hoping like hell that the whole thing didn't pick tonight to come crashing down. As she stood silently, a flicker of white amidst the soot caught her eye. Hoping that she had guessed right, she followed it.

Dagmar, Queen of Niune and Sovereign of Thinde, Mannan, and the North Isles, sat amidst the destruction, her ivory dress smeared with ash. As Mina drew closer, she saw that the girl perched atop a throne that had somehow survived the inferno. Cracked marble that had made up the throne room's floor lay all around it, fractured and blackened from long-ago flames.

"Your Majesty," Mina said, and bowed respectfully.

Dagmar tilted her head to one side. Her hair was a bizarre admixture of black and white and straggled loosely down to her waist. Her green eye glowed in the dark, while her brown eye looked like

a pit onto midnight. The bones of her face didn't quite seem to mesh, giving her regard a frightful quality. If any of her human courtiers or lords had seen her thus, they would no doubt have run screaming.

"It's been a long time," Dagmar mused. The wind gusted softly, sending eddies of soot around her. "Are all things well with you and Lord RiDahn?"

"Very well." Mina hesitated, wondering what she should say. She'd never exactly been in a position to learn the finer points of conversing with royalty, after all. "You have our gratitude and our loyalty for restoring Duncan's lands to him."

"It seemed a small recompense for the ones who slew my mother and father." Dagmar smiled cruelly. "But you have not come to relive old times."

"There are fae in the city, Your Majesty. Fae who don't, I think, mean us any good." Briefly, Mina outlined what little she knew. "I wanted to warn you."

Dagmar's lips pursed delicately, and for a moment Mina was reminded uncomfortably of the woman who had given birth to the mixed-blood in front of her. "Do you think they would seek to harm me?"

"I don't know. I don't know what they want in the first place—if they just want to keep on killing unseelie faelings, take up where the Seelie Court left off, or if there's more to it than that."

"Either way, I doubt they will look upon me as anything but an abomination." Dagmar's voice remained matter-of-fact, as if they discussed the weather.

"That was what I was afraid of," Mina admitted. "I wanted to warn you. Human guards won't be able to protect you."

"Yes." Dagmar stirred restlessly, her skeletal fingers playing lightly over her knees. "I love the night," she said abruptly. "But I hate the night, also."

Mina remained silent, not knowing what to say. What sort of hell did Dagmar live in, her blood constantly at war with itself? She belonged to neither night nor day, unseelie nor seelie, earth nor air.

Perhaps an assassin would not be entirely unwelcome.

* * * *

The house was dark by the time Mina returned. She sat down on the edge of the bed without undressing, her heart heavy.

"Coming to bed, my dear?" Duncan asked sleepily, reaching for her blindly in the dark. Mina had to smile a little; most men would wonder where their wives had been for half the night. Duncan just assumed that she had been roaming down by the river and thought no more of it.

She took his hand, felt his long fingers tighten around hers. "Do you remember what Fox said, the day she led us to Alex?"

Duncan pulled his hand free in order to prop himself upright. "I believe she said something to the effect of 'it's started,'" he said, going from sleepy to alert in the space of a heartbeat. "What's happened?"

Mina sighed and shook her head. "I wish I knew."

* * * *

The street outside Blackthorn Books was quiet and peaceful. The rare hansom or brougham rattled through on its way to somewhere else, and a crusher occasionally wandered past on his beat, but otherwise the street was deserted. It was so unlike the slums around the Sevens that it might as well have been a different world.

Pook stood in the shadows across from the bookstore for a while, watching the upper window where Alex slept. On this peaceful street, it seemed almost impossible to believe he had actually seen and heard a fae plotting to kill somebody—or everybody, for all he knew. But he still felt better coming by and making sure that everything was all right. Just in case.

He knew that Mina had put wards on the bookstore; he could feel them on his skin every time he went through the door. And he knew that they were good and strong and could keep out most things likely to wander past. But they couldn't keep out one of the Gentry.

Wrapping glamour around himself, he crossed the street and went to the door. If one of the crushers

were to happen by, he wouldn't see anything more suspicious than a deeper bit of shadow.

Pook wasn't a cracksman; picking pockets was more his style, so he didn't know anything about jimmying a lock. *Could just knock, let Alex know what I'm about...*

Except he wasn't sure how'd she take it, if she'd be pleased or flattered or just pissed at him for interfering. She might figure he'd far overstepped his bounds. So he'd have to satisfy himself with marking the threshold just in front of the closed door and hope it would be enough.

Pook pulled strength from the cobblestones and the night air, weaving them together along with shadow to form a thin thread of magic. Someone had died there a very long time ago; Pook found the faintest remnant of a scream in the earth and bound that into the thread, as well. Satisfied with his handiwork, he carefully spun the thread across the threshold. It lingered for a moment in his fae sight...then sank into the ground, where it would lie dormant until someone intending violence stepped over it. It wouldn't stop them, but at least it would let Pook know that there was trouble.

He stood up and stretched, feeling the bones of his spine pop back into place. There was still the rear door to do, and all the windows he could reach. Long hours' worth of work, but maybe it would help keep Alex safe, if the seelie did decide to go after her.

Maybe.

Chapter Ten

Alex had just stepped out the door of the bookstore the next morning, intending to grab breakfast from a small café down the street, when Pook appeared. His black hair was even more mussed than usual, and his clothing was wrinkled, creased, and dirty. The rising sun sparked off his silver earrings and made him squint.

"Good morning," she said uncertainly, wondering what he was doing there so early. Normally he didn't show up until after business hours had begun. "I'm on my way to breakfast—would you like to join me?"

"Sure." The statement was blunt and vaguely surly; she wondered what had put him in such a poor mood.

"Just let me lock up, then."

They walked down the street to the café and ducked inside. The interior was redolent of coffee and cinnamon, and steam had fogged all the windows. A few other early-morning customers—businessmen and their employees, for the most part—sat at the tables reading the papers and discussing the new tax proposals in disapproving voices. Alex walked up to the counter and was greeted by the proprietor.

"What'll it be, then, miss?" he asked. But as Pook came up, his voice faltered and his eyes narrowed, taking in the shabby clothes and unkempt hair. Pook didn't seem to notice; he was busy eyeing the posted prices apprehensively, as if asking himself how he was to pay for anything. Which probably didn't inspire any further confidence in the proprietor, Alex reflected.

"Two coffees—" she began, but Pook quickly shook his head.

"No, you don't have to," he said, a slight flush darkening his skin further.

"Oh, but you were good enough to share your cakes with me the day I moved in above the store," she reminded him, hoping the excuse would be enough to salve his pride. She didn't want to make him feel bad, but at the same time, he looked so thin and tired that she wasn't about to let him go hungry, either.

He thought about that for a moment. "Well...I was glad to share. But if you want to return the favor, then I guess that's okay."

A few minutes later, they sat down at one of the tables, laden with coffee, cheese, and tarts made with preserved fruit. Pook devoured his share so quickly that Alex wished she'd gotten more. Afterwards, he sat sipping his coffee, his long, brown fingers stark against the white porcelain cup.

"What's wrong?" she asked finally, when it seemed that he wasn't going to say anything.

His dark eyes flicked towards her in surprise; then, a small smile creased his mouth. "Sorry. Guess I

must be bad company this morning.”

“Never,” she said sincerely. “But I can tell something’s bothering you.”

“Yeah.” He twirled his coffee cup around and around, not really looking at it. “We got trouble.”

Alex listened to his account of the previous night’s expedition with Mina. When he was done, all she said was “I would have helped if you had asked.”

Obviously, this was not the response he had expected. Pook opened his mouth, then closed it, then opened it again, looking rather like a fish that had just been landed. “Uh...it was dangerous.”

“So was walking across Ruska in the middle of winter, but somehow I managed that well enough on my own.” Even she could hear the bitterness in her voice.

He blinked. “Well...yeah. I just...you ain’t...you know, you ain’t a g’hal, right? You’re, you know, a noble and all. Not a rough girl like Mina.”

“So I’m no good as a lookout? What if someone had come up on you two when you were busy spying? Wouldn’t it have been a lot safer to have someone in the alley who could have warned you?”

“Well...yeah.”

“Don’t you think I’m at least capable of doing that? Or am I as useless as any woman with an education?”

“Hold on!” He held up both hands, a look of surprise on his expressive face. “Where’d you get that from? I never said nothing like that!”

Alex bit her lip until she tasted blood. *But maybe you thought it. Maybe you...*

No, stop this. This is Pook. Not Father. She forced herself to look up and meet his eyes, to read the worry there.

“I know,” she said finally. “But this affects me as much as you. This Nigel person tried to kill me first, remember?”

“You know, for a minute there, I thought you’d kind of missed the whole part about seelie fae wanting to murder us all.”

“I’ll get back to that. You still haven’t answered my question.”

“All right. I’m sorry.” Pook seemed puzzled, as if asking himself how things had gotten so far off track. “I just didn’t want to see you get hurt.”

“Shouldn’t you have at least let me make that decision?”

He ran a hand tiredly through his hair. “I guess. I didn’t think about it that way.”

Alex’s mouth softened. “I know. But...you don’t understand what it’s like not to be in control of your own life. To feel as if everyone has a decision except you.”

For just a moment, his eyes looked haunted, as if something she’d said had touched a deeply buried nerve. Then the expression was gone, and she wasn’t entirely certain that she hadn’t just imagined it. “I do understand that,” he said, with a ghost of a smile. “And I am sorry. Really. I won’t do it again.” He leaned over suddenly and touched the back of her hand. “Forgive me?”

His fingers looked dark against her pale skin. They were long and graceful, not at all like her stubby, scarred, and ink-stained hand. Something quickened deep within her at his touch, and she swallowed hard against the sudden obstruction in her throat.

“Yes. Of course,” she managed.

Satisfied, he settled back, swirling his coffee around before draining the cup. “So, what say you and I take a look at some of the books in the back, see if we can’t figure out who this Finn Bheara and Tannais are before Duncan and Mina even get here?”

* * * *

Pook snagged his work shirt off the hook in the back room where it hung, before heading out to the pump in the yard. Even though Alex knew she ought to be collecting books for their search, she found herself drawn to the back door, where she stood and watched him in silence. He unhooked his suspenders and let them hang loose, before stripping off the ratty old sleeveless shirt that he wore in his off hours. There was a small scar, low on his right side, just above the trousers that, without the suspenders, sagged against his hipbones. It looked like the imprint of a tiny hand, white against his dark

skin, and Alex wondered what fae had given it to him.

He leaned over and stuck his head under the spigot. The tattoo on his left arm rippled as he pumped water out, splashing his head and torso so he could wash away the grime. Despite the cold, he laughed, his lean body brown and wet as a seal. When he was done, he shook his head like a dog, flinging water from his thick black hair.

The bakery sisters would pay to watch that, she thought, withdrawing from the doorway. If the bookstore has a bad month, we could always just charge admission every morning.

She had barely begun to pull books down from the shelves when Pook came in, fastening the last buttons on his work shirt. He helped her carry the books to the table in the back, then set about making a pot of tea for her while she began to skim their contents. By the time the brougham pulled up outside the bookstore, she had already discovered a clue.

The wheels of Duncan's chair thrummed over the wooden floor, then stopped in the doorway. At the sight of the towers of books on the table, he lifted a single, gray-brown brow in question.

"I told Alex about last night," Pook said, obviously assuming that Mina had done the same with Duncan. "We got to work right after breakfast, and Alex has already managed to find out who Finn Bheara is!"

Something about the look in Duncan's eyes made her realize that he had already known. *Stupid, she berated herself. Of course he does. He's been studying the fae for years. Why didn't I just wait and ask him instead of wasting all this time?*

Duncan smiled, however, as if pleased. "Excellent work. What have you learned?"

Alex cleared her throat nervously. "Well, I found his name in the account by Dell RiSough. RiSough was a mortal man who fell in love with a fae. She actually took him into Faerie with her, for a brief time. But he started to..."

She had meant to say the words "go mad," but they stuck in her throat. The echoes of iron chains and screams, of sobs and desperate pleading, sounded from the dark recesses she had consigned them to. Swallowing hard, she shoved them forcibly away.

"He had to leave," she amended, hoping no one had noticed her lapse. "But once returned to the mortal world, he wrote an account of everything he had seen...including Finn Bheara, King of the Sluagh. The Host."

"Unseelie fae," Pook added helpfully.

"Quite correct," said Duncan. "And the other? Tamnais? Have you found any reference to him?"

Alex shook her head, disappointed. At least Duncan had praised her initiative rather than berating her for wasting her time, but now she feared she would lose whatever approval she had gained. "Not yet. But I haven't looked through all of these." She gestured helplessly at the tower of books in front of her.

Duncan chuckled. "If you had, I would have suspected that you had some heretofore unheard-of magical talent for very fast reading. However, I fear that we may have to go through them."

"You don't recognize the name, then?"

"No." Duncan's long hair rustled against the shoulders of his frock coat as he shook his head regretfully. "The names of most of the fae are unknown to anyone in this world, so I fear that our search may be fruitless. However, we must look anyway, just to be certain."

"You and Mina can help Alex, and I'll keep an eye on the shop," Pook offered.

Duncan nodded briskly. "Very well, then," he said, propelling himself to the table. "Let us begin."

* * * *

Pook spent most of the day trying not to wonder about what was going on in the back room. He'd learned to read a little bit during a brief stint as a newsboy, but he wasn't nearly good enough at it to be much help in that way. It made him feel useless, even though he told himself that *someone* had to keep an eye on the store, after all. Still, he worried that Alex might think he was an idiot for not being a bookworm like the rest of them.

No reason to worry about that, b'hoy. Smart girl like her probably knows you're an idiot.

Business was slow that morning, except for Mrs. Blacksville, who as usual had him climbing ladders

to get down a large selection of horticulture books for her. She spent a few minutes looking at each one, then asked him to get some more off the bottom shelf, since her back wasn't up to bending over so far. After looking at those, too, she selected a single one to buy and had him put all the rest back. They went through the same damn ritual every time she came in, and it would have annoyed the hell out of him, except that she always gave him a nice tip for the trouble.

Around noon, however, a small cart laden with boxes of books pulled up. Duncan came out briefly to look at them. "They're from an estate sale," he explained to Pook. "We'll examine them later and estimate their value. For now, simply unpack and sort them as best you can."

The five bakery sisters interrupted as Pook carried the heavy boxes inside. As usual, they were all asking about his health. For weeks now, they had admonished him against working too hard in the cold and admired his ability to lift boxes out of carts. He was beginning to wonder just how weak and sickly he must look, for them to be so concerned all the time. *Great. I'm not only a pointy-eared freak, and an idiot, but I'm some kind of scrawny invalid, to boot.*

After the sisters left and he had finished unloading, Pook sat down behind the counter and began to sort. The going was slow, because a lot of the titles had words that he didn't know and that kept him from guessing what they might be about. These he put into a pile of their own, which depressingly turned out to be twice as tall as any other stack.

As he reached the bottom of the third crate, he caught sight of something amidst the jumbled contents that didn't belong. A small, flat box, tied to a notebook with a ribbon, lay tucked in between two large books. A single glance at the box was all he needed to tell him that it was valuable. The top was inlaid with ivory and edged in gold. Gemstones set into the center formed what must have been a family crest.

This must've gotten in here by mistake, Pook thought. Wondering if the contents were as valuable as the box itself, he untied the ribbon and opened it.

The box indeed contained treasure, although not the kind he had expected. There were pencils and charcoal sticks, inks and pastels, even a small tray of watercolors that lifted out and revealed various-sized pen nibs underneath. His hands trembling, he opened the notebook and ran his fingers over the pristine paper, feeling its smoothness and imagining how the charcoal might lie on it...

He had occasionally seen art sets for sale in windows, on the rare instances when he had visited the better parts of town. But he had never held one in his hands, never been that close to something so wonderful. He thought about the stupid prank he and Rose had pulled by painting makeup on General Gladstone's statue, about the portrait of George at the Trap, and about all the drawing he'd done on walls over the years. What more could he do with something like this?

Almost without making a conscious decision, he stuffed the set and notebook under his shirt. For the first time, he was glad that Duncan had made him work in something a little less revealing than the undershirt he usually ran around in. Trying to act nonchalant, he stood up and went out through the back room.

"Be right back," he said, sliding out the door. Everyone was absorbed in the books, and the only acknowledgment he got was a vague grunt from Mina, which he interpreted as meaning she'd keep an ear out for customers while he used the privy.

There was a small gap between boards just under the privy's roof. Pook stuffed the art set and notebook inside, then carefully studied it from every angle, making sure it was well hidden. *Perfect.* No one would notice it, and it would be protected from the rain. Even better, he could easily come back at night, climb over the fence into the yard, and remove it, without anyone else the wiser. Then, after a couple of hours of drawing, he could put it back, in equal secrecy.

But it is kind of like stealing from Duncan and Mina, he thought, feeling the first pangs of uneasiness. *I mean, it did come in a shipment for them.*

Yeah, but it was stuck in there by accident, right? Not like it was something they were expecting, or something they paid for. Finders keepers, right? It ain't stealing from them if it wasn't really theirs to start with.

Satisfied with this bit of logic, he went back to the bookstore, humming to himself. His hands itched

to try out those charcoals, and nightfall seemed an impossibly long time away.

* * * *

By the end of the day, Alex's eyes ached and she had a cramp in her neck. Old ink stained her fingers, and her hair smelled like dust and decaying paper. A pang of hunger in her belly reminded her that she'd only had a hot roll from the bakery to eat since breakfast.

Taking off her thick-lensed glasses, she rubbed tiredly at her eyes. The blur to her right that was Duncan seemed to be doing the same thing. Mina slammed her last book closed and tossed it contemptuously on top of the pile. For a moment the stack tottered dangerously, then stilled.

Pook's voice floated back to them from the front of the shop, along with the scratch of a broom against the floor. Alex thought she recognized a popular song, but it was difficult to tell, mainly because Pook couldn't carry a tune in a bucket with both hands. The first few times he'd mangled a song into something unrecognizable, she'd thought it charming. After a whole day of it, she was ready to strangle him.

Duncan let out a resigned sigh, and she remembered that he was a musician. Pook's arias were probably even more painful to him. "I really *don't* wish they'd drowned him at birth," Duncan muttered, as if trying to remind himself of that fact.

Alex put her heavy glasses back on and rose to her feet. Her body ached from sitting in the same position for hours, and she thought wistfully of drawing a hot bath. Unfortunately, that would involve lugging buckets of water from the pump out back, and, at the moment, she barely felt able to drag herself around.

Pook's singing ceased, and a moment later he poked his head through the door. "I put out the closed sign," he said. "Any luck?"

"No." Duncan wheeled back from the table and gave the stack of books an angry glare, as if they had personally let him down. "I fear that Tamnais is an unknown factor. We shall simply have to watch for him."

"Damn." Pook chewed absently on a fingernail, scowling at nothing. "So we're right back where we started."

"Not quite," Duncan replied. Gaslight flickered off his earrings and spectacles as he shifted his weight in the chair. "Thanks to Mina and Pook's excursion last night, we know one very important thing. Whatever is happening in this city, the king of the unseelie fae is involved. Which, I fear, can mean only one thing."

Pook's eyes were round. "What?"

"Mina was correct. The war in Faerie has spilled over into the mortal world. We are all in grave danger."

* * * *

The last thing Alex wanted to do was look at another book—which, given that she had spent a great deal of her life pining through entire winters with nothing to read, struck her as a bit ironic. Nonetheless, she forced herself to reenter the empty bookstore and go to the section on science. Vagabond followed her into the stacks, her tail twitching and her lone eye glowing.

The building took on a different character at night, when everyone else had gone home. The soft creaks that came from the bookshelves as they settled beneath their burdens seemed startlingly loud. The gaslights were shut off for the night, and Alex's solitary candle cast a warm glow over the leather and cloth bindings. The smell of ink and dust rose up all around her, enfolding her like a comforting blanket.

Mama would so have loved this. For the first time, Alex truly appreciated how difficult life in Ruska must have been for her mother. Moira had grown up free to read and to learn, with access to as many books and newspapers as her family could afford. What must it have been like to have arrived in her new home and learned that the husband she had never met expected her to abandon such pursuits as unsuitable for a woman? How had she adapted to hiding books like a shameful secret, to be brought out only during the fleeting summer months when Aleksei was gone? How had she felt when she realized that

Gosha was willing to overlook her oddities and not report her to Aleksei? And what had it been like to raise a daughter in such circumstances, sharing furtive knowledge only when it was safe, afraid of what would happen if they were ever caught?

She had to have known I would be married off to someone just like Father. How she must have dreaded that day.

Or perhaps...perhaps she hoped I might be luckier, that my husband might be more like Gosha, willing to tolerate eccentricity in the woman he loved.

Gosha...ah, Chernovog, I am damned for that, aren't I?

To her shame, Alex found herself blinking away tears. She swallowed them back, knowing that if she gave in, her grief would take her like a storm. *Now is not the time. I have work to do.*

She had not mentioned her plan to anyone else, mostly because she was uncertain what form it would ultimately take. It seemed obvious to her that they needed weapons to protect themselves from any fae, whether unseelie or seelie, who sought to draw them into a conflict. Mina and Pook no doubt had all the weapons they needed within themselves. Even Duncan could defend himself to some extent, and besides, Alex doubted if Mina would let any threat get near him.

But Alex had no such protections. The fae blood in her was too thin. Therefore, she would have to seek some other way.

And maybe...maybe if she succeeded, Pook would see that she wasn't so useless as he seemed to think. That she could be relied on in times of danger. Maybe...

Maybe pigs will fly.

It didn't take long for her to decide on her course of action. Once she had located something that sounded as if it would fit her needs, she carefully read through the instructions twice, then spent an hour studying the diagrams. Vagabond gave up hunting mice and came to curl against her as she sat on the floor.

Once certain that the project would be within her capabilities, Alex slowly began to compile a list of everything she needed. *Brass tubing, small tanks of some sort—I can make those myself if need be, I suppose—welding equipment, sulfur, quicklime, oil...maybe I should plan on doing some of this outside; it would be a shame to blow up the bookstore...*

Satisfied that she had at least a plan of action, Alex gathered up the relevant books and her list and started upstairs for bed.

* * * *

The room was dark and dingy, the only light cast by the feeble lantern in the guard's hand. The walls were stone, for this had once been a fortress, in better, brighter days. But the mortar was crumbling, and mold and filth blackened walls and floor alike. The cold and damp only accentuated the smells of urine and rot that seemed omnipresent in this place.

Alex tried to back away from the scene, but the nightmare refused to let her go. Instead, a hard hand propelled her forward, forcing her towards the huddled thing in the center of the room. The guard lifted his lantern, and she knew what she would see: her mother, bound in chains, her long hair a tangle of filth, the dirt on her face interrupted by the tracks of tears.

Indeed, the light flashed over iron rusted from blood, over rags and tangled hair. But when the figure lifted its face, she saw that it was Pook, instead. The smell of soot, of roasting flesh and burning hair, saturated his clothing. White scars covered his skin, and his nose was badly crooked, as if it had been broken and never set.

She lunged towards him with a cry of anguish, but the cruel hands held her back. A sheet of flame passed between them, and when it died away, nothing was left but ash.

Chapter Eleven

“Damn it! What are they doing?” Rose demanded, coming to a dead standstill in the middle of the

street.

Pook stopped as well, craning his neck over the crowds to see what she was looking at. They'd just come out of Hatboy's, where they'd been drinking along with the rest of the Rat Soldiers. His head was fuzzed with gin, and the smell of blood from the rat pit still clogged his throat and made his stomach uneasy. Meg trailed behind them, probably tagging along with the big kids to see what they would get into. She had a swollen eye where her Dad had pummeled her good, so Pook had been trying to cheer her up by performing some of his "tricks": using glamour to pull ribbons out of her ear or to make it look like a coin disappeared from his hand.

"What? Where?" Meg shouted now, jumping up and down, as if she could leap high enough to see over the clots of sailors, factory slaves, and day laborers filling the street.

Even with his height, it took Pook a minute to figure out what Rose was upset about; but then a cab moved out of his way and he saw. Three b'hoys dressed in long coats stood against one wall, two keeping lookout while the third deliberately painted a word on the brick. It took Pook a minute to puzzle it out; it said "Rummies" and was painted above an older mark that said "Rat Soldiers."

"Damn it." Just what he needed, on top of all his worries about the fae and the guns and everything else. The Rummies held the turf just to the west of the Rat Soldiers, but the border was a good block away from where they were currently making their mark.

You didn't just come in and write your name on another gang's turf, no more than you'd go into somebody's living room and write on the walls there. It wasn't polite, and it pretty much invited a stomping.

Pook grabbed Meg's shoulder to get her attention. "Go get Darcy, okay?" The little girl nodded and ran off. He exchanged a single glance with Rose; then, the two of them started strolling towards the vandals. Pook slipped his right hand into his pocket and fingered the makeshift brass knuckles he carried. They'd started life as a handle on a lid that he'd found dented and broken in an alley, but they'd seen some good service since then.

Pook and Rose stopped a few feet away from the Rummies. By this time, the three b'hoys had noticed them and ceased painting in order to face off. Pook's heart pounded, and he felt as if lightning jettied through his veins. Nervousness touched him—Rose wasn't the best fighter, and he didn't feel like getting stomped by three big guys—but he kept it off of his face. Instead, he slowly reached into his pocket, pulled out a cigarette, and lit it. *Easy as you please, not a care in the world.*

Darcy came at a dead run, and for once Pook was glad to see her. She fell into line beside him, her dark eyes narrowed with fury. "You b'hoys are on the wrong street. Too bad for you, huh?"

The b'hoy who'd been painting took a step forward and spat on the curb. "Maybe we decided we like this street."

Bloody hell. Anger was starting to overcome nervousness—these b'hoys were on *his* turf, trying to take away one of the only things he could lay claim to. "Maybe we got an issue with that," he said.

"Tomorrow night, midnight, right here," Darcy said, ready to go, and Pook felt a surge of affection for her. In this, at least, they were united. "Bring all the b'hoys and g'hals you want."

"Fists?" the b'hoy asked, and Pook had to give him some credit for not being totally stupid.

"Fists," Darcy agreed. But the lines didn't move, both staring at each other, waiting for the other to abandon the scene first. Then Hal came up, changing the odds, and the three Rummies turned slowly, casually away and strolled off, like they owned the street already.

As soon as they were gone, Darcy let go of her temper. "Damn them! Pook—get that shit off the wall *now*! Rose, make sure everybody knows what's up. Damn it!" She kicked the wall savagely, drawing looks from passers-by. "We're going to mess them up but good. Nobody does this to us. Nobody!"

* * * *

Pook had been with the Soldiers long enough to have been in a couple of serious clashes before, but somehow the nerves just never went away. He was jumpy all the next day, thinking about what was going to happen, worrying that the Rat Soldiers would lose and there would go some of their turf. It

wasn't just about ground, after all; it was about money, about making their way in the world. If they lost the street, they wouldn't be able to pickpocket on it in any kind of safety, or roll the drunks, or even get boozed up at Hatboy's. Rose couldn't work the street corners there, and Pook couldn't scavenge through the trash, looking for crap to use or sell.

He tried not to think about it, not when he was at Blackthorn Books. It made him feel weird, the two parts of his life in collision with each other. The bookstore's clean floors and dusty smell were too much at odds with the squalor of the Trap. Duncan's shabby gentility was too different from the drunk old man who beat up Hal and Meg. And Alex's accented voice and soft skin, not to mention her brains...well, it was pretty safe to say that he'd never met anybody like her down on Pennywhistle Lane.

Although, frankly, Mina kind of reminded him of a nicer version of Darcy, when it came down to it. Smarter, too. She could probably have done pretty well with a gang if she hadn't been a factory slave.

"Is something wrong?" Alex asked him over tea that afternoon. The two of them were sitting on the padded bench in front of the big window, watching people stroll by. Her scent, of soap and warm skin, filled his nostrils and made his heart beat like a bird shivering in a cage. Some days he thought about what it would be like to bury his face in her thick hair, pull it down out of the bun she wore it in and let it cascade over his hands.

But today he couldn't sustain the fantasy. *You ain't nothing, b'hoy*, he thought grimly. *Nothing at all. No family, not even a proper name. And tonight you're going to go out and brawl in the street.* He couldn't imagine what her reaction would be if he told her that, but he doubted she would approve. Nobles settled their differences in duels or courts, not with fists and brass knuckles.

"Nah," he said, and tried to give her a cheerful smile. But the smile didn't want to come, and he realized that for some reason it was hard to lie to her. *Losing my touch. Going soft, working here.*

Stupid. It ain't going to last, not for long. Nothing good ever does.

* * * *

The Rat Soldiers swaggered down the street, moving abreast in a ragged line that made people get out of their way. It was late enough, and cold enough, that all but the most die-hard drunks and revelers had gone back to whatever hole they called home. Pook didn't feel the cold, but tonight, neither did any of the other Soldiers, far as he could tell—all of them had stripped down to the undershirt and suspenders that marked them apart from the other gangs. Gaslight from the street lamps shimmered across muscle and scar-crossed skin and caught a glint from eyes that were hot and wild with fear and anticipation.

This is real, Pook thought, his heart pounding madly. His stomach felt clenched into a knot, as it always did before a fight, but he ignored it. *Not the bookstore, not the fancy mansion Mina and Duncan live in, none of that's real. But this is.*

The wind blew his dark hair around his face and keened over the muscles of his shoulders, which had gone taut from nervousness. Both of his hands were wrapped in rags to protect his knuckles, in case he accidentally caught some Rummie's teeth. He wore his makeshift brass knuckles already, but he had a leather blackjack filled with sand tucked into his belt, just in case. That was the big problem with being a faeling, he thought—you couldn't carry a knife like everybody else.

The Rummies approached from the opposite direction, their heavy boots tramping through the muck on the streets with a sucking sound. They all wore long coats that whipped wildly in the wind behind them, and Pook wondered nervously what they might have hidden under there. Fists only, the b'hoy had said the night before, but Pook wasn't going to bet his life that it hadn't been a lie.

They lined up, eyes making contact as combatants singled each other out even before the fight got started. Little Meg was the only Rat Soldier not brawling; she hung back, ready to call a warning if the crushers came or if the Rummies tried something sneaky.

Darcy and the leader of the Rummies faced off in the middle. "We fight until everybody on one side's down, or until the running starts," she said.

As she spoke, Pook eyed up the Rummies. There was a big, ugly blond b'hoy with cauliflower ears who caught his attention. The b'hoy made an obscene gesture at him, leering all the while, like he was

hoping to make Pook his new boyfriend.

“Last one standing, or the running starts,” the Rummie leader agreed.

Pook didn't know who made the first move, just that, all the sudden, the two lines were tearing at each other. “You better start hoofing it, pretty boy,” the blond roared at him.

Pook's blood was up; his vision narrowed, everything coming down to this one b'hoy. “Show me what you got, motherfucker!” he screamed, and then they were on each other, fists flying.

The ugly b'hoy landed first blow; Pook felt a fist connect with his shoulder. The pain was a distant thing, and he was almost glad for it, because it made him realize that the fear in his gut was gone. He fought back, brass knuckles connecting with the other b'hoy's mouth. Blood gushed out everywhere, but the b'hoy barely seemed to notice. He swung one hand at Pook's eyes, fingers poised to gouge. Pook jerked back so that the fingers found his mouth instead, and he bit hard, tasting blood.

The blond's other fist smashed into the side of Pook's head, sending up a clamor of bells in his ear. He could feel wetness trickling down his neck, but again it was distant, detached. The two of them planted their feet and just started trading blows, and the entire world was reduced to Pook's ferocious desire to see this guy lying on the ground. Then, finally, he had his opening: launching himself at the other b'hoy, he rammed his head hard into the blond's jaw. The Rummie's head snapped back, and a moment later, he was laid out on the cold cobblestones.

Wild elation filled Pook, and he could hear himself laughing like a madman. He was untouchable, invincible. Riding the euphoria of battle, he turned and saw Rose and another Rummie fighting it out. It looked like Rose was coming out on the bad end of things, so he waded in, punching the Rummie's kidneys from behind and sending him to the ground. Rose started kicking her fallen opponent, stomping on him with her hobnailed boots, and Pook joined in. The b'hoy curled up, trying to protect himself, but they kept kicking, and within moments there was blood everywhere.

This was better than fighting the fae alone. All those hunts, when it was just him and nobody else...those were scary. Bad. But this...fighting it out with the other Rat Soldiers at his back, all of them with their bloodlust up...this was the best thing he'd ever felt.

Darcy's screech cut through the shouts and punches. Pook looked up and saw that she had been fighting it out with the other leader. Now she had fallen back, her lips swollen and bloody, her nose at an odd angle. Fury showed in her dark eyes, and she screamed out a curse as she thrust one hand into her trouser pocket and pulled out a gun.

Everything slowed down, as if mired in frozen molasses. *Fists only*, Pook wanted to say, and there'd always been the chance it would escalate beyond that, but he'd figured it would be in the form of a Rummie pulling a knife. The roar of the gun firing was unnaturally loud, blotting out all other sounds. Smoke trailed back from the revolver, wreathing Darcy for a moment, making her look almost demonic.

The Rummie leader fell to his knees, hands clutching at his chest. *I know that hurts*, Pook thought, even though he'd been gut-shot, not heart-shot. The Rummie opened his mouth, as if he wanted to protest against the breaking of the rules, but all that came out was blood. Then he pitched face-forward into the street and lay silent.

The fighting had stopped. For a moment, everyone just stared at the dead Rummie, mouths hanging open in horror. Then Darcy looked up and raised her gun again, pointing it at another target.

The Rummies broke, and those that could still run, did. Darcy laughed at them, and after a moment Hal, Meg, and Raw started laughing, as well. Only Dubh and Rose remained silent along with Pook.

Pook felt as if he had been drenched in cold water. Vaguely stunned, he looked down at his boots and saw blood and hair on them. *From where I was kicking that guy.*

Kicking somebody when they were down was just what was done. Winning was all that mattered; nobody would think any less of him for ganging up on the guy with Rose.

Alex would.

To hell with that—Darcy fucking shot somebody! Killed him! And you're worried over breaking a few bones, maybe taking off some skin?

“Well, well, I think that showed them who owns this street,” Darcy said with satisfaction. She sauntered over to Dubh and slid her arm around his waist. “Now, let's go celebrate, before the crushers

come.”

They went, laughing and bragging and swaggering. Pook stood for a moment and watched them, the only family he could claim, and felt cold. Desperately, he wished that he could get back the heady bravado from just a few minutes ago.

You know what they would say, b'hoy. You're weak.

Pasting on a smile, he started after them, sparing only a single glance for the body in the street behind him. But what he saw made him halt for a moment and pulled away even the false happiness.

The b'hoy had been shot in the chest, and it seemed reasonable that a fair amount of blood should have been spilled. But, except for a slight stain on the back of his coat, Pook didn't see any blood at all.

That's crazy, he told himself, hurrying after the others. It must've soaked into the ground or something. I mean, where else would it go?

Chapter Twelve

Alex wearily brushed her hair out of her eyes. After hours of cutting and welding, her back and shoulders ached fiercely, and sweat beaded on her brow despite the coolness of the air. Wincing as she straightened, she took a look at her handiwork. There was still a great deal to do, but a weapon was finally beginning to take shape on her worktable.

After all this, I hope it's effective, she thought glumly. It deviated from any of the recorded means of guarding against the fae, so there was no guarantee that all of her work wouldn't turn out to have been in vain.

She had made certain that she was armed with more traditional means as well, just in case. *Iron. Salt. Rowan. Bells.* Those were old protections, but she was uncertain how effective any of them were, other than iron. Neither Pook nor Mina seemed to mind the sound of bells, although Pook hated salty food. As for rowan, she had no idea where to find such a tree. So she had settled on iron and welded together a makeshift bola: two iron balls connected by a chain rather than a cord. The thing was damnably heavy, and not easy to throw, but with any luck it would at least buy her a few moments in a fight.

She hoped.

Stop worrying about it, at least for tonight, she told herself crossly. It would only keep her awake, despite her exhausted state. *There's nothing more to do for now. Just go to sleep.*

Trying not to think, she changed into her nightdress and let down her long hair. As she brushed it in front of the mirror, she wondered if Mina had the right idea. Certainly a short haircut would keep it out of her eyes while she worked, and she would waste less time maintaining it.

I wonder which Pook would prefer...

Now *that* was a stupid thought. *He probably wouldn't notice if I shaved my head bald and painted it blue.*

As she slid beneath the bedcovers, she took one last glance out the window. At this time of night, the street outside was quiet and still, the silence not even broken by the clop of horses' hooves or the measured tread of a constable. Everyone else was sensible enough to be asleep; only she was mad enough to stay up past midnight.

Or maybe not. A faint glow showed from within the bakery across the street, as if the great hearth within had been stoked. *I know bakers have to get up early, but it's the middle of the night. Anything they bake now will be cold as a stone by morning. What in the world are they thinking?*

Her curiosity piqued, Alex fumbled on her glasses. The light came into focus, and she realized that there was something odd about the faint, warm glow. Although she could see it clearly through her left eye—the one that could pierce glamour—through her right, there was nothing but shadows.

Alex whispered a curse she had learned from the sailors on board the steamer. For a moment, she sat frozen by indecision. It would be sheer folly to investigate; she knew that. *But what if the baker family has been hurt? I can't just sit here and hope they aren't all killed. I have to do something.*

And if I don't do anything, there's no saying that whatever is over there won't come over here next.

God of the waning year, give me strength.

Alex pulled on a dressing gown and a pair of boots, then picked up her iron bola. She tried wrapping it in the skirt of her nightdress to quiet it, but the links of the chain still clanked too loudly as she went down the stairs. Swearing silently, she left it on the counter before slipping out the door.

The night air was cold, but it had lost the deepest bite of winter. Even so, she pulled her dressing gown more tightly around her as she slipped across the street. The door to the bakery stood ajar, and she saw that the bell that normally hung above it was gone. Although she could still see the glow from the hearth in the back, accompanied by a flickering shadow, the front room was silent and still. If she wanted to see more, she would have to go inside.

It took her a long moment to gather her nerve. *I could call a constable for help.* But to anyone purely human, the bakery would seem in perfect order. They would never see that anything was amiss, even if a fae were standing right in front of them.

She had never cared for the bakery sisters, thanks to their determined pursuit of Pook. She had never even bothered to learn their names. But at the same time, she couldn't just go back to bed and pull the covers over her head while they died horribly.

I wish Pook were here. He'd know what to do. Chernovog, why couldn't I have had just a little more magic in me?

Heart pounding, she eased through the open door, praying that the wooden floor didn't creak too much beneath her weight. As soon as she was inside, she crouched down, hiding in the shadows of the counter. The smell of baking bread enveloped her, but there was something amiss about the scent, an acrid tang that she associated more with cooking meat. Hardly daring to breathe, she eased forward, around the counter and to the door that led to the kitchen. This door was open as well, and the bright light of the fire cascaded out. Steeling herself, Alex cautiously leaned forward and peered around the doorframe.

A woman stood inside, sliding a fresh batch of bread loaves out of the great oven. As she turned to lay them beside the pile of those that were already cooling, the yellow light limned her profile in gold. Her hair was dark, but her eyes glowed redder than the coals of the stove. The bones of her face parodied human form, but no one seeing her could mistake her for anything other than fae. She wore a gauzy dress, the cloth of which fluttered and rippled in an unseen wind, first revealing, then concealing, her gaunt form.

The loaves she baked were dark brown and gave off the strange, meaty scent that Alex had noted before. But now that she was closer to the kitchen, she could smell something else: the metallic bite of fresh blood. As the fae turned back to the oven, Alex chanced leaning farther, snatching a quick glimpse of the rest of the kitchen before flattening herself against the wall.

The large table within had been strewn with the ingredients that had gone into making the bread. There was flour, of course, and yeast, and a few other things that seemed normal. But there was also what appeared to be a pitcher half-filled with congealing blood.

That's why the bread smells odd. She's using blood in place of water.

Alex imagined the baker family lying dead in their beds, their blood drained for use in their own oven. Horror ripped through her, and she knew she had to get out before she became the next victim. Heart in her throat, she began to slide carefully back the way she had come.

"Who's there?"

The voice was the roar of the wind in branches, or the hot song of fire as it rushes up to the sky. Alex froze like a rabbit spotted by a hawk, terror coursing through her veins.

There came a whispery crackle, like paper going up in flame, and the fae woman appeared in the doorway. Eyes narrowed, she peered around the darkened shop, and Alex heard her curse the night.

She can't see very well in the dark. Even worse than me, it seems. Maybe I can hide, maybe she won't find me. Oh, Chernovog, please don't let her find me!

Then, very audibly, the woman began to sniff. Her head turned from side to side, like a hound

scenting prey, and Alex saw her mouth split into a horrible grin that seemed to stretch from one ear to the other. “Come out, come out, little one,” the fae sang, taking a step towards Alex. “I know you’re here. I can smell you. Come out, or I shall come to you!”

Without any more warning than that, the fae lunged at Alex, her nails glittering like knives. Alex flung herself to the side, felt those talons scratch across her cheek. The shallow cuts stung horribly, and she let out an involuntary gasp.

“Come here, poppet, and I’ll make it quick,” hissed the fae. “One of Finn Bheara’s spies, are you?”

The fae had somehow gotten between Alex and the door to the street. With nowhere else to run, Alex darted into the kitchen. As soon as the light touched her, she heard the fae give a triumphant shriek.

Weapon, I need a weapon. She grabbed the pitcher of blood from the table and flung it at the fae, hoping to buy just a few seconds of time. It clanged loudly against the doorframe and splattered the room with its contents. Drops of blood hit the coals, popping loudly as they struck, while others dripped slowly down the fire tools standing by the hearth.

“Little bitch! I’ll eat your eyes!” the fae shrieked.

Alex hurled herself blindly at the hearth, felt her hand close on the iron poker. But even as she touched it, clawed fingers knotted in her long hair, jerking her head back so hard that tears sprang to her eyes. She swung wildly, and this time her aim was true. The cold iron of the poker impacted solidly with the fae’s skull, and she let go of Alex, scrambling back from the iron and shrieking like a mad thing.

Alex seized the opportunity and darted out the now-empty doorway, then through the front room. Cold night air slapped her as she ran into the street, and she drew in a breath to scream for the constable.

But something was wrong with the air around her—it seemed to congeal, turning into a sticky morass, slowing her movements and stopping up her throat. She couldn’t seem to get enough breath into her lungs, and her ears popped painfully. *The bookstore—I have to get inside,* she thought hazily, even though it took all her strength to go a single step.

She had left the door unlocked in her haste, and it swung open easily beneath her touch. Certain that she was going to feel those skeletal hands clutching her at any second, she shoved herself through the thickened air, felt it pressing against her as if she struggled through a membrane. Then her foot crossed the threshold, and the spell shattered.

Suddenly able to breathe again, she fell to the floor. Her head spun crazily, but she forced herself to crawl behind the counter, hoping against hope that she could hide there.

A soft glow streamed into the bookstore, as if dawn were coming. Stronger and stronger it grew, until Alex knew that the fae stood right outside. *Maybe she can’t come in. There are wards on the store; Mina and Duncan both said so. Maybe they’ll be strong enough to keep out even something like her.*

The sound of a footstep on the wooden boards shattered her hopes like glass.

* * * *

Mina’s eyes snapped open. There was an odd ringing sound in her ears, and for a moment she thought it was the factory bells, calling her to work a twelve-hour shift in the mill. Then she realized that the sound was too high, and that she wasn’t a factory slave anymore, anyway.

Beside her, Duncan reached out to the stand next to their bed, touching his fingers to a small hand bell. It fell instantly silent, its spell annulled. “Something’s amiss at the bookstore,” he said grimly.

“Shit.” Mina rolled out of bed, grabbing blindly for her clothes. “Alex.”

“I know.” Although Duncan’s tone remained calm, she knew him well enough to read his fear. “Go—you’re faster on your own. I’ll catch up.”

Mina didn’t bother answering, only bolted out the door and to the lift as soon as she had her shoes on. She called in her staff, felt wood covered with frost settle into her hand. A thousand scenarios of disaster ran through her mind as the lift creaked slowly down.

Anything that could get through those wards is damned strong, she thought. *God, don’t let Alex be dead before I can even get there.*

She took one of the horses, throwing on a bridle and disdaining a saddle in favor of speed. As soon

as they were out the gates, she kicked it into a gallop, flattening herself against its neck as it raced breakneck down the street.

Hold on, Alex. Just hold on.

* * * *

Alex scarcely dared to breathe as she listened to the fae cross the floor. “You can’t hide for long, little harlot,” the woman snarled. “I would have killed you easy, but now you’re going to pay for what you’ve done. Perhaps I’ll take you into Faerie with me, let you spend the rest of your days screaming, while I flay off your skin one piece at a time. You’ll be an old, old woman before I let you die.”

The footsteps came to a halt on the other side of the counter. “Come on out. I know you’re there. I can smell your fear.”

A loud yowl made Alex’s heart jump; the sound was almost instantly followed by the fae’s screech of pain. Knowing that she would have no better chance, Alex leapt to her feet and grabbed the iron bola she had left on the counter. “Run, Vagabond!” she screamed, and saw a dark shape dart towards the back of the store and the swinging, cat-sized door there.

The fae turned towards her, and Alex saw that one cheek was marred by angry gashes from Vagabond’s claws. The red outline of the poker glared from the other cheek, as if it had been etched there in acid. The fae lunged, arms outstretched, and Alex flung the weighted chain with all her might.

The chain struck the fae’s arms. Momentum whipped the weighted ends around, wrapping the chains about pale skin. The small iron balls thudded hard into flesh, bruising bone. The seelie’s howl of agony shattered the glass in the front window, sending it cascading into the street outside.

Alex ran into the stacks and crouched there in the shadows, gasping for breath. She could hear the fae growling, too hurt and furious to speak. For a few minutes, there was silence...then, the dull clank of iron hitting the ground.

Please let her give up and leave. Please...

A blast of fiery hot wind punched into the stacks like a gigantic fist. The huge shelves went over, books falling everywhere, and Alex flung her arms over her head in a desperate attempt to shield herself.

Something heavy slammed into her, sending her into the wall. One of the ponderous bookcases hit the floor only inches from her feet, and a few stray volumes rained down on her, but, for the most part, she was untouched.

What...?

A cold clot of shadow went past her, and she caught a glimpse of black fur, horns, and eyes that glowed like sullen coals. A hideous growling came from it, and a moment later it impacted with the fae, sending them both to the ground. Clashing heat and cold sent waves through the air; a few drops of bright blood flew off to speckle the wall.

Pook.

Alex cast about frantically for something, anything, to use as a weapon. Praying that there was some truth to the old stories, she ran to the kitchen in the back and snatched up the saltcellar. The cap stuck, and she swore frantically as she tried to get it open, then finally slammed it hard against the table. It broke in half, and she poured salt into her hand.

Pook and the fae were still locked in combat. There was a haze of steam around them, and shadow and light flickered wildly, making it hard to see what was going on. Alex hesitated, unwilling to risk hurting Pook by accident.

“Hey! Bitch!” she screamed.

The fae spun towards the shout, giving Alex the opening she needed to dash the salt into the woman’s eyes. The fae shrieked and jerked back, one hand going to her face. Her other arm hung limp, bruised and showing the marks of fierce teeth.

The fae was hurt but not defeated. Alex felt the rise of power in the room, the air suddenly breathlessly hot, and she realized in horror that the fae was simply going to fire the entire building and put an end to it all.

A wave of cold came through the front door, like a flood of dark water, extinguishing the flames

before they could be born. The fae turned, snarling, her eyes sealed shut and streaming tears. Mina stepped through the doorway, a staff in her hand and her eyes black as the space between stars.

“Now that isn’t very nice,” she hissed...and grinned, displaying small, sharp teeth.

The black thing that was Pook launched himself at the fae’s back, fangs tearing and horns gouging. Mina brought up her staff at the same moment. All the air seemed to rush out of the room as conflicting powers clashed, and pages ripped from the books whipped up in a sudden whirlwind. Sparks and snow alike burned Alex’s skin, and she hunched down, arms over her head.

Then, suddenly, there was silence. Her heart thudding in her chest, Alex looked up to see that the fae was gone—dead or simply vanished, it was impossible to say. Mina staggered, and then drove her staff into the floor, grounding herself. All the shadows ran back to the corners where they belonged, leaving Pook leaning against the counter. Blood masked the right side of his face, and she saw him wince when he tried to put his weight on one leg.

“You’re hurt!”

He gingerly touched the blood on his face. “Looks worse than it is—you know how head wounds always bleed like a right bastard. What about you, though? Are you okay?”

His fingers brushed her lightly on the cheek where the fae had scratched her. She flushed at the realization that she was still in her nightgown. “Yes, I’m fine.”

Mina went and turned on the gaslights. Seeing the destruction in the room with them, Alex winced. “Oh Chernovog, Mina. I’m so sorry.”

Mina sighed, picked up a couple of books off the floor, and then dropped them again. “Tell us what happened.”

“The bakery...I saw light coming through the windows. She was making bread...with blood.” A cold fist seemed to knot around Alex’s throat, as she remembered what she had seen. “I think...I think she must have killed them.”

Pook’s eyes went wide with alarm, and he limped out into the street. Swearing softly, Mina followed, Alex trailing last. The bakery was silent and still; it seemed impossible that the entire street hadn’t been awakened by the battle. The broken pitcher of blood lay where Alex had thrown it...but all of the bread was gone.

“Damn,” Mina said quietly.

“What...I don’t understand...what was it for?” Alex asked tentatively.

Mina shook her head. “Hell if I know. Come on—let’s check upstairs.”

Alex tried to steel herself as they climbed the stair, certain that they would find nothing but corpses there. But the moonlight streaming through the windows revealed six peacefully sleeping forms, their chests rising and falling with even breaths. Pook bent over the only brother of the bunch and shook him.

“Hey, Marek, wake up,” he said urgently.

Marek failed to stir, however, or give any sign. Pook frowned and shook him harder, but without any more result.

“They’re under an enchanted sleep,” Mina guessed. “They’re not going to wake until tomorrow morning. Leave them.”

They went back to the bookstore. Duncan was there, Vagabond in his lap, surveying the damage with dismay. He listened carefully to Alex’s account of the night, his mouth pressed into a flat, hard line.

“Faery food,” he said at last, as if in answer to a question.

Alex frowned. “The bread?”

“Yes.” He sighed, took off his glasses, and absently began to polish them. “Faery food is enchanted. It can take many forms, but the end result is that anyone who eats it is in thrall to the fae who cast the spell. I’ve heard it said that a second taste will break the enchantment, but that may be nothing more than wishful thinking.”

“Who are they going to feed it to?” Pook asked worriedly. He looked better with the blood cleaned off his face, but bruises stood out starkly against his coffee-and-cream skin.

Duncan shook his head. “I don’t know.”

Alex bit her lip, not wanting to add yet another grim thought to the discussion, but unable to hold

back. "And if the bakers are all right...whose blood did the fae use in the bread?"

No one had any answer to that, but she thought she saw a troubled look pass over Pook's face before he turned away.

* * * *

Alex and Vagabond both spent the rest of the night in the spare bedroom at Mina and Duncan's house. There had been only an hour or two left before dawn by the time they settled in, and Alex hadn't thought she could possibly sleep. Nevertheless, exhaustion brought on by terror got the better of her, and she drifted off shortly before sunrise.

It was cold, cold in the depths of the taiga, so that breath froze and exposed skin turned to ice. Snow muffled the world; the only sounds were the occasional snap of a branch and the crunch of Alex's boots as they broke through the thin crust over the snow. And, of course, the sounds made by the leshy: plaintive wailings that sometimes sounded like a lost traveler, other times like a small child...or, worst of all, the cry of a tormented woman.

Alex stopped her ears to them all, even as she hoped that any pursuit would be drawn off her trail by the leshy's tricks. If only she could ask it for help...but she had nothing to offer in return. Not to mention that the spirits of the forest were deadly dangerous. The odds were stacked against her badly enough; no need to deliberately court destruction at the hands of such a creature.

It was said that the leshy obscured a traveler's footprints in the snow, but she didn't dare count on the capricious whim of one of the faery kind. Instead, she swept the snow behind her with a branch, hoping to erase her trail. The entire time, she kept her ears pricked for the sound of men's voices, or the jingle of harness, or the baying of dogs.

The furs she had stolen from the bottom of her mother's chest were white, offering camouflage, as well as warmth. They covered her almost completely, and she wore a white scarf over her face to keep the icy air from freezing her lungs. A white sheet wrapped her heavy valise, hiding it as well. If pursuit came, she might be able to escape by fading into the snow-covered landscape or climbing into a conifer, heavy with its winter burden.

But Gosha still found me. Or was that later on? Had she killed him yet?

The smell of burning came to her unexpectedly, and she stopped walking. Ahead of her stood a figure, black against the clean white snow. Although soot covered its skin, she thought she caught glimpses of charred flesh beneath. Then it glanced her way, and she saw it had Pook's night-sky eyes.

"What are ye doing here?" he asked, sounding puzzled. The highland accent was stronger in his voice than usual.

Dropping her branch and her valise in the snow, she went to him. The trees rattled overhead as the leshy leapt about like a giant squirrel. "This is my home. The taiga. I should ask what you're doing here."

"Been coming here my whole life. But I never seen you here before."

She shrugged. "It's a big place. That's why I like it. So quiet and empty. You could walk a thousand miles and never see another human being."

"Lonely."

She started to deny the word, then hesitated. She wasn't lonely. The cold of taiga was inside her, as well as out, freezing everything, denying all emotion. Denying everything except the needs of the moment, because to do otherwise would only bring ruin.

Wouldn't it?

"I'm glad you're here," she said finally, quietly. "Have I killed Gosha yet?"

"I don't know." He shivered. His thick, shining hair had been shaved off; she could see the scrapes from the razor on his skin.

"I'm scared," he whispered. "Everything used to be so simple. But now I don't understand half of what's going on. I don't understand nothing."

“Neither do I.” She closed her eyes against him. He shouldn’t even be here in the taiga, should he? He was far, far away in Niune, waiting on the docks for her.

“But you aren’t waiting for me,” she said sadly. “It was just luck that you were on the docks when I came in, wasn’t it?”

The grin he flashed her made her feel warm, dispelling even the cold of the forest. “Been waiting for you my whole life.”

“No.” She closed her eyes and clenched her hands. This isn’t real. Pook would never say something like that to me. “This is just a dream.”

She opened her eyes again, caught once last glimpse of his face, his eyes dark with grief. “Yes,” he whispered hollowly. “Just a dream.”

Chapter Thirteen

To Alex’s great relief, the damage at the bookstore turned out to be far less than it had appeared. Mina, Alex, and Pook worked on gathering the books and putting the bookcases back up, making minor repairs on the shelves as they went. A few volumes were damaged beyond saving, and the front window would have to be replaced, but that was the most of it.

Duncan spent several hours with the constables, giving them a tale of burglars who had apparently been frightened off, as nothing of value had been taken. Around midmorning, the baker sisters—who had been giving their own reports to the police, after awakening to discover the mess in their kitchen—arrived. Although they had looked quite composed coming across the street, the moment they glimpsed Pook, the eldest let out a distraught wail and flung her arms around his neck.

“What an awful ordeal!” she howled. Alex, who had stopped sweeping up broken glass to watch the scene, privately thought the girl seemed to be shoving her breasts into his chest more than the situation really called for.

“Um, yeah,” Pook agreed, looking as though he weren’t sure what to do next. He made as if to pat her on the back, but two of the other sisters promptly attached themselves to either arm.

“The police said the thieves must have used knockout drops on us!” one cried dramatically, as if she had been fatally poisoned, rather than rendered unconscious.

“If only we had a man to protect us!” sniffled the third, blithely disregarding the fact that their brother had been present the entire time.

Mina was having a choking fit that Alex suspected was meant to cover laughter. *Although what’s so funny about it, I don’t see.* As the last two sisters seemed to be seriously contemplating throwing themselves at Pook’s legs, she said, “Your brother’s coming—I’m sure he needs your help, since you all still have a business to run.”

A couple of them cast her cold looks. Reluctantly loosening her death-grip on Pook’s neck, the eldest said, “I’d feel so much safer if you’d stop by later and just...check on us. After hours, of course,” she added, with a glance at Alex.

“Um, yeah. Okay.”

Alex’s belly gave a cold, ugly twist. Suddenly furious with Pook, she grabbed her dustpan full of glass shards and stalked to the yard in back, where she dumped them in the midden. Damn him for just standing there, covered by simpering females rubbing their breasts all over him. And damn them, too. She hated them for being beautiful and slender, for being bold and confident. Bitter envy ate at her heart, and she felt her hands shaking with the force of it.

“You okay?”

Pook stood just outside the back door, watching her uncertainly. For a moment, she almost wanted to slam the dustpan into his face. “What does it matter?” she snapped waspishly.

His black brows drew together in a frown, but instead of replying immediately, he took out a cigarette and went through the ritual of lighting it. Only when he had exhaled a long stream of smoke did he look at her again.

"It was a bad night, and we're all tired," he said gently. "I'm kind of cranky myself, and my head hurts, and I feel like maybe my thoughts ain't together like they ought to be. So if I done something to make you mad at me, then I'm sorry."

She'd been ready for a fight—wanted one, in some perverse way—so his words took her by surprise, disarming her in a moment.

That's cheating, damn it.

"You haven't done anything," she said dully. And it was true. After all, it wasn't Pook's fault that he was beautiful. It certainly wasn't his fault that she was ugly. She'd never had any illusions about a potential relationship, so she really had no one to blame but herself for falling in love with him.

No. She felt cold suddenly. It isn't that, it's just...lust, that's all. Just stupid physical attraction, and I can overcome that. It can't be anything more; I won't let it.

He was watching her with concern in his ash-colored eyes. And she realized what she should have known all along: if he had been cold and aloof, if he had turned his back instead of helping her, if he had sneered at her bookishness and her ideas, then her heart wouldn't hurt so badly now. Physical beauty only went so far, could even have been blotted out entirely by an ugly soul.

"You're right; I'm tired," she said quietly, wishing that she could lie to herself as easily as to him. "I don't know what came over me."

"You should lie down for a while." He put his hand to her elbow, drawing her towards the door, and she went without resistance, as if all her will were gone. "The rest of us will keep working. You'll feel better after a nap."

A part of her wanted to argue, but after the terror and stress of the night before, she lacked the energy. *Loss of sleep does strange things to the brain. That's all this is. Perhaps if I rest a little, everything will seem different.*

Pook watched her climb the stairs, as if afraid it might prove too much for her. "Sweet dreams," he called, and her heart gave an odd lurch, remembering what she had dreamed of him the night before. She turned to say something in reply, but he was already disappearing back into the store, leaving her to climb the rest of the way alone.

* * * *

When Pook walked back out into the store, he saw a man standing uncertainly in the doorway. Mina and Duncan were involved in the cleanup and hadn't noticed him, so Pook sighed, smoothed his hair, and made his way through the wreckage. "Sorry, store's closed," he said, hoping he sounded at least vaguely pleasant.

The man stared around with wide eyes. "So I see...what on earth happened?"

"Burglary," Pook said curtly. *So quit gawking and leave us alone.*

"Oh, dear." The man looked suddenly worried. "I hope nothing was taken. Actually, that's why I'm here, in a way. My uncle died last month, and we sold a batch of his books here."

The conversation had caught Duncan's attention; he rolled over to them, bits of glass crunching under the wheels of his chair. "Is there a problem of some sort?"

The man shifted his attention to Duncan and smiled; clearly, he would rather talk to a lord than to some grubby shop-boy. "I'm afraid that something might have gotten misplaced in one of the crates. It was an art set. Normally it would be of no consequence, but this one had some value."

Pook felt his gut clench. The set was still hidden above the privy, although now the notebook was filled with his sketches. He had never expected that anyone would come looking for it.

Duncan looked puzzled. "An art set? I don't recall seeing anything like that. Pook?"

Pook put on his innocent face, the one he used for shell games and lying to Darcy, but his heart felt sick inside. "Nah, didn't see nothing like that," he said. He made himself meet Duncan's grave, blue-gray gaze for a moment, but it was far too similar to Alex's. *Don't like lying to them.* It was stupid, but it was true.

"Oh." The man frowned in disappointment, then took a card out of his jacket. "If you come across it by some chance, will you let me know?"

“Of course.” Duncan took the card. Pook stood by him, smiling inanely, while the man took his leave.

That guy don't deserve something nice like that set, he reasoned. It'd never even been used when I found it! He'd just...just sell it, that's all. No appreciation for it.

Trying to put it out of his mind, Pook took his broom back up and began sweeping shards of glass. In the heart of each one, a distorted reflection of his own face peered back accusingly.

* * * *

Alex sat in bed that evening, her arms wrapped around her knees. She had tried reading for a while, but her mind refused to focus on the words of the engineering treatise she'd chosen to study, and she gave up. Instead, she sat and stared at nothing, her thoughts a confused muddle.

Everyone had argued that she shouldn't stay in the flat alone, but she had politely refused to be swayed. It might be foolhardy, but she wouldn't give up the precarious freedom that her own residence afforded her. She no longer thought that Mina and Duncan would lock her up in the mansion with them or try to marry her off to someone she hated, but, even so, she couldn't quite bring herself to live totally within their power.

Pook had kept after the argument, long after her relatives had given up. But in the end, even he had been forced to concede defeat.

Pook. I wonder if he had a nice evening. He'd gone over to the bakery after they finished cleaning for the day, keeping his promise to the eldest sister, whatever her name was. Alex had tried not to watch out the window, but it was impossible not to sneak glances. Pook was inside for a long time—eating dinner with them, perhaps. When he'd come out, the eldest sister was with him. They'd talked for a few moments on the street before he took his leave. Although Alex had no idea what they said to each other, her imagination could supply any number of scenarios, all of which featured a budding romance between the two.

This is so stupid. What does it matter? It wasn't any of her business if Pook started seeing the girl. But it still hurt.

Throwing the covers back, she climbed out of bed. Sitting there moping was the height of stupidity. She was no flutter-brained twit with nothing better to do than allow some boy to obsess her, no matter how good-looking he might be. Instead, she ought to be working on her weapons, or reading up on the latest experiments with electricity, or...

Her gaze fell on the battered old valise that she had carried all the way from home. For the most part, it had been emptied of its contents. All that remained were the last pieces of jewelry that she'd not yet had to sell...and her mother's diary.

An odd lump formed in her throat. She hadn't been afraid to face thieves in order to get the diary back...and yet, she had been too afraid to open and read it. It was the last thing she had of Moira, yes...but it was also something that had been written in private, something that held words Moira never expected anyone else to read. And Alex feared that its pages might hold more than she wanted to know.

To her dismay, she found herself blinking back tears. *No. I don't need to look in it. I don't need to know.*

But Chernovog...what if she really had loved Gosha. What if...?

I have to know.

Alex pulled out the diary with trembling hands. The thick book was almost completely filled, as if its pages had determined the number of days her mother would live. Pushing aside the morbid thought, she sat in a chair beside her worktable, where the light was best.

The diary was written in Niunish, which alone had ensured that it would remain unread by any prying eyes at home. Niunish had been like a secret language between Alex and her mother, one in which they could share their thoughts freely, without fear of censure. When Alex first heard it spoken by the sailors on the streamer, it seemed odd, as if they trespassed into some private space.

Taking a deep breath, she began to skim the pages, letting individual words snag her interest. The first date was shortly after Moira had come to Ruska. Days, weeks, and sometimes months, passed

between the entries, leaving voids that would never now be filled.

There are many fae in this country...I have found they are not like those at home, precisely, but their power is kindred nonetheless...I am speaking the language better now...Aleksei would not approve if he found me writing this—I must be sure that he never finds it. It would be safer not to write at all, but I have no one else to talk to but myself...Perhaps a child would improve my station here...If only I were pregnant...Aleksei has hired a new man to run the estate while he is away. His name is Georgiy, but asks me to call him Gosha. He is very handsome...Gosha has been kind to me, or, at least, kind as these people understand it. He tolerates much in me that Aleksei would believe unseemly in a woman, and for that I am more grateful than I can say. Sharing his bed when Aleksei is gone seems like a small price to pay for such freedom...I am pregnant at last...

Alex felt cold, and it was everything she could do to force herself to go on.

If it pleases the gods of this barbaric land, it will be a boy-child, for I would not wish this existence on any girl. Their god of the waning year has looked upon me with kindness so far; I've never been caught using my faeling powers. At least the barrenness spell is simple and easily concealed—without it, I could hardly be sure if Aleksei or Gosha were the father. Perhaps I should have gotten a child with Gosha instead, but that would seem too much a betrayal of my wedding vows...

Tears obscured Alex's vision. Taking off her glasses, she wiped at her eyes, but quiet sobs still wracked her. *Thank you, Chernovog.* She was still a murderess...but at least she couldn't add patricide to the list of her crimes.

Still sniffing, she put her glasses back on, intending to return to the diary to its place. But the pages had fallen open to a spot near the back, and the sight of her own name stopped her.

Thank Chernovog for my Dreya. I hate to imagine what my life here would have been like without her. Perhaps I would have ended it myself long ago. She has brought me such joy; but now, as she blossoms into womanhood, I begin to fear for her. Her seventeenth birthday is only a week away, and it won't be long before her father chooses a husband for her.

And that is what I fear. I would send her to a convent if I could! Anything would be better than seeing her married off to one of the brutes Aleksei is likely to choose. Stupid, violent men with no thoughts in their heads, worse than beasts. I never realized before how blessed I've been by Gosha's tolerance. But the chances of such an arrangement coming Dreya's way are few. More likely, she will be wed to some petty lord who can barely read himself, and who will beat her if he catches her at it.

I swear to the god of the waning year that I would trade my own life to give her another chance. I would die happy, if I knew that it meant she would find someone who would love her mind and her heart. Someone who would respect her, even if he didn't understand all of her gadgets and tinkerings. Someone who would put her happiness over his own. If such a man even exists, I would gladly make the trade.

The tears were coming again, and nothing could make them stop. Putting the diary aside, Alex buried her face in her hands and sobbed.

Chapter Fourteen

As the weeks passed, there came no further sign from the seelie fae. Gradually everyone relaxed. The shelves were put back up, the damaged books repaired, and the glass replaced. Customers returned, and life fell back to its normal rhythm, as if the fae had simply vanished from Dere.

Not that Alex believed for a moment that they had. And so, in the evenings, she worked on her weapons, this time without the hope that she would never have to use them.

Time passed more quickly than she realized, so it startled her when Duncan pointed out that the equinox—her eighteenth birthday—was less than a week away.

“I thought that a small get-together to mark the occasion might not be out of order,” he said, as they were closing up one night. “A good meal, some wine, some music, a few friends.”

Alex blushed. “No—that isn’t necessary, really.”

“It is traditional at least to celebrate the equinox here. Even if you don’t want a birthday party, surely you’d like to join us for that.”

Pook turned the *open* sign to read *closed*. He was still wearing his work clothes, and the white shirt contrasted sharply with his dark skin. “Sounds like fun. Can I bring a friend? Kuromori might like to come.”

“Of course,” Duncan said graciously.

Pook grinned and disappeared into the back to change into his street clothes. When Alex didn’t say anything, Duncan gave her an uncertain look. “And you, Alexandrea? I promise that we won’t make a fuss over your birthday if you don’t wish it.”

“I believe you. It’s just that...I don’t have anything to wear to a party,” she admitted, feeling vaguely ashamed. “And I don’t...I mean, I never fit in very well at things like this. It would be better if I stayed here.”

Mina left off petting Vagabond and came over, her dark eyes serious. “This is a faeling party, Alex, not some stuffy formal gathering. You don’t have to come if you don’t want to, but won’t you give it a try, at least?”

Pook must have heard the last sentence as he came back, dressed in the threadbare sleeveless undershirt that he resisted all attempts to change. “You ain’t coming?” he asked.

He almost sounds disappointed.

Don’t be stupid.

“I don’t have anything to wear,” she repeated.

Mina’s grin made her instantly suspicious. “Well, don’t worry about that. I know a woman who owns a dress shop—she used to work as a spinner at the same mill as me.”

“Great!” Pook said enthusiastically. “So you’re coming then, right?”

He looked so pleased that Alex didn’t have the heart to argue anymore. “I suppose.”

And so it was the next day that Alex found herself being dragged out of the store by Mina, who insisted that Duncan and Pook really could manage by themselves for the afternoon, without running the shop to ruin. Although Mina was surprisingly excited about the trip, Alex felt as though her stomach were filled with lead.

The weather was miserably cold and rainy, so they hired a cab. Once they were ensconced inside, Mina shot her a keen look. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were on your way to a funeral, not a dress shop.”

“I don’t mean to seem unappreciative,” Alex said. “It’s very nice of you to take time to do this for me, really. It just seems...wasteful, I suppose. Doing it for me, that is.”

Mina cocked her head to one side. In the dim light of the cab, her eyes looked like black holes in her pale face. “What do you mean?”

“I’m just not one for frills and bows and the like,” Alex said awkwardly. *And because there’s no point in dressing a crow in a peacock’s feathers.*

A sudden vision came to her of Moira, sitting in the sun and sewing peacefully. They had been too

far away from any of the large cities to have such luxuries as dressmakers, so Moira had made almost everything for Alex. She had even sewn waistcoats and fine shirts for Aleksei to wear when he returned with the winter.

Alex burned with shame, remembering the scene she'd witnessed, the last year before Moira's death. Aleksei had crumpled the bill for fabric in one hand, his face flushed red. "*Look at how many yards it takes to cover the girl decently! You're overfeeding that fat, lazy thing! I won't have gluttony and sloth under my roof!*"

As if Aleksei weren't built like a barrel, himself. But it was all right to be a man with a straining waistcoat, apparently. Alex had a sudden, horrible vision of the dressmaker handing Mina the bill, of Mina's eyes widening in shock and outrage.

"Frills and bows make me itch," Mina said, drawing Alex's attention back to the present. "So I'm glad to hear that. Just relax and don't let Gaye talk you into anything you don't want."

Alex nodded unhappily, and they subsided into awkward silence. All too soon, the cab clattered to a halt, and they climbed into the wet, gray day. Cheery light spilled out of the store in front of them. Its wide windows featured mannikins clad in extravagant fashions that offended Alex's practical turn. *Don't women who wear those things do anything? How on earth do they even get about with all those layers and wraps?*

Feeling even more awkward than ever, she let Mina lead her into the shop. The front room was filled with more mannikins; dresses hung from the walls in various stages of alteration, and reams of lace, ribbons, and thread spilled from every surface. As soon as they passed through the door, someone let out a loud shriek, and a moment later Mina was being hugged by a woman in a striking crimson dress.

"Mina, it's wonderful to see you! Or should I say 'Lady RiDahn'?" the woman added, taking a step back. "Oh, really, you're still wearing those awful trousers? But you've come to your old friend to fix that, right?"

Mina laughed. "Sorry, Gaye. You'll have to wait until another day to reform me. It's my niece who needs something fit to wear to an informal party."

Gaye smiled broadly, her teeth white in a face the color of good chocolate. "Welcome to my shop, Miss RiDahn."

The title sounded odd to Alex, and she started to open her mouth to correct the woman. But the protest died on her tongue. *Why not? I don't want anything of Father's. Not even his name.*

"Thank you," she said instead.

Gaye took her hand and pulled her towards the back. "Come with me, and we'll take a few measurements. Now tell me, are there to be any young men at this party?"

"One," Mina chimed in helpfully, tagging along behind them.

"Ah." Gaye led them into a small alcove with a mirror and pulled a curtain to seal them off from the rest of the store. "And is a good impression required?" she asked, after ordering Alex to strip down to her chemise.

Alex felt her face turn red as she undressed. "It isn't like that," she mumbled.

"Of course not, dear," Gaye said placidly.

The next hour was pure torture. Alex submitted to being measured ("Stand up straight, dear."), then stood in her underclothes while Gaye bustled back and forth, holding up swatches of color next to her skin, muttering to herself, and squinting at Alex. "I think I have just the thing," she said at last, vanishing around the curtain. "It came in from Grynith last week...I just have to find it...yes, you're in luck!"

Gaye returned with a dress of emerald silk, trimmed in white and edged with yellow embroidery. She put it on Alex, as if she were nothing more than another mannikin in the store, then spent several minutes pinning and mumbling.

"We'll have to let it out a bit here," Gaye said, tapping the uncomfortably tight waistline, "and take it up here," she added, pinning the bodice so it didn't sag too far open. Standing back, she nodded, then turned Alex to face the full-length mirror in the back of the alcove. "Well? What do you think?"

The girl in the mirror was Alex...and yet was not. The rich green silk brought out unexpected reddish highlights in her hair and found roses in her cheeks. Though long-sleeved, the gown was cut to

almost completely expose her shoulders. The skirt, which Gaye was busy pinning up, was long and full, and would swirl about her with every movement.

"I...don't know what to say," Alex whispered uncertainly.

"Just say you like it," Mina prompted with a grin.

"I do, but...it's not really me...is it?"

"Of course it is," Gaye said, bustling about and clearing away some of the fabric samples she had been using. "A good dress will enhance the beauty of the woman in it, not overshadow it."

Alex privately thought Gaye had to be wrong, but she smiled and nodded. Gaye helped her out of the dress and promised to send it around to Mina and Duncan's house the next day. Mina told her to send the bill there, as well, ignoring Alex's protests.

"Now all we need are some shoes to go with it," Mina said as they piled into another cab. "And, surely, that wasn't a smile I saw?"

Alex ducked her head. "I am starting to look forward to the party a little," she admitted hesitantly. "It will be...odd, I suppose. To be there just to enjoy myself and not to be trotted out in front of a bunch of boys, knowing I'll be married off to one of them someday."

Mina shifted slightly in her seat. "That would be awkward," she said quietly.

"Yes. It was. Mama tried to make it better, but there was only so much she could do." Alex bit her lip, wondering if she had given away too much.

"I know all about feeling helpless. Powerless." Mina laughed, but it was a bitter sound. "You might not think that, not given what you know about me. It's hard when your fate is in someone else's hands and there's not a damn thing you can do about it. Hell, if not for Duncan, I'd *still* be working in a mill under a contract of indenture."

"But you didn't...I mean, you don't seem like you would just accept things passively," Alex offered.

"Neither do you. You're here, not there, aren't you?"

Alex hesitated, her heart beating hard. "I...was afraid," she said carefully.

Mina smiled faintly. "And Niune has hardly turned out to be safe for you, has it?"

Alex's hands clenched in her lap, so hard that the nails drew blood from her palms. "There are things worse than dying."

* * * *

Pook walked slowly along the bank of the Blackrush, smoking a cigarette and thinking. The sun had set some hours ago, and darkness shrouded the river, broken only by the occasional glow of a streetlamp. Although a chill hung in the damp air, he could feel winter loosening its grip on the land. Slowly but surely, the world was turning its face away from him. The spring equinox had never been a time of celebration before, because it marked the balance point between seelie and unseelie power, and the next days would not fall in his favor.

But now...maybe something different for this year. Something different for every year after.

A dry, rasping laugh sounded from the riverbank.

Pook froze, his heart beating hard, as he strove to pierce the shadows with his eyes. A shape moved down by the river, and he heard the wet slap of cloth against algae-slimed rock.

Maybe if I just keep moving...

But he already knew that was impossible; whatever was down there had meant to catch his attention. It wouldn't just let him wander past unmolested.

He drew strength from the earth under his feet, from the dank mist over the water. "Who's there?" he called.

Again the laugh. A faint, nacreous glow rose slowly around the figure, revealing corpse-pale skin and a tattered dress. The fae's eyes had sunk back into her head, like those of something long dead, and blood dripped slowly down her legs, spotting the stones beneath her. In her bony hands she clutched what looked like a shroud, stained with blood.

Pook felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up. "Bean-nighe," he whispered.

The terrifying washerwoman laughed again. "Aye, boy," she cackled, in a voice that reminded him

uncomfortably of the sound of a gravedigger's shovel biting into wet earth.

He felt as if his feet had frozen to the ground. The bean-nighe washed the shrouds of those about to die, and seeing her was a horrible portent for the future. As if she sensed his fear, she chuckled again.

"It's not your shroud I wash this night, child," she said. "The fideal and the mad thing in the cellar speak to you in riddles, but I behold the future. The weeping woman will lead you to the sword. Watch for her."

What the hell? "What woman? There must be thousands of women in Dere, and I'm guessing they all cry sometime. You want to be a little more specific?"

"It would do you no good to learn more this night, child. For before you find the sword, your friends will become your enemies."

His blood seemed to congeal in his veins. "What does that mean?"

"There is no further meaning, and the words are plain enough. The web has already been spun, and the flies cannot avoid it."

Your friends will become your enemies. "No," he said aloud, taking a step back. "You don't know. You're wrong."

Not the Soldiers...

No—that was unthinkable. He and Darcy might not get along, but they both lived by the code that said you watched each other's back, no matter what your personal problems were. Rose had been his friend since childhood; he wouldn't believe for a second that she would ever betray him. As for Dubh...

Wouldn't call him a friend, on the best day.

Which left only three options. *Alex wouldn't betray me, would she? Not her. Not Duncan and Mina. God, please, no.*

"You're wrong!"

He spun on his heel and ran from the fae, half expecting an attack as he did so. But none came, and he ran until he could no longer catch his breath. Stopping to lean against the wall of a building, he took in great gasps of air, ignoring the suspicious looks from passers-by.

She's wrong. She don't know.

But Mina said the bean-nighe told her the truth five years ago.

No. It won't happen. It can't.

I won't let it.

Chapter Fifteen

"That...that can't be me," Alex said, as she looked in the mirror.

Mina shoved the last pin into Alex's hair and took a step back. "Well, I don't see anyone else it could be, do you?" she asked with a grin. "Sorry I can't do anything more to help with your hair, but, well..." She gestured at her own short locks.

"It's all right," Alex said distractedly. Her reflection peered quizzically back at her: a stranger dressed in a green gown, her thick hair pulled back from her face but left to tumble freely down her back. A few tiny silk flowers, fastened to combs, peeped from amidst the curly locks. Her lips were red, and a gentle blush highlighted her cheekbones. A piece of her mother's jewelry, a choker set with emeralds, encircled her neck. She had stowed the amulet Mina had given her under her bodice, so it lay against her skin.

"You look lovely," Mina said, perhaps sensing Alex's trepidation.

Alex blushed. "I'm afraid I look...silly. I don't know."

"Don't be ridiculous. Now, we'd better get moving, or else they'll eat dinner without us." Mina pulled her away from the mirror and down the hall to the lift. *At least I'm not the only one who looks different tonight,* Alex thought, glancing at the simple dress that swished around Mina's legs. It was of ivory silk, with wildflowers embroidered near the hem, and it flattered Mina's slim figure beautifully. *Although it isn't nearly fancy enough for Ruska...they would have laughed at her for looking like*

a peasant. Not that Mina would likely have cared.

The doorbell clanged just as the lift let them out. Duncan emerged from one of the side rooms, dressed in a frock coat and with his long hair drawn back into a neat tail. Fox trailed after him, her ruined finery for once not terribly out of place.

Duncan opened the door. Pook walked through, and Alex felt her feet stumble to a halt. *Oh, Chernovog...is that a kilt he's wearing?*

It was a kilt, in some red tartan pattern that was meaningless to her eyes. Soft, calf-high boots shaped his legs beneath, and a sporran decorated with horsehair hung in front. He wore a black frock coat over all; a profusion of white lace from his shirt showed at the cuffs and neck. His silky hair was as untamed as ever, straggling over his shoulders and giving a glimpse of his delicately pointed ears.

She could feel her heart pounding, but she hung back, half-afraid to come any closer. "This is Kuromori," Pook was saying, gesturing to whoever was with him, but she didn't want to tear her eyes away to look.

"It is an honor, RiDahn-San," Kuromori said, bowing. "Please accept this wine as a small token of thanks."

"And that's Fox," Pook went on, oblivious to good manners. "And Mina, and, uh..."

His searching eyes found Alex where she hung back, and for a moment he looked as if someone had hit him in the head with a heavy object. His eyes widened, and his mouth hung open slightly, and she wondered nervously if there were something amazing standing behind her that she hadn't noticed.

"A-Alex," he stuttered, seeming to remember that he was in the middle of a sentence. He swallowed, dropped his eyes, and suddenly seemed preoccupied with adjusting the hang of his sporran.

Kuromori stepped past Pook and bowed smoothly. He was not overly tall, Alex saw, but he had the look of a man not to be trifled with. He wore a pair of loose trousers and some sort of loose shirt, which was folded over in the front and held closed by a silk sash. Shining black hair, swept back into a modest bun, emphasized his dark eyes.

"An honor, Alex-chan," he said. "Pook-kun has spoken highly of you."

She felt a blush heat her cheeks. "Oh," she mumbled, not sure what else to say. *Pook has? Or is he just being polite?*

Duncan said something about dinner, and there was a general movement away from the front door, towards the dining room. As everyone else drifted away, Pook came up to her. "You look, um, really pretty. I mean, really...wow," he said in the direction of the floor.

She could feel her face getting even hotter. "Thank you. So do you." *I wonder how he could afford those clothes, though.*

He glanced up through his thick lashes, and a quick grin lit his face. "Thanks. I, uh, know you didn't want no fuss about it being your birthday and all, but I, um, got you something anyway. Hope you ain't mad."

He fished a small parcel wrapped in old newspaper out of his pocket and held it out hopefully. Surprised and pleased by the gesture, she took it and carefully unwrapped it. Within the crumpled paper nestled a small watch on a chain.

"I got it for you 'cause you can open the back—see?—and there's all the gears and stuff," Pook said, demonstrating it for her. "And I figured you might like to take it apart and see how it works or something."

A feeling of warmth suffused her. "I—thank you. That was so thoughtful." She didn't have the heart to tell him that she had taken apart her first watch at age eleven. "It's perfect."

He gave her that smile that never failed to make her feel weak in the knees. "Yeah? I'm glad you like it. I didn't think you'd be interested in jewelry or nothing like that."

"No." She smiled ruefully, and reflected that he knew her better than she'd imagined. "Will you help me put it on?"

She held the heavy mass of her hair out of the way, while he fastened the chain about her neck. It probably looked utterly ridiculous with the choker, but she didn't care. His fingers brushed against her skin lightly as he struggled with the catch, sending a pleasant shiver through her entire body.

“There you go,” he said, as he stepped back.

Mina appeared in the door to the dining room. “Are you two coming or not? I’m starved!”

“We’re coming!” Pook called back with a roll of his eyes.

Silently damning Mina, Alex said, “We’d better go in before she drags us. Besides, Duncan spent all day cooking, and he’d be disappointed if we didn’t have any.”

To her surprise, Pook offered her his arm. Swallowing against a sudden tightness in her chest, she slipped her hand into the crook of his elbow and let him escort her to the dining room. The velvet of his coat was soft and warm under her fingers, and she could feel the hardness of muscle underneath. She caught a whiff of sandalwood and the faint, musky odor of his skin.

There were two chairs left at the end of the table; Pook pulled one out for her and took the other himself. The smell of nut roast, fresh bread, berry tarts, and a dozen other dishes filled the air. Mina poured wine for everyone, and then Duncan raised his glass. “A toast to honor the turning of the seasons,” he said. “And, if she will permit it, to Alexandreya’s eighteenth birthday.”

“To Alex,” everyone said, and she blushed. Pook clinked his glass against hers and winked.

“Make a wish,” he said.

After the initial round of drink-pouring and dish-passing, talk around the table settled into a comfortable hum, interrupted occasionally by laughter. Although she suspected she was being impolite, Alex couldn’t have said what most of the conversation was about. She hardly tasted the food Duncan had spent all day cooking, nor the wine that kept refilling her glass. It was as if she and Pook were isolated in a golden bubble, and the rest of the room faded into unimportance. He asked her about the steamship she had been on, and she answered gladly, even telling him, when he seemed interested in the details, how she had fixed the boiler. Their talk wandered from there to other things; and the silver flecks in his eyes flashed like stars when he laughed.

Someone cleared the plate from in front of her, and Alex jumped, startled back to reality. Mina shot her a grin. “In case you weren’t listening, there’s going to be music in a few minutes, in the drawing room.”

Pook stood up and stretched. “Great! I’m going to nip into the garden and catch a smoke first. Want to come with me?”

Alex followed him out through the tall, glass-paned doors that let into the decrepit garden. The light from within cast a faint golden glow over some of the nearest weeds and brambles, but farther back, all was in shadow. Pook went first, cat-sure in the darkness, and cleared away last autumn’s leaves from a marble bench. The stone was cold beneath Alex as she sat by him, and she felt herself shivering a little. Although it was supposed to be spring now, winter had not entirely given up the fight, and the air was chill.

“Here.” Pook pulled off his coat and set it about her shoulders. “I don’t need it so much,” he added at her protest.

“Thank you.” She pulled it more closely around her; it was still warm from the heat of his body. His scent clung to the fabric, and she breathed deeply of it.

A match flared, then died away to the soft glow of a cigarette. They were both silent for a while, but it was a comfortable sort of quiet, and Alex felt herself relax. The occasional sound of voices drifted from inside the house, and hooves clopped by on the street outside; but here, in the garden, everything was still and peaceful.

“Pretty night,” Pook said at last.

Alex glanced at him; he was sitting with his head tilted back, looking at the stars. “Look, the Hunter’s almost gone,” she said. “I suppose winter really is over.”

“It’s that one, right?” he asked, pointing at the constellation.

“Yes. Beside the Scales.”

“Don’t know that one. Don’t know any of them but the Hunter, and I only know him because Mad Carla down on Whiffle Street pointed him out to me once.”

She showed him the Scales. “Mama taught that one to me,” she said, “and others I discovered in books. Duncan has a telescope; I’m sure he’d let us borrow it some night. If you want, that is.”

“I’d like that. Maybe you can tell me the names of some more stars. I remember the first time I saw them, and it was...” He trailed off and shook his head with a sigh.

Alex blinked at him incredulously. “You remember the first time you saw the stars?”

“Well, yeah. I was eleven.”

“How could you not have seen them before then?” she asked, then winced. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to sound so shocked.”

“That’s okay.” He flicked the ash from his cigarette; a dying spark arced away, fading before it hit the ground. “I grew up in Gloachamuir, right? There’s lots of mines near there, in the highlands, and all the ore comes down to the city. The smelters run day and night. The smoke and the glare turn the sky orange after the sun goes down. You’re lucky if you can see the moon, let alone any stars.”

He took a long drag from his cigarette, and then sighed, smoke curling out his nostrils. “I was eleven when I left Gloachamuir. That first night, I slept under a hedge beside the road. I was scared as hell—I’d never been out of the city before. Thought some wild animal was going to come eat me.” He laughed and shook his head at his own naïveté. “But then the stars came out...more and more of them...so many that it just took my breath away. Never seen anything like it, while I was awake. That’s the really funny thing—I used to see them in dreams, even before I knew what they was like in real life.”

She didn’t know what to say. It sounded inexpressibly sad that anyone could go most of his life never having seen stars. The memory of the chimney, of being locked in a pit with rats, came back to her forcefully. *But no—those were just dreams. That wasn’t real. It only existed in my mind, not in Pook’s past. Thank Chernovog for that.*

The sound of a violin being tuned came from within. Pook stood up, his white shirt a smear of light in the shadows. “We ought to go in.”

Alex nodded, even though she would rather have stayed in the garden with him, and gave him back his coat. He pulled it on, then took her hand in his, long fingers feather-light. Her heart lurched so hard, she thought it might have bruised a rib.

Duncan had just finished tuning his violin when they entered. His wheelchair was over to one side, and all the tables, chairs, and couches had been moved out of the way to leave a clear space in the middle of the room. Kuromori sat cross-legged on the carpet beside Duncan’s chair, a wooden flute held loosely in his hands and a serene look on his face.

“Ah, good, there you are,” Duncan said with a smile. “We were just getting ready to start, and of course, if anyone would like to dance, do feel free.”

Not likely, Alex thought. *Not unless anyone wants his toes stepped on.*

Pook, however, tilted his head to one side. As Duncan lifted his violin, Pook moved into the center of the cleared space, his body relaxed but ready. Everyone else watched, faeling eyes gleaming with reflected firelight.

The bow came down across the strings, pulling forth a high, urgent ribbon of sound, like nothing Alex had ever heard before. It was wild, demanding, relentless, calling to her blood and making her muscles thrum.

Faery music.

Pook tilted his head back, eyes closed, body swaying slightly, as he picked up the beat of Duncan’s music. Kuromori’s flute joined in, plaintive notes darting in and out of the violin’s greater song, urging it faster. Then, with a sudden shout that made Alex jump, Pook leapt into motion.

It might have a been a jig he danced, but, if so, it was a wilder version than anything danced by humankind, the perfect accompaniment to Duncan’s feral music. His feet beat out some complicated pattern, tapping, spinning, jumping, his long coat and kilt swirling around his strong legs.

As Alex watched, mesmerized, she felt the rise of the magic, calling an echo, even in her thin blood. Mina whooped and leapt into the circle, twirling around Pook so that her skirts belled out. Her eyes were wild, a hunter’s eyes, cold and fey. Fox had been clapping her hands together in time to the music; now she followed Mina’s lead, gamboling and capering madly.

But it was Pook and Duncan anchoring the magic; Alex could *feel* it, somewhere deep in her bones. She clenched her hands, as her heart tried to beat in time to the rhythm, and she found that despite

herself, her body swayed to it.

No. This was faery music, faery dancing. Mortals had been ensnared in circles like this, danced to death by fae who felt no weariness or pain. This circle was not so dangerous, at least not in that way. *But I'll look like a fool if I try to do that.* Pook's grace made her feel more awkward than ever, and she took a step back, torn between watching him and retreating from the room to some safer vantage point, where she wouldn't be tempted to join in.

Pook spun as he danced, his head thrown back, laughing all the while. Flashing eyes met hers, and she saw the spark of mischief in their depths. "Alex!" he shouted, beckoning to her, and she felt the magic tugging her forward.

"No—I can't—" she protested.

Then Mina whirled past and grabbed her by the hands. "Come on! Have some fun!" Mina laughed, pulling her into the circle.

"No, really," she started to say. But Mina had already let go of her and spun away, and instead, a pair of brown hands closed on her own. Pook tugged her closer, then twirled her around, his eyes bright.

To hell with it, then, she thought, with a sudden flash of rebellion. Abandoning dignity and giving herself over to the magic, she did her best, bouncing and skipping more or less in time with the music. Pook laughed in delight.

Time lost all meaning. Alex forgot to care about whether or not she looked foolish, or whether her hair were coming out of its pins, or even whether Pook thought she was a bad dancer or not. For the first time in a long while, she felt *alive*, deeply conscious of the blood moving through her veins, the breath in her lungs. The misery of the past was gone, and the future not yet arrived, and nothing in the world mattered except the dance and the boy with her. His touch was light and sure, on her hands, at her waist, but she felt the imprint of his fingers as if he had branded her skin.

Gradually, however, the music curled in on itself, the magic dying away like mist before the sun. Alex found herself standing in front of the hearth, her face slick with sweat and her body trembling with fatigue. Her hair had come down, tumbling into her eyes and sticking to her damp cheeks, and she flushed to think what she must look like.

Pook flung himself down on the hearthrug, the lacey ruffles of his shirt heaving up and down in time to his breath. "Damn!" he said happily to the ceiling, a silly grin on his face.

Duncan smiled, as he carefully laid his violin in its velvet-lined case. "I fear that, enjoyable as this has been, an old man such as myself cannot play all night."

Alex looked at the clock, certain that it hadn't been so long, and saw with a little shock that it was well past midnight. *No wonder I'm exhausted.*

Kuromori slipped his wooden flute into a bag and tied it neatly at his waist. "Pook-kun and I must be on our way, is that not so?" he asked, shooting a glance at Pook.

Pook looked disappointed. "I guess." Then he brightened. "Hey, Alex, you maybe need somebody to walk you home?"

"I had planned on spending the night here." *Curse the luck.*

"Oh." He picked himself up off the carpet and shoved his hands in the pockets of his coat. "Goodnight, then."

She walked him to the door. Once there, he hesitated, as if casting about for something to say.

"Thank you for the gift," Alex said tentatively into his silence. "And for the dance."

The familiar grin lit his face like a blaze of light. "Yeah. I had a good time, too." The grin faded a little, and he ran his hand through his unruly hair in a nervous gesture. "I...well. Goodnight."

He turned and walked quickly away, disappearing into the shadows in the yard. Feeling as if she had lost something precious, Alex stood in the open door for a long time, staring out at the night.

* * * *

Pook had hidden his bag behind an ugly statue that stood guard over one of the gates a couple of streets over from Duncan and Mina's house. His normal clothing was inside, damp from the misty

evening, and he shivered a little as he pulled it on. The more formal outfit he had worn to the party he stuffed into the bag. *The best money can't buy*, he thought, with a faint grin. Damn, but he'd had to bust his ass to swipe the whole outfit in time. Stealing Alex's new watch had been far easier; he hoped that she didn't realize how he'd come by it. At least she hadn't thought to ask.

Tomorrow, he'd take the clothing to one of the junk shops and sell it, get a few coins in his pocket for his trouble. And that would be that, an end to the fantasy that had sustained him throughout the evening.

Pook lit a cigarette and started walking, his damp clothes chafing uncomfortably. *It was good to pretend, at least for a little while*, he told himself, even though he could already feel the ache starting in his chest. Tonight had been an opportunity to make believe he was somebody other than Pook. Somebody more than a thief and a guttersnipe. Dressed up all fancy like that, for a little while, he could imagine that he was a lord himself, somebody with a family and a home. Somebody who mattered.

Somebody who might have a chance in hell with Alex.

And hadn't she looked beautiful tonight? Even more than usual, and his throat felt tight, and his body screamed all kinds of demands at him. He'd thought about kissing her in the garden, and again at the door, and a part of him wished he had.

But the truth was, all the fancy clothes in the world couldn't make him any less of a worthless freak. He go could only so far on imagination, and making any moves on Alex would have gone way past that boundary. *Probably would have slapped me silly. Or had Mina kick my ass out the door. Or kicked it out the door herself.*

Alex was staying with her relatives tonight, so that let him off guard duty across from the bookstore. He didn't know what she'd think if she found out he'd been sleeping in the alley across the street, but after the attack by the seelie fae, he'd been too damned nervous to leave her there alone. Tonight though, he thought he'd go by the Trap, find out what the rest of the Rat Soldiers were up to. With any luck, they'd have some good booze, or at least good enough to ease the ache in his heart.

Light filtered up the stairs as he clattered down to the basement flat. A quick glance told him that everyone was there but Dubh, which suited him just fine. "Hey, Rose, you got any gin?" he started to call...but the words died in his throat before they were halfway out.

The rest of the gang had been standing in the center of the room, close together, as if they were whispering secrets. At the sound of his voice, they turned towards him as one, their faces cold and remote as those of strangers.

"Pook," said Darcy. Her eyes rested on him briefly, and he saw none of the hot anger that normally burned there, none of the rage or the passion. Just...blankness.

"Um, yeah," he said uncertainly, coming to a stop at the bottom of the stair. *What's going on here?*

"You're late. We got a job to do tomorrow."

He swallowed, trying to deny the fear that was tightening his balls and crawling up his back. What was responsible for this odd change, he couldn't guess, but he didn't like it. Glancing past Darcy, he tried to make eye contact with Rose, but her face was as blank as all the rest. *Like I'm a stranger, not somebody she's known for years.*

"W-what kind of job?" he asked.

"Never mind that. Just do as you're told." Darcy took a step towards him that would have been threatening, if she'd been behaving normally. Under the circumstances, it was downright terrifying.

"Yeah. Sure." He nodded and smiled weakly, to show that he was on board with whatever Darcy had in mind. Apparently satisfied, the rest of the Rat Soldiers went and lay down on their pallets. There was no talking, no drinking, nothing, except eerie silence. Trying to tell himself that they were just playing some weird prank on him, Pook lay down as well, but sleep was a long time in coming.

* * * *

Alex sat beside the wide windows, feeling the warmth of the sun streaming through. It was high summer, her favorite time of year because of the freedom it represented, both for her and for Moira. Through the window, she could see the familiar trees of the orchard. Some of the serfs who

worked her father's land were busy picking fruit, and she wondered briefly if they ever thought about the women in the castle.

"Gosha will be along soon," Moira said. She was sitting beside Alex on the padded bench beneath the window, busy embroidering the sleeve of a new gown. But even as Alex watched, she realized that Moira had pricked herself, and blood was slowly seeping onto the expensive fabric.

"Stop, Mama," she said.

Moira smiled, never looking up. "I can't, dear. You need this to wear. After all, your father is going to sell you off like a prize heifer, and you have to look your best for your husband-to-be."

The smell of soot and old smoke filled the air, blotting out the sweet scents drifting from the orchard. The dark, burned thing that was Pook crouched in one corner, watching.

"She didn't really say that," Alex said to him, desperate to make him understand. "She was good to me."

Pook's eyes gleamed in his blackened face. "She's pretty. Like you. Who were they going to marry you to?"

"I don't know. I don't think father had decided."

"Whoever he was...I hate him."

"I don't understand."

Pook said nothing, just crouched and watched, a horrible anomaly. Alex turned back to Moira, but she no longer had the embroidery or the dress. Now she sat on the bench wearing rags, with iron manacles around her wrists and ankles. Tears of blood oozed slowly down her face.

"No, Mama, don't cry," Alex said frantically, but her hands refused to move, and she couldn't wipe away the bloody tears.

"They bound her in iron." Pook stood up suddenly and came closer. The smell of burning intensified. "I'm sorry."

He touched one filthy hand to Moira's hair, in an odd gesture of comfort. But the moment he did so, flames leapt up, incinerating them both. Alex screamed and lunged to save them, but her hands closed on nothing but ash.

Chapter Sixteen

"We're hitting the Flogged Horses, over on Royal Boar Lane," Darcy said the next day.

When Pook had awakened that morning, he'd sincerely hoped that the other Rat Soldiers would have snapped out of whatever had come over them. But that hope had been dashed almost instantly. The minute he'd tried to strike up a conversation with Rose, she'd just given him a cold look and gone back to what she was doing.

Which was, far as he could tell, sitting and staring at the wall. As if she were waiting for something.

Desperately uneasy, he'd wanted to get the hell out of the Trap. At the same time, though, he'd been almost afraid to leave. Something strange had happened while he was at the party—if he left again, would things get even worse?

Maybe I could ask Duncan, he thought uneasily. Blackthorn Books was closed today, but it might be okay if he just stopped by the house for a little while. While Pook didn't feel nearly as easy with Duncan as he did with Mina, the old guy knew a lot and might be able to help.

Might. Pook pictured the big house, the table laden with food, the finery everyone had dressed in last night. *But would he if he could?*

Pook could still hear Fergus' voice bellowing in the back of his head, like an echo that never quite died, no matter how much time passed. "*Ye worthless little guttersnipes! Ye deserve everything I give ye, so I had best not see any crying or moaning. Ye think anyone else gives a damn about ye?*"

So far as he could tell, the Rat Soldiers weren't any better than the climbing boys Fergus had despised—maybe were a step down, even. There was little Meg, who'd started to mimic the whores she

saw, 'cause after all, wasn't her dad treating her like one? And Raw, with his barrel fever, wracked by delusions, or else so drunk, he couldn't stand up. And Hal and dead George, with their mean, cold mouths, and Darcy, who was worse than both of them put together. And him and Rose last of all, both of them thieves. Who would help any of them?

Would Duncan? Or would he think we got what we deserved? Maybe throw me out, too—not trust me around the silverware anymore, if he knew. Or around Alex.

As for Alex...just picturing the look on her face made his heart clench. No, he was on his own in this, just like always.

Or maybe not. Maybe Dubh could help. He's unseelie faelings, too.

But Dubh hadn't shown his face since Pook had come back—and wasn't that just like him? The one time Pook wanted to see him, he couldn't be found. *Stupid git.*

So Pook had tried to stay calm, go with it, and see what was happening. Until, that is, Darcy had made her announcement.

"The Flogged Horses?" he demanded now, coming to his feet. Although he expected a chorus of other voices to back him up, everyone else remained silent. "Are you crazy? That's way the hell off our territory. Their turf don't even border ours, unless something's happened I don't know about."

Darcy turned her cold, flat eyes on him, sending a chill down his spine. "We do what we're told," she said in a hollow voice.

"What the...*told?* Who told you to do this?"

Rose finally turned her head towards him, although she still stared at him as if he were a stranger. "Obey, Pooka," she said. Her voice had an odd timbre, as if it cost her something to say the words.

She don't ever call me by my full name. Never.

Fear crawled in his belly. "All right. Fine."

But he knew in his heart that it would never be all right again.

* * * *

At last, Alex thought, with a flush of satisfaction. Her weapon was finally nearing completion, and, even though it remained to be tried, she couldn't keep down a sense of victory. Now, if only there were some way of finding out whether or not it will work. Without actually being in a fight for my life, that is.

The chemist peered at her over his half-moon glasses, while she carefully counted out payment. "Now remember, young lady, this can be very dangerous!" he remonstrated, indicating the heavy, lead-lined tank.

"Precisely." She shoved the rest of the money across the worn counter and met his gaze squarely. "Have it sent round to Blackthorn Books tomorrow morning, before hours, if possible."

Although the chemist was obviously uneasy, he said nothing more, only took her money and huffed softly to himself. Satisfied that he would do as she asked, Alex turned and walked quickly out through the little shop. Vials and jars of various liquids and powders called to her from the shelves, and she longed to stop and inspect some of the equipment displayed in the glass-fronted counters. But she had spent almost every coin she had, and there was no sense in looking, when she would only be disappointed that she couldn't buy.

Perhaps someday, she thought wistfully, as she stepped out onto the curb.

Although it was technically spring now, the evening air was still on the chilly side. Only a few people moved about on the streets. A noodle vendor ladled out a bowl of soup amidst great clouds of steam. Across the way, a little boy selling matches stopped to talk with a girl who looked as though she might have been his sister. The great bells of the Cathedral of the Martyr rang out the hour, scattering birds into the night. In the flats above the nearby shops, dinner was underway, and the pungent smell of cooking food made Alex's stomach growl.

Although it would have been more frugal to walk home, she was tired, hungry, and cold. Pulling her shawl closer about her shoulders, Alex stepped to the corner and hailed the next cab that passed. After giving the driver the address, she settled against the leather seat and stared blankly out the window at the

passing scenery.

The sound of a gunshot rang out, startlingly close. The cab stopped, then rocked alarmingly as the horse fought to back away. The driver swore furiously, battling for control, even as a horde of running figures poured out of the nearest alleyway and spooked the animal even more.

Alex received a vague impression of struggling youths, some of them with red handkerchiefs around their necks, others dressed in sleeveless undershirts. What had apparently begun as a brawl on some other street had turned into a rout, as those with the red handkerchiefs tried to run away. Fists flew, and she saw blood-covered knives; then the gun roared again. A girl younger than Alex collapsed against the side of the cab, blood bubbling out of her lips and a hole in her chest.

Alex froze, staring down at the dying girl. For a moment, she saw Gosha, his blood just as bright, begging for her help. Then the cab jerked violently, and the girl fell away. The shrill whistle of the police sounded; almost instantly, the savage fight in front of her broke apart, and the combatants began to run. As the mob reverted to individuals, she found herself looking into Pook's eyes.

His hair was wild and streaked with blood, and there was blood on his knuckles, although he had no other weapon that she could see. The expression on his face seemed to combine guilt, horror, and loathing, all into one.

For a moment, she thought that she had to be imagining things, but there was no denying the truth. She started to call out to him, to ask if he was hurt, to demand to know what was happening, but no words would come. Then the shrill whistles sounded again, nearer this time. Pook jumped, cast a frightened look over his shoulder...and ran.

The cab lurched into motion, the driver swearing even more foully than before. "Are you all right, miss?" he yelled down, apparently too frightened to stop and find out for himself.

Her mouth was so dry, she could barely speak. "Y-Yes. I don't...What's happening?"

"Damned gangs! Worse than those factory slaves, if you ask me. Always fighting, causing trouble, stealing...God only knows what all they get up to. Police should just shoot 'em on sight, if you ask me!"

He continued on his diatribe, but Alex sank back into her seat, no longer listening. *God of the waning year, what does this mean, Pook? What have you gotten yourself into?*

And how am I going to get you out?

* * * *

It took all of Pook's courage to go to the bookstore the next day.

The battle with the Flogged Horses had been a cock-up from the start. What made it even worse was that the other gang had acted every bit as freaky as the Rat Soldiers. It had been as if Pook were the only person not sleepwalking through the fight, the only one *alive*.

Then the guns had come out, and people had started dying right in front of him...

And Alex had seen all of it.

He didn't know what sort of reception to expect as he opened the door to the shop. Duncan was sitting behind the counter, drinking a cup of tea and perusing the morning paper. Pook didn't have to look at it to know what the blaring headlines said; he'd had it screamed at him by newsboys on every corner. Every paper was eager to report on the gun battle in the streets, playing up the death and destruction. Half of them castigated the crushers for not doing enough to stop the violence, meaning that he'd have to watch his step if he didn't want to get dragged off to jail. The mayor was adding to the frenzy by swearing to enact a law that would clear the streets of all vagrants and beggars, again meaning that life was about to become a lot tougher for Pook and the Rat Soldiers. Hell, for anybody who made their living on the streets.

Duncan glanced up when Pook entered, and his stomach tightened in dread. But Duncan only murmured a greeting and went straight back to his paper.

A little of the tension eased out of Pook. Maybe Alex hadn't told anyone else, after all. Whistling softly to himself, he went in the back, washed up, and changed his shirt, as usual. Mrs. Blacksville came in shortly afterwards, and after an hour of climbing ladders and bending over, he had almost forgotten his trepidation.

“Thank you for your help, dear,” she said, giving him the usual tip. Then she turned to Duncan. “You don’t deliver, by any chance, do you?”

Duncan raised an eyebrow at her usual single purchase. “Only for large orders, I’m afraid,” he said.

“I see.” She gave Pook an assessing look, although what he had to do with anything, he couldn’t figure. “Well, then. I may have to put in a...special order...soon.”

Alex ghosted up to his side, her blue-gray eyes like chips of ice behind their protective frames. Pook’s heart lurched when he saw her, all his fear returning with a kick of adrenaline. She cast Mrs. Blacksville a dark look, then turned to Duncan. “I’ll bring lunch back from the café. Pook can help me carry things.”

Duncan’s brows tightened slightly in puzzlement, but he only nodded and gave Alex a few coins to buy lunch for everyone. She brushed past Mrs. Blacksville without speaking, and Pook followed dejectedly, knowing why she wanted his company. Indeed, as soon as they were on the street and out of hearing, she spun around and faced him.

“You know I saw you last night. Pook, what happened? Are you in some kind of trouble?”

He kicked idly at a lamppost, mostly because it gave him something to do, other than look at her. “No,” he lied.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her hands tighten into fists. “Pook, talk to me. You were in the middle of that fight. It’s all over the papers today! If anyone knew you were involved, you’d be in real trouble! Now tell me what happened.”

“It was just a fight, that’s all. We wanted something the Flogged Horses had, so we went and took it. End of story.”

Alex seemed taken aback. “You...you’re a part of one of those...gangs?”

Summoning up what little pride he had left, he raised his head, tossing his hair back out of his eyes, so he could look at her. “I’m a Rat Soldier, yeah.”

He could tell she was still confused, but the corners of her mouth were already starting to turn down in disapproval. “Pook, you shouldn’t be associating with those kinds of people! You’re going to get hurt—maybe even killed. I would have thought you’d have more sense than that.”

The words stung, like alcohol in a wound, and he felt his lips twist into a surly snarl. “*Those* kinds of people, is it? In case you ain’t noticed, I *am* one of those people. You’re standing here, passing judgment on me, and you don’t know a damn thing!”

Coldness filled her eyes. “I know that people were killed last night. I saw a girl shot to death right in front of me. Why, Pook? What did she do to deserve that? What did she have that you wanted badly enough to take her life to get?”

Her question cut straight to heart of his own misgivings. But he wasn’t about to admit that—it would be like stabbing the other Rat Soldiers in the back, almost. “I ain’t the leader, right? It ain’t mine to say.”

“So you just...just take orders from someone else, and never think twice? Are you insane? How can you be a part of that?”

“Maybe because that’s all I got!” he shouted, temper finally giving way altogether. People passing by on the street were stopping to look, but he didn’t care. “It’s so damned easy for you to stand there and say that I’m bad, that the Rat Soldiers are bad, and that I ought to leave them alone. *They’re all I got!* I got no family, no one else to look out for me. If I leave them, that’s it, I got nothing at all. *I’m* nothing at all.”

To his surprise, some of her anger seemed to drain away at his tirade. “That isn’t true, Pook,” she said quietly, her eyes pleading with him to believe her. “You have us. You have Mina, and Duncan, and me.” She hesitated, as if weighing her next words. “You...do you remember when you saved me from Nigel? You told him I was your sister, remember? Try to think of me that way, and perhaps you’ll realize that you’re not alone.”

Grief hollowed out his chest, swirling together with the mix of anger and frustration and fear already there. *Maybe it’s better this way*, said a tiny voice in his mind. *At least she cares about me. If she thinks of me as a brother, then at least it means she don’t hate me.*

But it wasn’t better, it was worse somehow, and it made him want to scream or cry or...he didn’t

even know what.

“You *ain't* my sister,” he snarled, feeling his hands shake. And he realized how stupid he had been, that some part of him had clung to the insane hope that maybe, just maybe, she might look past his deformities and his worthlessness and fall in love with him.

She'd flinched when he snarled at her, but now she straightened and glared at him. “Fine. But even if you don't want my help, you have to do something. You're going to get killed otherwise.”

“What I do on my own time is none of your damned business,” he snapped back. “This don't have nothing to do with fae, or with the bookstore, so just keep your nose out of it.”

Her eyes narrowed, and if she'd had more power, he thought she might have frozen him with her gaze. “Very well, then. You can go back to the bookstore. I don't think I'm going to need your assistance after all.”

Alex turned and stalked off in a swirl of skirts. Pook watched her go, and for a moment he wanted to run after her and take back everything he'd said. More, he wanted to tell her everything, confess all of his fears and share his pain. He wanted to explain to her that he wished things were different, that there were something more for him than life with the Rat Soldiers.

She'll never understand. She don't want to hear that crap—she wants you to say you'll be a good boy and starve in the street alone, instead of running with the Soldiers. That you'll let them down when they need you the most. That you'll give up the only thing you got to be proud of.

To hell with her, then.

* * * *

Pook barely spoke to Alex for the rest of the day. Embarrassed and hurt that he had flung her offer of help back in her face, she was just as glad to maintain her distance. If he would rather run around with a bunch of ruffians, like a common criminal, that was his choice, and she was well rid of him.

But he doesn't think he has a choice, her intellect reminded her.

I told him that he did. If he doesn't want to listen, then that's his fault, not mine.

Asking him to think of her as a sister had been terribly hard. Even though she knew he would never look at her the way she wanted him to, she had still felt as if she were tearing her own heart out. And instead of at least giving her the solace of accepting her offer, he'd gotten even angrier.

I don't care. He doesn't want my help, and he obviously doesn't want to confide in me. All this time, and he never even mentioned this gang of his once. I thought we were friends, at least, but clearly I was wrong.

To hell with him. I don't care anymore.

But she did; that was the stupid part.

That night, unable to sleep, she threw herself into completing her weapon. While Vagabond watched curiously, she finished the last few touches and welded the final tank into place. She even dragged the entire thing downstairs and tested it briefly in the yard, but the fact that it worked perfectly didn't fill her with the sense of jubilation it once would have. Cursing herself, Pook, and everyone else in Dere for good measure, she lugged it all back upstairs and collapsed into bed.

When she woke gritty-eyed the next morning, she lay in bed for a long time, staring blankly at the plaster ceiling. More than anything, she wanted to roll over, pull the covers over her head, and hide from the coming day. But instead, she pulled herself out of bed, dressed, and headed downstairs. The calls of the newsboys filtered in from the street outside, and the smell of baking bread permeated the air.

Stifling a yawn, Alex opened the door to the yard out back—and froze.

A dark-skinned boy stood there, and for a moment she thought that it was Pook. A second glance dispelled the illusion, however. Although he had the same black hair, it was cut short, rather than left wild, and his slanted eyes were brown, rather than gray. His build was stockier, and he was slightly shorter than Pook; but, even so, the similarities between the two were striking.

I was told there were no dvorovoi in Niune, but what if that was wrong? Could he be the yard spirit, after all?

“Who are you?” she asked warily.

He took a step forward, then stopped when she looked as if she might retreat. “My name is Dubh,” he said. “I’ve come to warn you.”

Not a *dvorovoi*, then. Even so, she felt a surge of unease at his presence. “Warn me? About what?”

The expression on his handsome face grew grim. “About Pook, actually. He isn’t the friend you believe him to be.”

Her heart went cold. “Is this...about the gang?” she asked warily.

Surprise flashed over his face. “In part. You know about that?”

“I found out by accident.”

He nodded gravely. “Then you’ll understand when I tell you that you could be in danger from him. Pook is a liar and a thief. You can’t believe anything he says. He won’t do anything unless there’s some gain in it for him, and if it seems otherwise...well, you wouldn’t be the first to be taken in by a confidence man. I don’t suppose he mentioned that there’s a bounty on him?”

The sudden change of tack flustered her. “A bounty? For what?”

“Did he tell you that he was once an apprentice?”

“I think he might have mentioned it once.”

“I suppose he didn’t elaborate? No? Then I will. There was a master in Gloachamuir who took him in. And in return for the chance to learn a trade and live a good life, he ran away...but only after stealing his master blind. The poor man was left destitute. A bounty was placed on Pook’s capture and return, but he was too clever and managed to escape. He brought his thieving ways to Dere instead, where he’s made a career out of robbing innocents.”

I don’t believe that. Pook had worked hard at the bookstore, and she had seen him scouring the streets for any bit of junk he might sell.

And yet...he hadn’t told her about being involved in a gang. She wasn’t certain what sort of criminal activities they might be up to, but the newspapers certainly made it sound as if they would rob and kill everyone in Dere, if given the chance.

But Pook...he saved my life. Not just once, either. He wouldn’t hurt any of us.

“I suppose you have proof?” she asked at last.

He smiled at her, a cold smile that she didn’t like at all. “I do. I’ve been following him, you see. He’s been hanging around here quite a bit after the shop is closed—but you didn’t know that, did you? I wondered what he could possibly be up to, and so I watched him closely one night, and I found this.”

He turned and walked towards the privy. As Alex watched in confusion, he stood on tiptoe, reached up into the eaves, and pulled out a small parcel, which he thrust towards her. She took it cautiously, unwrapping the dirty rags that had been bound around it. Inside was a small art box and a sketch pad.

“What’s this?” she asked.

“Ask Lord RiDahn—I have a feeling it’s something that Pook stole from the shop. But that isn’t all.” He reached into his coat and drew out a packet of folded papers. “I’ve spent the last few days traveling to Gloachamuir and back. These are newspaper clippings from five years ago. They involve the matter I told you about—Pook’s stealing from his master and breaking his apprenticeship contract.”

Alex took the folded papers with a feeling of dread. *No. Damn it, no. How could I have been so wrong about Pook?*

“Thank you,” she said numbly. Dubh nodded, smiled at her again, and then simply walked away, with the air of someone who has completed a job well done.

Feeling as though her heart had been replaced by a lead weight, Alex went back inside. The soft jingle of the bell sounded from the front, and she heard Mina’s voice. Clutching the box and the papers, she went into the store.

Duncan was in the process of wheeling himself behind the counter, but he stopped when he caught sight of her face. “Alex? Is something wrong?”

She swallowed hard against the obstruction in her throat. “Do you...do you know what this is?” she asked, holding out the art set to him.

Duncan’s brows quirked together in a frown as he took the box and sketchpad from her. “This

looks like the art set that Sir RiNa asked about. He said that it had been misplaced in a batch of books that were sold to us. Wherever did you find it?"

Alex told him everything, starting with the mysterious boy and his accusations. She even told them about the battle in the streets that she had seen, and about Pook's involvement in it. By the time she was done, Mina was wearing a scowl; power whispered about the room, cold and angry. But Duncan merely sat and looked down at the box, his lips pressed into a thin line.

The bell jingled once again. "Morning," called Pook as he strolled in, shoving his hair out of his eyes. "Did you hear about the ship that ran into the bridge last night? You should've seen—"

He stopped as he took in their expressions. For a moment, he simply looked puzzled. Then his eyes found the art set in Duncan's lap, and some of the color seemed to fade from his face. Ash-gray eyes darted briefly to Alex; she looked away, unwilling to meet his gaze.

"Did you take this art set and then lie about doing so?" Duncan asked. His voice was quiet, calm; but the anger beneath it was sharp as a knife.

For a moment, Pook didn't answer, as if he hoped for some sort of reprieve. But when none appeared, he dropped his gaze to the floor. "Yeah."

"I see. And do you have any explanation as to why you did so?"

Pook kicked at the floorboards with a scuffed boot. "Well...it got in with the books by accident, didn't it? I mean, it ain't like it belonged to the store. Not like I stole it from you, right?" His voice sounded weak, as if even he didn't really believe that.

"And lying about it? Do you have some excuse for that?"

Pook shrugged and kept staring at the floor.

Mina pushed herself off the desk where she had been sitting. "What about everything else, Pook?" she demanded angrily. "What about running away from an apprenticeship in Gloachamuir? What about robbing your master? What about lying and stealing from everyone who tries to do you a good turn?"

Pook glanced up, and, for a moment, Alex saw some of the familiar fire in his eyes. "What do you know about Gloachamuir?"

Mina's hands clenched. "I know that I spent eight years of my life with a fucking iron collar around my neck! My God! I would have killed for a damned apprenticeship contract. Taught a trade, taken care of, given a home, food, respect—what the hell is wrong with you? Damn you!"

Pook's nostrils flared, and for a moment Alex thought he would fight back. Then the light in his eyes seemed to die away, and he looked back down at his feet. "Are you going to turn me in to the crushers—the police?" he asked in a voice that sounded so quiet and defeated that Alex felt sorry for him.

"We haven't made any decisions yet," Duncan said. "There is a cart waiting outside. You will unload it. When you are done, you will be informed of our decision."

Pook nodded and went to the door. He paused there for an instant, one foot almost on the street, and cast a look back at Alex. Their eyes met, and in his gaze she read neither anger nor defiance, only grief. Then he stepped out and gently shut the door behind him.

Duncan took off his glasses and rubbed tiredly at his eyes. Setting the art set aside, he began to browse through the paper clippings.

"Little bastard," Mina snarled, glaring at the closed door. "I can't believe he lied to us! Stole from us! I swear, I've half a mind to send for the police now and let them haul him back to Gloachamuir for breaking his contract."

While Mina continued her tirade, Alex drifted to the table where the art set lay. She felt hollow inside, as if Pook's betrayal had scooped out her heart and left her with nothing to replace it. The jewels on the lid of the box winked at her, and she wondered why Pook hadn't sold it immediately, instead of keeping it somewhere it could be discovered. Surely a professional thief should be smarter than that.

Bereft of anything else to do, she pulled the sketchbook towards her and flipped it open to the first page. The answer to her question stared back at her.

"Chernovog!" she said in surprise.

Duncan glanced up from the newspaper clippings. "What is it?"

Wordlessly she tilted the sketchpad up so he could see. Mina came around to see, and some of the rage eased off her face. “Damn. He’s good.”

The sketch was rough, but, even so, it was obvious that true talent lay behind it. A charcoal Vagabond stretched out in the sun, so detailed that it seemed anyone touching the page would feel fur instead of paper. Mina reached over Alex’s shoulder and flipped the page, then the next. There were sketches of objects and people, some of them quickly done or half-finished, others completed with loving detail. Alex found her own face looking back at her...except that it wasn’t quite her, couldn’t be her, because she knew that she wasn’t that pretty girl with a little half-smile on her lips, her face aglow.

The next drawing was more abstract: a young boy whom Alex didn’t recognize, surrounded by fire and smoke. His eyes were wide with agony, and his mouth stretched in a silent scream. It was followed by a stream of others like it, sometimes the same child, sometimes different ones, many of them scarred or burning.

“What the hell?” Mina murmured, confused.

The sketches made Alex think of the dreams she’d had of the child roasted alive in the chimney. *But that was a dream—it doesn’t have anything to do with this. It was nothing other than my own imaginings.*

And then Mina flipped the page a final time, and Alex clapped both her hands to her mouth to stifle a scream.

Her mother’s face stared back at her, haunted and gaunt as it had been in her last days—as it had been in the dream. Although most of the sketch was in charcoal, the tears that dripped down her face had been lightly tinted red.

Shock slammed through Alex, and she took a reflexive step back. *No. It can’t be. It’s impossible.*

“Alex?” Duncan asked in alarm. “What is it? Who is this woman?”

She shook her head, denying the words even as she said them. “It’s...it’s Mama. But it can’t be: it wasn’t real, it was just a dream.”

There was a moment of silence; then, Duncan asked carefully, “You’ve been having odd dreams?”

“Yes.” She could feel the tears struggling to emerge, shocked lose by the unexpected sight of Moira’s face. “But they’re just dreams. Pook couldn’t know...it can’t be her...but it is. I don’t understand.”

Mina exchanged a grim look with her husband. “Tell us about these dreams.”

“This...the one with Mama was the latest one, but I’ve been having them almost since I got to Dere. They don’t make any sense. But they’re just dreams. Nightmares, really.”

Duncan put a calming hand to her shoulder. “I understand, my dear. But please, humor us. Tell us what you remember.”

She did so, beginning with the dream of being trapped in the chimney. The dreams had retained a terrible clarity in her mind, and she found herself describing the sights and smells: the terrifying pit with the rats, the scent of burning that always clung to Pook, the bitter cold of the taiga. When she was done, Duncan shuffled through the newspaper clippings in his lap as if looking for something.

“What did you say was the name that the boy spoke in the pit?” he asked quietly.

The recitation had left Alex shaky, and she had to take a deep breath for calm. “He said that Fergus was coming. That I couldn’t see what was going to happen next. And then I woke up.”

Duncan took off his glasses and rubbed at his eyes. “Damn.”

“What’s wrong?”

Duncan handed her the clipping he had been looking at. The paper had gone slightly yellow with age, but the print was still clear.

Wanted:

*Runaway chimneysweep apprentice, age 11,
also wanted for theft. Dark skin,
gray eyes, hair shaven but may
be growing out. Distinguishing marks:*

*malformed ears and eyes, extensive scarring on
back and left arm, minor scarring to face.
Answers to "Pook" or "Freak."
Information should be remanded immediately
to police or to Mr. Fergus DaNair,
Chimneysweep's Guild, 42 Divot Lane.*

Alex read the advertisement three times. It felt as if a knife lodged against her heart, cutting deeper with every beat. *No. It isn't true.*

"Pook isn't scarred," she said, but her voice sounded oddly distant to her ears.

"Pook heals when he shifts shape," Duncan replied. "It may be that any scars vanished when he came into his power."

"But this isn't possible. It must be a coincidence. They were only dreams."

Mina sighed and sat down on the edge of the table. Her anger seemed to have evaporated, and now she looked merely tired. "No. They weren't. Or at least, not 'only' dreams."

Oh no. Please don't say that. "I don't understand," she whispered, looking up at them helplessly.

"God damn it, it was right in front of my face," Mina went on, as if Alex hadn't spoken. "The night Pook and I spied on the seelie fae. We had a drink together at a bar first, and I asked him about girls."

She jumped up again, pacing back and forth and scowling at nothing. "And instead of answering a simple question, he starts asking me if I ever *dream*. He started talking about dreaming of trees and snow—starting describing somewhere very cold and far away. Then he asked if I ever dreamed about the fucking ocean!"

"There is no need for profanity, my dear," Duncan said mildly.

"I don't understand," Alex repeated, feeling desperate.

Mina ran her hand through her short shock of hair. "Ruska is cold, isn't it? Snowy? Lots of trees?"

"The taiga is." She frowned, uncertain. "I dreamed about the taiga, and Pook...I mean, the dream Pook...asked me what I was doing there. He said he'd been coming there all his life."

"Exactly," Mina said, as if Alex had just made some point. "And who do we know who's crossed the ocean recently? *Damn* it, this is crazy! There's—I don't know—thousands of miles between Ruska and Niune, at least! They couldn't have met before!"

Duncan shook his head. "Pook is, in essence, a fae with a human heart. I cannot say how such things might make themselves known in his case. Perhaps no one can."

"Would someone please tell me what's going on?" Alex shouted.

Startled, they both looked at her, as if they had almost forgotten her presence. Duncan sighed, glanced away at nothing, then turned back to her with an odd look of compassion on his face. "It sometimes happens that two faelings who are...close...share one another's dreams. These dreams are generally quite vivid."

"But we aren't. Close. I mean, we haven't..." Alex trailed off, blushing.

"That is of no consequence, my dear," Duncan said gently. "Indeed, apparently you need never even have met for Pook to have found you, or at least to have had glimpses of your surroundings, even if he were not truly sharing your dreams at that point. I have never heard of such a thing before, but it seems that the rules do not apply to our pooka. Which should not come as much of a surprise, I suppose."

Alex could feel her heart hammering. She didn't fully understand what the implications were, but she did know one thing. "So...what I saw in the dreams...the chimney...the pit...was real?"

"They were still Pook's dreams, but I fear they were most likely nightmares based on reality. It is hardly uncommon for those who have suffered such traumas to continue to relive them in their sleep for many years after."

"Damn it," Mina muttered. "I guess I wouldn't have traded my iron collar for that, after all."

A jolt of fear went through Alex as she remembered what had precipitated the conversation. "You can't turn him over to the police! It might have been illegal for him to run away, but you don't understand—it was horrible—he was just trying to survive!"

“Calm down, girl, we get that.” Mina took a cigarette out of her pocket and held it loosely between her fingers, even though she didn’t light it. “No one’s talking about sending Pook back to Gloachamuir. As for the art set...it was a stupid thing to do, although at least I understand why he did it.” She nodded at the sketchbook.

“Yes,” Duncan agreed, although he still looked rather vexed. “Alex, if you would like to call Pook back inside, perhaps we can discuss things further.”

Feeling both relieved and scared, Alex went to the door. The cart stood outside, the boxes of books still in place in its bed. But of Pook, there was no sign.

Chapter Seventeen

Rain poured past Kuromori’s balcony, lowering a gray curtain that cut Pook off from the rest of the world. Drops pounded on the roof and gurgled in the gutters, a steady cadence that he would ordinarily have found soothing. The smell of wet earth and water mixed with that of exotic spices and rotting garbage.

Pook sat on the balcony, staring blankly out at the city. He felt that if he stayed still long enough, perhaps he would turn into one of the little round stones that decorated the floor with their obscure patterns. *That would be good. To be a stone. Not to have to feel nothing ever again.*

“*Your friends will become your enemies,*” the bean-nighe had said. But he had never thought that it would happen like this.

He took a deep, shuddering breath and forced himself to look down at the paper in his hands. The ink had spotted badly in places, and run in others where the damp had gotten to it, but the letters remained legible. It had taken him an hour to write this simple note—an hour that he didn’t really have to waste, not if the crushers were on their way. But even so, he read it over a last time, wondering what else he could possibly say.

“*I love you.*” But what kind of final message was that to leave for anyone?

The door slid open behind him. “Are you sure you do not wish for any tea, Pook-kun?” Kuromori asked.

“I’m sure,” he said, even though he was cold to the bone.

“*Your friends will become your enemies.*”

“I better be going,” he said, climbing slowly to his feet. “I appreciate you delivering this for me.”

Kuromori took the folded letter from him and bowed slightly. “It is my pleasure, Pook-kun. But are you certain you do not wish to deliver it to the young lady yourself?”

Pook remembered the look on Alex’s face at the bookstore. Disappointment, anger...God only knew what else. *No one to blame but myself, neither.*

He swallowed hard against the lump in his throat. “She won’t want to see me.”

“Very well.” Kuromori inclined his head elegantly. “Good luck on your journeys, Pook-kun. I hope that our paths cross again someday.”

“Me too. Thanks. For everything.” Pook bowed deeply, grateful that the gesture hid his face. Then he straightened and hurriedly took the stairs down to the street, never looking back.

Rain plastered his dark hair to his skull, but he didn’t care. It seemed impossible to believe that he’d gotten up this morning thinking everything was, if not right with the world, at least not in total ruin. Now he was on his way to the docks, hoping like hell to get out of Dere before the crushers caught up with him.

Abandoning your friends, said a treacherous voice. *Abandoning the Rat Soldiers, and Alex, and—*

But what else could he do? Staying in Dere invited disaster. Mina and Duncan would already have told the police that he was a fugitive; hell, the hunt was probably on right now. If he were spotted, they’d drag him straight back to Gloachamuir. Straight back to Fergus.

When Pook had left Gloachamuir, he’d been a little kid, small and scrawny enough to be a perfect

climbing boy. But he'd grown a lot since then, and now, on the edge of manhood, he'd be useless to Fergus, except for one thing.

He'll make me into a lesson. Drag me in front of whatever boys he's got now, just to prove that there ain't no escape. That even if you run away, even if you stay free for years, you'll get caught in the end. And then he'll kill me.

If Pook were lucky, his death would be fast. But a quick death wouldn't make as good a lesson as a slow one, would it? Fergus would lock him in the pit, and he'd die alone in chains, his body gnawed by rats maybe even before the last breath had left it...

I can't face that. I can't.

So he would head to the docks next, catch the first steamer out of Dere. *See the world, maybe. Maybe even that place Alex was from...*

The thought of her made him feel as if his lungs were full of glass slivers. *Should have known from the start that it would end like this. Should have stayed clear of her that day on the docks, let her deal with the crushers herself. Or let her work it out with Nigel on her own. Or not gone back after.*

Even with the pain, though, he couldn't make himself regret knowing her. And maybe that was why he had wasted an hour writing her a letter just to say goodbye. *She probably won't even read it. She'll probably tear it up or throw it in the fire.*

Out of my hands. He forced his mind away from the image of Alex ripping his letter to shreds, her face set in an expression of disgust and contempt. There was still one more thing to do before he hit the docks. No matter how weird the Rat Soldiers had been acting lately, they were still his only friends. He had let them down too many times already; the least he owed them was a warning that he was leaving and not coming back.

Few people were out in the gray day. Sodden newsboys hid beneath any available awnings, until the shopkeepers chased them away. Even the horses, pulling the occasional cab, looked depressed as they clopped through the muddy streets. Two small children were playing in the fountain in Box Circle, and one of them called to him to do a magic trick for them. He shook his head regretfully, causing the boy to scream an insult and throw a stone at him. The stone missed Pook and hit instead the statue of the pleading angel. Rain cascaded over her marble face, filling up her hollow eyes and running down her weather-pitted cheeks, as if she wept at some injustice. Pook fancied he rather understood how she felt.

The river was riding high with the rain, and he wondered if the Trap had flooded yet. He took the stairs two at a time, trying not to breathe deeply, as the stink of river water and sewage rose up from below. Greasy water swirled on the basement floor, although it covered only an inch or two so far. If it rained much more, the Rat Soldiers would have to look for higher ground.

Rose, Hal, and little Meg stood together in the room, their expressions listless. Worry touched him and set off a pang of guilt. "You okay?" he asked uncertainly, wondering if maybe he shouldn't leave right away after all.

Rose's lips were pale in the bad light, and dark hollows circled her eyes. "Hello, Pook," she said...and her gaze shifted past him.

That was the only warning he had. Something hard and heavy slammed down on the back of his head. White light burst behind his eyes, riding a wave of pain that sent him to his hands and knees in the dirty water. His head spinning, he tried to crawl away, but nothing seemed to be working right. Then a second blow followed the first, and he collapsed into unconsciousness.

* * * *

Alex clenched her fingers tight in her skirts, trying not to betray her distress to Duncan. Pook was gone, and it was all her fault. If she had only looked through the papers first, if she had only talked to him alone, if she had only trusted the instincts that told her he was good and decent, then he would still be here.

"We have to find him," she said, her voice shaking a little.

"Be calm," Duncan advised. He had maneuvered his chair to catch the best light from the gas lamps.

For the last hour, he had shuffled through Pook's sketches, his expression thoughtful. Now he lingered on the final portrait of Moira, and sadness gathered in his eyes.

The door opened and Mina came in out of the rain, pulling off the hooded oilskin that had kept her dry. The rain had delayed any search for Pook; because he hadn't unloaded any of the boxes of books from the cart, they had found themselves in a mad scramble to get the crates inside before the weather broke.

"The bakers haven't seen him, and neither has the café," Mina said. "One of the newspaper boys said Pook headed off towards the river, but that doesn't mean anything."

"He may yet return," Duncan pointed out. "The best thing may be simply to give him time to think things over."

Alex bit her lip. Duncan didn't understand—she *had* to talk to Pook. Had to tell him...

What? That I'm sharing his dreams, for Chernovog's sake? How can I possibly tell him that?

The jingle of the bell made her jump. Silently damning whatever customer had braved this miserable weather, she turned towards the door and saw Kuromori standing there. An umbrella had protected him from the rain, and he folded it neatly before bowing to them.

"Good morning, Duncan-san, Mina-san. Alex-chan," he said.

"Have you seen Pook?" Alex blurted.

Kuromori drew a folded piece of paper from his sleeve. "Indeed, Alex-chan. Pook-kun asked me to deliver this to you."

She took the damp paper from him, dread gathering in her stomach. While Duncan went to fetch tea for Kuromori, Alex moved over to the window, both for the extra light and for a bit of privacy. Pook's handwriting was beyond horrible, and it took her some time to decipher the letter.

Alex,

I just wanted to send you this and say that I am sorry. I wish that I could make things different. I know that I have done wrong and I deserve everything that has happened. But I can't let the crushers take me back. I guess I am a coward about that.

I am going away I don't know where. I guess I will find a ship. I will think about you all the time and miss you more than anything.

Pook

PS: Please don't hate me too much.

Tears brimmed in Alex's eyes, threatening to spill down her cheeks. *Damn it, there's no time for that!* Stuffing the letter into a pocket, she turned to see everyone staring at her in concern. "We have to get to the docks," she said impatiently, striding towards the door. "Now, before it's too late!"

* * * *

Consciousness came back in drips and drops, like the slow leak of dirty water. Pain dominated everything, a constant agony that made Pook feel as if his head had split in two. Voices came and went, and he thought that he heard a name: "Tamnais."

That roused him further, and he became aware of the taste of blood in his mouth. Nausea roiled in his belly, and the skin on his wrists felt burned. After a while, he realized that this was because of the iron manacles that chained his hands above his head.

Pook opened his eyes, then closed them again as the world tilted and spun. His scattered mind tried to piece together what had happened. Alex had found out about the art set and his past...the crushers were coming for him...he had to leave...he'd gone to the Trap...

"Your friends will become your enemies."

Pook's eyes flew open in horror. Pain stabbed into his head, and he vomited weakly. He had been chained in a sitting position, and he felt warm bile splatter against his stomach and thighs.

Oh God. He leaned his head back, felt the world spin again. The dank confines of the Trap surrounded him, and the rising water soaked his butt and legs. His shirt was gone, and shivers wracked his frame. *If I could only change...need to change...*

But the iron manacles prevented that.

Someone took a step in front of him, splashing filthy water everywhere. A dark figure swam in and out of focus for a few moments: Darcy. She stood in front of him, hands on her hips, staring down with eyes that seemed too large for her thin face. It occurred to him that she looked almost as bad as he felt.

“Darcy,” he said. He gut heaved almost immediately, but there was nothing left to bring up. When the spasms had passed, he took in a deep, shaky breath. “Hey, Darcy, listen. I know we’ve had our differences, but you ain’t got to do this. Just tell me what you want and I’ll do it. Come on.”

“How incredibly naïve,” said a voice that sounded vaguely familiar. A moment later, Nigel stepped into view. Although he still wore his fancy coat and shirt, he’d changed into boots and pants more suitable for the mud and sludge of the Trap.

Pook stared blankly at the seelie faeling, wondering if the blow to his head had addled his wits. “You... What’re you doing here?”

Nigel smiled cruelly. His flat, metallic eyes were without pity, although Pook thought that there was a faint look of unease in their depths. “I’m the one asking the questions, b’hoi.”

Shadowy shapes drifted into view: Rose, Hal, Meg, and Raw. None of them seemed even slightly perturbed by the presence of a Firestarter in the Trap.

Not to mention the sight of Pook in chains.

“Let me go,” he said, feeling fear start to wake in his belly. “Please. Rose, come on—we’ve been friends since we was kids. Don’t let them do this.”

But Rose’s face betrayed no more emotion than if he were a stranger.

“Stop your whining.” Nigel took a sudden step forward, grabbed a hank of Pook’s hair, and yanked his head back. Pain seemed to shatter his skull at the movement, and it was everything he could do not to cry out.

“You’re going to answer some questions for me now, b’hoi,” Nigel snarled, his face so close that Pook could feel the hot breath on his cheek. “Starting with the most important one. What is Finn Bheara up to?”

Why Nigel thought a lowlife like Pook would know a damn thing about the doings of the unseelie king was beyond him. “How the hell should I know?”

Nigel’s hold tightened on his hair, bringing tears of pain to Pook’s eyes. “Don’t play stupid with me, b’hoi. I know all about you.” Abruptly releasing Pook’s hair, he stood up and took a step back. “Show him what will happen if he doesn’t answer.”

Darcy moved closer and, without any sign of hesitation, kicked Pook hard.

He *felt* a rib crack beneath her boot. Pain exploded in his side, a white-hot star that flared every time he took a breath. “Darcy, please!” he managed to gasp out. “Why you taking orders from this b’hoi? You ain’t never took orders from nobody in your damn life, so don’t fucking start now!”

Darcy didn’t even seem to hear him. Nigel’s mouth twisted with displeasure, however. “Shut up. Now, let’s try this again. What are Finn Bheara’s plans?”

For a moment, Pook considered making up something. Anything—it didn’t matter what—just something to tell this idiot seelie and make him go away. But he looked past Nigel and saw the Rat Soldiers—his only family, his only friends—and something deep inside of him broke.

“I don’t know nothing,” he snarled. “So you can go to hell.”

Malice burned in Nigel’s eyes now. “As you wish,” he said softly.

The Rat Soldiers closed in.

* * * *

“I’m sorry, Alex,” Duncan said quietly as the brougham pulled up to the curb in front of the bookstore.

They had spent the afternoon at the docks, questioning everyone from captains to dockhands to drunken loiterers. No one admitted seeing any sign of a boy who matched Pook’s description, nor had they caught a glimpse of him themselves.

He probably went under a glamour, she thought miserably. That would make sense, if he thought he was about to be arrested.

And now he's gone. I'll never see him again.

After Moira died, Alex thought she would never again feel anything but grief. She had shut away all emotion, setting it aside so that she could concentrate on her escape, until it had seemed that her heart was as cold as the taiga in winter. But at some point, unnoticed by her, there had been a thaw.

And now her heart bled anew.

"Would you like some dinner?" Duncan asked hesitantly. "It's been a long day, and you haven't eaten anything."

"I'm not hungry." Alex climbed out of the carriage, fumbling for her keys. At the moment, she longed to be away from them. *If only I could leave myself behind, as easily.*

A figure stepped out from the nearest alley, and for a moment Alex's heart leapt. Then she realized that it was only Fox, wet and bedraggled from the rain. Droplets of water fell from the cats-cradle between her fingers, but she still glanced into it now and again, as if fascinated by some vision only she could see.

"Hello, Fox," Mina said tiredly. "We closed up early. If you want to come home with us and get some food—"

"Not talking to you," Fox said in a surly voice.

Alex paused in the act of opening the door. Fox might be mad, but she had always seemed at least somewhat cheerful.

Mina frowned. "Why not?"

Fox's mouth twisted into a half-pout, half-snarl. "You made the pretty boy go away. Now all the bad girls and boys are hurting him. I don't like it. I want him back."

Twin pincers of hope and fear gripped Alex's heart. "You mean Pook? He's still in Dere?"

Fox nodded.

Duncan's brows dove together in a frown. "But he's been hurt? Is that what you've seen, Fox?"

She nodded again, stroking the string as if soothing a small animal. "Poor thing. Kicked and hurt. Poor little puppy."

Without thinking, Alex grabbed the other woman's wrist. Fox jerked free, lips peeled back in a snarl that exposed sharp teeth. "Can you take us to him?"

Fox's snarl faded, and she glanced back at her string. "Yes."

"We must act quickly, then," Duncan said. "Fox, climb up beside Mina and show her where to go. Alex—"

But she had already thrust the key into the lock and flung open the door to the bookstore. "If Pook's in trouble, we need weapons," she called back over her shoulder.

She ran up the stairs faster than she had ever gone before. *Please don't let him be badly injured. Please don't let him be dead.* She prayed frantically as she hauled on the mass of straps, tanks, tubes, and nozzles. *Oh, Chernovog, Pook, just hang on. We're coming for you.*

The door slammed behind her so hard that the bell fell off and hit the floor. As she hurried to the brougham, she saw three pairs of incredulous eyes staring at her. Duncan blinked in disbelief as she climbed in beside him.

"Alexandreyka...what on earth is that?" he asked at last.

"This," she said grimly, as the carriage lurched into motion, "is a flamethrower."

* * * *

"I have wasted enough time on this," Nigel said, his voice like the hiss of water hitting a hot griddle.

Pook blinked sluggishly, struggling to focus on the words. Just thinking seemed to hurt, and he felt the dark edge of oblivion calling again. It seemed that there was no part his body that didn't hurt, from his broken ribs that shifted with every breath, to his bloody nose, to his bruised stomach. The taste of blood filled his mouth and clogged his sinuses, drowning the stench of the slowly flooding basement.

He had no idea how long the Rat Soldiers had beaten him. It had seemed endless: long stretches of agony punctuated by Nigel's nonsensical questions. Why the seelie faeling was so convinced that Pook knew a damn thing about what Finn Bheara was doing, he couldn't imagine.

Desperate, maybe. Crazy.

Oh God, let it be over.

Nigel crouched down in front of him, and Pook blinked his eyes rapidly, trying to focus through swollen eyelids. A moment later, a cruel hand once again knotted in his hair, jerking his head back.

“This is your last chance,” Nigel said. He held out his free hand towards Darcy, who stepped forward and put a gun in it. A moment later, the barrel kissed Pook’s forehead, cold and almost welcome against his feverish skin.

Pook swallowed convulsively and closed his eyes. Maybe he should have seen this coming, that he would die over some stupid misunderstanding, while all the friends he ever thought he had, betrayed him in the end.

“One more time.” The hammer clicked back, a cold, dead sound. “Tell me what I want to know, or I’ll spread your brains all over the wall.”

Pook didn’t bother to open his eyes. Why let his last sight be that of Nigel’s ugly face? “Come on, then, you seelie bastard,” he whispered through swollen lips. “Do it.”

* * * *

“There,” said Fox, pointing at one of the many dilapidated buildings that lined the road along the river. Mina hauled on the reins, and the brougham jolted to a bone-bruising stop. Alex scrambled out almost before the wheels had ceased turning, the flamethrower a heavy weight on her back.

The street was crowded with people, all of them apparently in search of something to blot out the hopelessness of their lives. Brothels, dancehalls, and saloons lined the avenue, interrupted here and there by squalid tenements. Rain overflowed gutters already blocked with garbage, creating a swirling flood of filth in the street. A youth in an iron collar staggered by, blood running from a cut on his head and the stink of gin riding his breath.

“If anybody even touches the carriage, freeze their bones,” Mina called to Duncan, as she secured the reins.

Duncan’s mouth thinned with displeasure, but he nodded. “I shall. And I’ll watch for anyone trying to slip in behind you.”

Fox splashed across the gutter and disappeared through a door. Swearing silently, Alex ran after her. The door opened onto a narrow hall littered with debris; the only light was a faint glow that streamed through a crack in a second door. “Be careful,” Mina whispered, but the warning went unheeded, as Fox wrenched open the door.

The light came from a guttering lantern that hung on the wall of what looked like the basement. Murky water swirled at the bottom of a short stair, and the overwhelming smell of rotting offal and sewage rose up from it, thick enough to make Alex gag. The flickering glow from the lantern showed a group of people standing ankle-deep in the floodwater, all young and dressed in the same sleeveless undershirts that Pook had favored. In front of them, crouched down near the wall, she saw Nigel’s blond hair and top hat. And in front of him, chained to the wall, was Pook.

She only caught a confused glimpse of him, but what she saw made her heart clench and sent raw fury pumping through her veins. Then Nigel spun around, and she saw the gleam of a gun in his hand.

“Look out!” shouted Mina, and a dark shape hurtled over the side of the staircase. She landed on her feet in the fetid water, then dropped to her hands and knees as the gun barked, the sound deafening in the confined space.

Fox flung herself at the humans, and Alex heard someone let out a scream of pain. Praying that she didn’t get shot or set on fire, Alex ducked her head and struggled the rest of the way down the rickety stairs. Someone lunged at her, and she reflexively pulled the trigger on her flamethrower. A plume of fire spurting out the end of the nozzle, but she hadn’t aimed, and it sizzled harmlessly into the water. Even so, she heard a cry of fear, and her half-seen attacker fell back.

Mina was on her feet again, her head flung back and her eyes black as a starless night. The temperature in the basement plunged abruptly, and the water turned into half-frozen slush, so cold it sent spikes of pain up through Alex’s calves. Chains clanked loudly, and she saw Pook thrash once as the

water he was sitting in turned to ice around him.

Nigel swore furiously and flung the gun away, freeing his own power. The temperature began to rise again, and the slush went back to liquid. Steam formed in the air, blotting out the feeble light from the lantern and turning the basement into a nightmare of half-seen shapes.

Alex plunged in what she hoped was the direction of the wall. In the steam and confusion, she almost tripped over Pook's legs. He hung limply from his chains, barely clinging to consciousness. Bruises ringed his beautiful eyes, swelling them shut, and blood from his nose masked much of his face.

Damn them for hurting him.

She dropped down beside him, heedless of the muck. "Pook? It's all right—we're here. We're going to—"

Alex more sensed than heard the shadow behind her. With a snarl of rage, she spun around, loosing a stream of flame. A young man fell back, screaming and beating at the fire that clung to his arms. The stink of burnt hair and flesh filled the air, mingling with that of blood and refuse, but Alex felt no pity. Raising the nozzle higher, she began to sweep the geyser of flame in a slow arc. Cries of fear broke out from shapes only half-seen in the steam, and feet thudded on the wooden steps leading out of the basement.

"Alex, stop!"

Although her heart still pounded with a mixture of rage and fear, she let the flames die. Mina appeared out of the mist, her eyes black and a feral grin on her mouth. "They all ran. Good job."

"What about the seelie?" Alex demanded, looking anxiously past Mina. Fox came running from the other side of the basement, her clothing covered in muck, and dropped down beside Pook. A soft wail came from her throat, but she made no move to touch him.

"He was the first out. I don't think he was expecting us." Mina's smile of bloodlust faded as she turned her attention on Pook. "Damn. We need to get him out of here."

The shackles about his wrists were connected by a chain, which in turn was looped over a hook in the wall. He groaned as Mina tugged on the chain, and Alex saw the faint gleam of bloodshot eyes beneath his bruised lids.

"Pook?" she whispered anxiously, trying to watch him and the stair at the same time. "Can you stand up?"

He closed his eyes again, licked his bloody lips, and nodded. Mina slid an arm under his shoulders, doing what she could to help him up, while Alex kept the nozzle of the flamethrower trained on the stair in case anyone came back. Fox merely stood by uselessly, wringing her hands, her wide, mad eyes desperate.

As soon as there was enough slack in the chain, Mina pulled it free from the hook. "There we go," she said encouragingly. "Now you just have to walk."

Pook shook his head. Even in the bad light, he looked terrible, and Alex felt tears of pity prick behind her eyes. "I can't," he said faintly. "Please...just leave me here...please...."

"Like hell," Mina said, and dragged him towards the stair. His expression bleak, Pook stumbled beside her, and they made their slow, limping way across the basement and up the stair.

Outside, the air was tainted with the smell of scorched leather. Duncan sat alertly in the brougham, peering out through the glass. Although the horses obviously hadn't spooked, their ears were back, and one tossed its head nervously when they appeared.

"We've got him," Mina said unnecessarily, half helping and half dumping Pook into the back-facing seat across from Duncan. "What happened here? Are you all right?"

Duncan's glasses reflected the gaslight. "The seelie faeling thought to take a parting shot. He was not in earnest, but he did manage to burn a hole in the upholstery. I'd like to think that I at least stung him a bit before he departed, though."

Alex climbed in beside Pook. Up close, he reeked of the floodwaters, and his clothing was utterly filthy. He leaned his head back against the seat, his eyes closed, and she wondered briefly if he'd passed out.

They'll pay for this. I swear, Pook. I won't let anyone hurt you again, if I can help it.

With a clatter of hooves, the carriage pulled off into the mist-filled night, leaving the dank cellar behind.

Chapter Eighteen

Mina drove at what Alex thought was a breakneck pace through the rainy streets, scattering pedestrians and earning cries of wrath from other drivers. Alex clutched the flamethrower's nozzle in her hands, trying desperately to scan the streets for any possible sign of attack. She wasn't certain what had gone on in the basement before they arrived, but she doubted Nigel had acted alone.

Mina and Pook saw him with a fae. And if the fae get involved and decide to come after us now, I have to be ready. There's no way Pook can defend himself.

Pook started to shake before they had gone far, deep shudders that tore at his whole body. Alex cast him a concerned glance and met Duncan's blue-gray gaze over Pook's head. Looking grim, Duncan pulled the lap rug over Pook as best he could.

"Not much farther," he said reassuringly.

Pook opened his eyes; that bleak look was still on his face, as if he had fought a terrible battle and lost everything at the end. "Where...where are you taking me?" he asked. His voice sounded dead, and that more than anything sent a chill through Alex's heart.

Those bastards. May the god of the waning year curse them all.

"We're going to the house, where Mina and I live," said Duncan, who obviously thought that Pook's question came from confusion and injury.

At his words, a faint spark came back into Pook's eyes. "Not the police station?" he asked, as if not daring to hope.

"I hardly think this is the sort of thing one can easily press charges over," Duncan pointed out.

"No—not for that. For me. You ain't...you know...going to turn me in?"

"What?" Alex exclaimed in outrage. "Why would you think that?"

Pook displayed his chained hands silently.

Duncan sighed. In the uncertain light coming from passing streetlamps, he looked suddenly old. "Difficult as it may be to believe, the seelie fae'ing wasn't polite enough to leave behind a key to your manacles. And unless Alex has hidden an ax in with her flamethrower, I don't see anything in this carriage that could be used to remove them. I have a set of lock picks at home that I intend to use to free you." His mouth quirked slightly in what might have been humor. "Not to mention that it hardly makes sense to go to all this effort to rescue you, if we meant to hand you over to the police."

The reason behind Pook's bleak look became horribly clear. *He really thought we were going to hand him over to the authorities. That we would send him to prison, or worse, without a second thought.*

Oh, Pook.

She put her hand over his, desperate to offer some comfort. His skin felt chilled, and she wished that she had some way to warm it. "I would never let anyone hurt you, Pook. Never."

"I'll thank you to have more faith in the future," Duncan added, sounded slightly miffed. "After all, sending you away to torment and death is hardly a measured response to a minor theft. Surely you don't think us that unreasonable, do you?"

Pook dropped his eyes and shrugged. Alex winced, remembering what she had gleaned from him in dreams. If his master had indeed roasted a boy alive for the crime of getting stuck inside the chimney he was cleaning, then how was Pook to judge what punishment might be meted out for any given infraction?

"We're your friends, Pook," she said quietly, squeezing his hand in an attempt to convey some of what she was feeling. "We care about you. You have to believe that."

She wasn't certain if she got through to him or not. They rode the rest of the way in silence. As the carriage pulled up to the bronze gates in front of the house, Fox hopped down from her perch by Mina and simply wandered off, as if she had lost all interest in the proceedings. Mina gave a shake of her head,

but didn't call out in question; no doubt she had known Fox too long to bother.

Pook managed to get down more or less on his own, although he swayed on his feet. The iron chain clinked hideously every time he moved. As soon as they were inside, Duncan went to fetch his lock picks, and within the space of half an hour, the heavy manacles fell unlatched to the floor. Rubbing at his wrists, Pook stood up, his shape shifting to liquid darkness, then back so quickly that it was like the flicker of a shadow.

Most of the wounds disappeared, but he was still filthy and exhausted looking. Nevertheless, the shadow of a grin quirked lips still crusted with dried blood. "Thanks."

"Do you know what this seelie faelung wanted?" Duncan asked quietly.

"He kept asking me about Finn Bheara's plans." Pook shook his head; his hair was matted with blood and grime and stuck to his skin. "I think I heard him say that other name again, too. Tamnais. But I was kind of out of it."

Duncan nodded. "And the people who were helping him? That was his gang?"

In the dim light, Pook's face seemed to take on a grayish hue. "No. Mine."

Oh Chernovog. Alex remembered what he had said to her, that these people were his only friends, his only family. "I'm sorry," she said, knowing that it wasn't nearly enough, but unable to think of anything else to say.

He shrugged and looked away. In all the time since they had met, she had never seen him like this. Beaten. Defeated.

"The bean-nighe said it would happen," he said at last, not looking at any of them. "Said that my friends would become my enemies. But I thought she meant you lot."

Mina had been standing in the doorway, watching the proceedings. Now, she stirred restlessly. "You've spoken to the bean-nighe?"

Duncan held up a long-fingered hand, as if to restrain her. "Pook, is there anything that you haven't told us which cannot wait? Anything urgent?"

"Not that I can think of."

"Then perhaps a bath and a rest would be in order. For all of us."

They took the lift to the second floor. While Duncan showed Pook one of the guest rooms, Alex went back to her own and sat down on the edge of the bed, staring out the window at the night. After a time, she heard the pipes rattle as someone—hopefully Pook—drew water for a bath.

He thought we betrayed him. It hurt, as if someone had cut her deep inside. *How must he feel? His gang...people he thought were friends...did betray him. They tortured him.*

Anger blazed through her, all over again. Whether or not they had once been Pook's friends, she didn't regret setting at least one of them on fire. The vindictive part of her hoped that she'd gotten more of them than she realized. But she had the feeling that Pook wouldn't quite see it that way.

Restless, she rose and changed out of her dress. The skirt was wet and smeared with filth, and she wondered if it would be salvageable. Although sense told her that she should put on a nightgown and go to sleep, she instead donned the sensible dress that she had left in the armoire for just such an emergency. The gown she'd worn on the equinox hung beside it, and she ran her hand wistfully over the silk sleeve, remembering how Pook had looked at her that night.

Letting herself out into the hall, she moved quietly towards Pook's room. *I should make sure he's all right. Or find out if he needs anything. Most likely he's already asleep.* Although she didn't want to wake him, she needed to at least peek in, just to reassure herself that he was alive and as unharmed as could be expected.

The door was slightly ajar, and the muted glow of gaslight spilled out into the hallway. Pook sat on the edge of the bed, wearing a pair of trousers that had probably come from Duncan, along with a clean shirt. The shirt was half buttoned, as if he had been in the act of dressing when he had sat down. His head was in his hands, blocking any sight of his face, but she could see his shoulders shaking with muted sobs.

Alex hesitated a moment, not certain whether or not he'd want her to intrude. *I can't just stand here and do nothing, though.* So she pushed the door the rest of the way open and went to him, sitting beside him on the bed. He had to have known she was there, if only from the give of the mattress, but he

gave no acknowledgment.

Any thoughts of awkwardness vanished in the face of her need to comfort him, to do something, anything, to make him feel better. Putting her arms around his shoulders, she pulled him towards her. "It's all right, Pooshka," she whispered, calling him the pet name she had only dared to use in her most private thoughts. "It's going to be all right."

She'd half expected him to pull away, but instead he turned blindly towards her, wrapping his arms around her waist and hiding his face in her hair. She could feel his whole body shaking, feel the desperation in the way he clung to her like a drowning man. "There, there," she murmured, stroking his hair as if he was a child. "Everything's going to be all right. I promise."

His black hair was still damp from washing; it was exquisitely soft under her fingers, like midnight silk. The scent of soap clung to his brown skin, underlain by his own slightly musky smell. Even through their clothing, she could feel the heat of his body, the hard leanness of muscle on his arms and back. Alex closed her eyes, willing herself to breathe slowly, willing her heart to quiet its frantic beating. An ache for all the things she could never have filled her chest and made it difficult to think.

Eventually, the storm of weeping ceased. She kept stroking his hair and back, unwilling to let go of the moment, the closeness, before she had to. He leaned against her, the weight of his head on her shoulder, and she could feel his breath against her ear. Her hair was damp against her neck from his tears. For a while, neither of them moved or said anything, and she wondered if she had managed to bring at least a little contentment back into his heart.

It couldn't last, though. Pook stirred, and she let go of him immediately. His eyes were puffy and red, and he dashed the back of one hand across them. "I'm sorry," he said, his voice a little hoarse from crying. "You must think I'm weak."

"Of course not. How can you even say that?" she asked.

He shrugged, glancing down at the bedspread. "I don't know. I just...I thought I was going to do all right...and then it just hit me."

"It's all right. If I'd been through everything you have, I'd weep too." *I almost am, just watching him.* Seeing him so dejected tore at her heart like knives.

"Maybe it's different. Maybe I don't have any right to be sad. Maybe I deserved it."

The words surprised her; this was a side of him that she'd never seen before. "That's ridiculous, Pook."

"Is it?" The silver flecks in his eyes looked dim, like dying stars. "Then why did they all turn against me? Even Rose, and she was my best friend before I met you. We've known each other since we was kids. What did I do that she hates me so much now?"

Anger scalded her, but she swallowed it back, not wanting to upset him more. "Maybe you didn't do anything, Pook. Bad things happen to people all the time, whether they deserve them or not. You ought to know that better than anyone."

"Mina wouldn't agree with you, not about me, anyway. You heard what she said—she would've killed to take my place in Gloachamuir. So maybe if I'd been good, and worked hard, and shut up, and taken what was given, and stayed there instead of running away..."

He trailed off, but she heard in the words the bitterness of years, coupled with blind anger...and underneath it all, a child's fear that maybe he really had done something to bring torment on himself.

"Mina was angry about the stupid art set, and she lashed out. She didn't realize, not then. She does now." But he still looked uncertain, so she played her trump. "What about Collin, then? Did he deserve what happened to him?"

Pook stared at her, eyes going wide. "How'd you know about that?"

How to tell him that I've been sharing his dreams? "Just accept that I do," she said, trying not to blush. "That's not important right now. Answer my question."

For a moment he continued to look at her in puzzlement. Then he slowly shook his head. "No. H-he didn't."

"That's right. He didn't, and neither did you. Far from it." She hesitated, not certain how to express what she meant. "You are a miracle to me."

“I am?”

She nodded, willing him to listen to her, to believe. “After everything that’s happened to you—after Fergus, and Collin, and all the bad things—you could have just said to hell with the world. And been mean, and hateful, and not cared about anything. But you didn’t. You aren’t mean, or selfish, or any of those things. You’re kind, and gentle, and b-beautiful.”

She ducked her head, knowing that she had gone too far, said too much. But he only let out a wry laugh. “Now who’s the kind one?” he asked. “I know I’m funny looking.”

“You’re *what*?”

“You know.” He shifted uncomfortably, and then gestured vaguely at his head. “My ears and my eyes and all that. ’S okay. It don’t bother me so much no more, I guess.”

His confession stunned her, so impossible did it seem. “What on earth do you think is wrong with your eyes? Or ears? Or...your *anything*?”

He shrugged, seeming a little defensive. “You know. They’re all pointed and slanted and weird. Deformed.”

“That’s the most insane thing I’ve heard from you tonight! Don’t you look in mirrors?”

He drew back from her a little, running his hand through his hair in a nervous gesture. “I try not to. I mean...maybe if I’d looked more like the family my mom left me with, they wouldn’t have hated me so much. Maybe they would’ve kept me, instead of selling me to Fergus. And Fergus...well, he used to call me ‘Freak.’ A lot of the other kids did, too, trying to get on his good side.”

He looked so sad that it broke her heart. “You are not a freak,” she said firmly. “By the gods! Haven’t you ever noticed all the women throwing themselves at you left and right? What about the bakery sisters? They’d probably knife each other in the back, if they thought it would give them a shot at you.”

“They’re just nice,” he objected.

“Oh really? And what about Mrs. Blackville? Why do you think that every time she comes in the store she has you either climbing ladders or getting books off the bottom shelves?”

“She likes gardening!”

“She’s looking at your backside! And Lady RiTor is almost as bad.” Alex flung up her hands in frustration at his disbelieving expression. “The truth is, you’re...you’re gorgeous. And everyone, from the baker sisters to Fox, thinks so and would love to prove it to you.”

Pook didn’t say anything for a moment, only looked at her, his face slowly going from puzzled to wistful. “What about you?” he asked softly.

Alex felt a blush heating her cheeks. She should have thought more about what she was saying, about what she was giving away. Trying to buy time, she stood up and went to look out the window. The only light outside came from the gaslights on the nearby street, but they were dim and shrouded in mist.

I can’t tell him. He’ll laugh at me. Or worse, he’ll take it amiss—think that I really believed he’d have any interest in someone like me.

But lying to him tonight seemed terribly wrong, somehow. Maybe it was seeing him hurt and betrayed that did it to her. Or maybe it was the knowledge that she had almost lost him forever, that he had been on his way out of her life when the seelie faeling caught up with him.

She remembered the day she had come to Dere, knowing that no one else in the entire world cared about her. If she had died on the ocean crossing, no one would have shed a single tear. And suddenly she understood why Pook had clung so desperately to the Rat Soldiers. Impossible as it seemed to her, he had felt that way, too—perhaps still did—and belonging to them had been his only insurance against dying alone and unmourned.

“Of course I do,” she said, closing her eyes against his reflection in the window. “The first time I saw you on the docks, I just...felt overwhelmed, I suppose. You looked so beautiful standing there. I remember thinking that you had the most incredible eyes I had ever seen. And your skin...well.

“After I met you...it would have been different if you had been mean, or if you’d made fun of me for being such a bookworm, or if you’d acted as if I were beneath your notice. But you didn’t, you were kind—and that made everything so much worse, because I knew that you couldn’t feel the same way

about me—I knew that, but I just...I thought that if I could just be near you, maybe everything would be all right..."

She took a deep breath, fighting against tears, hideously embarrassed. "I have to go," she mumbled, and tried to turn and flee. But he was between her and the door, on his feet now, his hands closing lightly on her shoulders. Wishing that she could just sink through the floor and die, she stood still in his grip, refusing to look at him. *What must he think of me...oh, Chernovog, I'm such an idiot...how could I say that to him?*

"Alex?" he asked tentatively. When she refused to look up at him, she felt his fingers catch her lightly under the chin. For a moment, she considered keeping her head down, but struggling with him would only make her loss of dignity complete. So she let him tilt her head back, felt him shift his hand so that his thumb ran lightly over her cheek, wiping away a tear. He bent towards her, and for a moment she didn't know what he meant to do, until he kissed her.

His lips were startlingly soft, their caress a question, as if he wasn't sure this was what she wanted. Stunned, she opened her eyes wide, saw the delicate sweep of his long lashes lying against his brown skin. Her heart lurched wildly, and she responded, only half-certain about the mechanics of what she was doing.

Pook's arms slid around her waist, pulling her against him. His lips caressed hers, a feeling so good that she almost forgot to breathe. Teeth nipped delicately at her lower lip, and she moaned softly. He slid his tongue into her mouth, tasting her, and then coaxed her to do the same with him. Fire ignited in her veins, making her tremble against him. She felt hyperaware of every touch, from the hands that were slowly stroking her back, to the passionate seduction of his mouth.

The kiss came to an end. Alex felt as if the room were spinning around her, as if she would fall if he let go. "Oh," she said in a small voice.

"Yeah," he agreed raggedly. And kissed her again.

Chapter Nineteen

Candlelight cast soft, uncertain shadows over the walls of the kitchen, creating a tiny haven in the otherwise dark house. The spicy smell of mustard filled the air as Pook slathered some liberally on the sandwich he was busy constructing. Someone—probably Mina, he guessed—had put a spell on the icebox, so that the interior was cold, even in the absence of any actual ice. The leftovers preserved inside had been thoroughly raided for a late dinner or possibly an early breakfast—from the soft chiming of the hall clock and his own inner sense of things, Pook reckoned the night was pretty far gone.

"That's all Duncan told me," Alex said, over the rattle of knives and dishes. He had finally gotten her to explain how she knew so much about his past, although he wasn't entirely certain he understood, even now that she had finished.

"Huh." He set the mustard aside and took a healthy bite out of his sandwich. His stomach felt like it had been gnawing at his backbone, which was one of the reasons they were in the kitchen at this ungodly hour, when everybody else in the world seemed to be asleep. "So those dreams about the snow and the forest...that was where you lived?"

She nodded, and a pretty blush rose to her cheeks. "Yes."

It made him feel weirdly happy. Maybe it was just knowing, finally, why he'd had these crazy dreams all this life. "No wonder I liked it."

The soft light gilded her skin and reflected off her glasses, hiding her eyes. She ducked her head, looking at her sandwich instead of at him. "I'm sorry, Pook. I didn't mean to...intrude on your dreams, in any fashion. But particularly the ones we've both had, since I came here."

"Not like you did it on purpose. Besides, I been having nightmares most of my life—maybe it ain't so bad, not to have to face them alone."

Another delicate flush spread over her cheeks. "Oh. I just...didn't know...that is, some of those things were personal."

There was something in her tone that made him think she didn't mean just him. "Like when you was in the forest?"

Like when you asked me if you'd killed Gosha yet?

Alex flinched a little, and he knew he'd hit true. "Yes," she said in a small voice. "There are things...things I haven't told you..."

She trailed off, and he knew that, no matter how curious he was, she wasn't ready to talk about that yet. So he put down what little remained of his dinner, then reached over and touched her hair lightly. It was soft and silky against his fingers, and she leaned her head into the caress.

"You ain't got to, baby, if you don't want," he said seriously. "But you can if you do. What I mean is, whatever it is, you can tell me. There ain't nothing you could say that would make me turn away from you."

She glanced at him, and he could tell that she wasn't entirely certain about that. So he tried to reassure her without words, leaning over and kissing her softly. She responded immediately, eagerly, and his heart beat hard in his chest.

Someone began to pound on the front door.

They jerked apart, both of them looking towards the door. Even from a distance, it was obvious that, whoever was trying to get in, he was desperate. "What the hell?" Pook muttered, and exchanged a worried look with Alex.

"Do you think we should let Mina and Duncan answer?" she asked uncertainly.

Pook shook his head, starting for the front of the house even as he did so. "Bastard's going to break down the damn door," he said, feeling distinctly uncharitable towards whoever it was.

He hadn't bothered to put on any shoes or socks after his bath, and the wooden floors were chill under his feet. Alex followed behind him, carrying the candle that her eyes needed to navigate through the dark rooms, and he half wished that she had stayed in the kitchen. After all, if this really was trouble...

Who you kidding, Pook? If there's trouble at the door, which of you has a damned flamethrower? Maybe you ought to be the one hiding in the kitchen.

The frantic pounding had not let up by the time he got to the door. Drawing a thread of power from the darkness all around, he chose surprise over caution and flung the door wide.

Dubh stood on the other side, his hand in the air, suspended in the act of knocking. For a moment, they stared at one another in mutual surprise. *What the hell is he doing here?* Pook wondered. Although, if he'd had to guess who would be most likely to drag him out of the kitchen, away from a good meal and an armful of pretty girl, Dubh would have been near the top of the list.

Dubh stood there with his jaw hanging open, and Pook felt a nasty grin spread slowly over his own face. "Hello, Dubh," he said, with false cheerfulness.

And punched him as hard as he could in the mouth.

Pook had the immense satisfaction of seeing Dubh go flying back, skidding on his rump down the ramp and into the yard. Biting back a laugh, he slammed the door shut and turned away.

Alex stood in the hall, her eyes wide. Behind her, a light appeared, and the grind of the lift filled the air as Mina and Duncan made their way down. "Just a nuisance," he said to them all, waving a dismissive hand. "Go back to bed."

Alex's gray-blue eyes darted from him to the closed door and back again. "That boy," she said uncertainly, as Mina came up behind her, ignoring Pook's good advice. "He's the one who brought the papers from Gloachamuir. Who showed me where the...I'm sorry, Pook, but where you'd hidden the art box."

Pook froze. In all the excitement, he hadn't stopped to ask how he'd been found out. *But God damn it, if I'd thought about it, who the hell else would I expect it to be?*

Dubh had been riding his ass for no damn reason from the moment they'd met. Attacking him at every turn, breaking into the Rat Soldiers, trying to drive a wedge between him and everybody he cared about—and for what? No gain that he had ever figured, no profit, nothing but pure spite.

And Pook had pretty much rolled over, just taken it, for the sake of the Rat Soldiers. Bitter pain flashed through his gut at the thought of the gang. Well, his ties were severed with them now, that was for

damn sure. Which meant he was through taking whatever Dubh wanted to hand out.

Pook spun around and wrenched the door open. Dubh had gotten to his feet and was halfway back up the ramp again, obviously too stupid to run the other way. With a snarl of pent-up fury, Pook launched himself at the other boy, catching him off guard and ramming a shoulder into his gut. He heard all the air leave Dubh's lungs and felt a tiny bit of satisfaction as they tumbled down the ramp together.

Dubh recovered fast—Pook had to give him that much credit. A fist connected with Pook's head, but the blow was glancing. Then the fight was on in earnest, a flurry of wild punches, too fast to track. Pook managed to get Dubh under him; blood filled his mouth, but he didn't care, too lost in the euphoria of finally, *finally*, giving free rein to his anger. Fear flickered in Dubh's eyes, and Pook heard himself laughing. *Now which one of us is running, you—*

He felt the power rise an instant before it hit him. Frost crackled in the air, freezing the blood on Dubh's face. Cold wind slammed into Pook, shoving him aside, off of the other boy. He tasted power on his tongue, Mina's power. Not an attack, then, just her way of getting his attention.

But he'd put up with too much for too long, and he turned on her with a snarl. Mina didn't belong in this quarrel, didn't know anything about it, but by God if she was looking for a fight he would give it to her. He dragged power from the darkness, from the earth under his feet, and he felt an answering crackle from her, saw her razor-sharp grin—

"Pook, don't!" Alex shouted, putting herself between them.

He swallowed it back fast, magic collapsing around him in shreds of mist before it touched her. "Just calm down," Alex said, holding out her hands to him. "Please."

"I told you!" Dubh moaned from the ground, the words muffled through a bloody nose. "I told you he was violent! That he is not to be trusted! Do you believe me now?"

"I'm not to be trusted?" Pook demanded. "You backstabbing, bootlicking—"

"Pook," Duncan said, and cast him a sharp glance. "This is not constructive." He turned his gaze to Dubh. "Perhaps you could tell us who you are?"

Dubh came to his feet slowly, wiping blood away from his lips and shooting a wary glance at Pook. "Forgive me, please, Lord RiDahn. My name is Dubh." He bowed, as if they were at court or something. "I'm sorry to disturb you at this time of night, but I...I am in need of sanctuary. Alex can vouch for me."

"What?" Pook blurted, looking helplessly back and forth between them. *What the hell's been going on?*

Alex bit her lip, flash of white teeth against soft pink. "I wouldn't exactly say that I can vouch for Dubh," she said carefully. "I did speak to him this morning, however."

"What?" Pook said again, knowing he sounded like an idiot, but not able to stop himself.

"He wanted to talk about Pook," she went on, her eyes averted. "Mainly, about how Pook had...misrepresented...himself to us."

"And did I lie?" Dubh challenged.

Alex winced and cast an apologetic look in Pook's direction. "The facts he told me were accurate, as far as they went."

"Because I feared for you. I traveled all the way to Gloachamuir to bring you proof. Because I was concerned—for myself, yes, but also for you."

The honeyed, reasonable sound of Dubh's voice made Pook grind his teeth in fury. "You backstabbing son of a whore! What the fuck is wrong with you? I guess you didn't tell her that you're a Rat Soldier, too, that you're just as bad as I am, doing the same damn things to get by!"

Dubh's brown eyes narrowed. "I didn't come here to debate with you."

"No, I guess you didn't. Probably because you figured I'd be on my way back to Gloachamuir in chains by now!"

"And deserved every moment of it!"

"Stop this!" Mina snarled, and Pook felt something huge and dark lurking just on the other side of his wards, waiting to push if need be. "If you boys are going to fight over whose is bigger, you do it some other damn time! *You*," she added to Dubh, "turn up on my step in the middle of the night, so you owe me some answers. And I'll tell you now that I don't care for people who sneak around behind other's

backs, carrying tales and whispers.”

A flush mottled Dubh’s dark skin, but he offered her a rigid bow. “As you will. As I said, I was forced to go to Gloachamuir, so I’ve been gone for several days.” He glanced at Pook. “I suppose you’ve told them what happened to the Rat Soldiers?”

Bitterness cramped Pook’s belly, making him feel ill. He didn’t want to think about what had happened, didn’t want to remember how they’d turned against him. “That they’re working with the seelie?” he asked tonelessly. “Yeah. They know.”

Dubh stared at him, as if Pook were some strange creature he’d never seen before. “Great gods—could it be that you really are as stupid as you look? Haven’t you noticed anything else odd about them?”

Pook swallowed. “Well...they was acting a little funny,” he said cautiously. “But I don’t see what that has to do with nothing.”

“Everything, you brainless fool. They’ve eaten faery food.”

Alex gasped softly, but the sound came to Pook from one remove. His blood turned cold, and yet, at the same time, he felt hope struggle back to life somewhere deep within. If the Rat Soldiers had indeed been given faery food...if they weren’t responsible for their own actions...then maybe they didn’t hate him after all. Maybe he hadn’t really lost them.

Mina was frowning, her eyes narrowed into slits. “Why?” she asked bluntly. “What interest would the fae possibly have in a bunch of ragamuffins?”

“Mortal blood,” Duncan said quietly.

Surprise showed on Dubh’s face, quickly hidden. Pook frowned at the other boy, then glanced at Duncan. “I don’t get it.”

Duncan shifted slightly, causing the wheelchair to creak. Moonlight reflected off his glasses, hiding his eyes, but his voice was grave. “We know that the war in Faerie has begun to spill over into the mortal realm, yes? Pook and Mina saw a seelie fae and overheard him speaking with Nigel. The name of the unseelie king was mentioned. Then there is the matter of the weapons being brought into the city, designed to kill those with fae blood. I think it is clear that all these things are signs of something very large afoot in Faerie. The armies have been gathered, so now it is time for the battle lines to be drawn.”

“But what’s that got to do with the Rat Soldiers?”

Alex’s eyes had lit up, and Pook knew that she was way ahead of him, as usual. “Don’t you remember, Pook? Duncan taught us this. Remember the old stories about the use of a mortal on the battlefield?”

“No,” he said truthfully. He’d always been far more interested in the practical aspects of his magic and hadn’t paid nearly as much attention to Duncan prattling on about the rest of it. What did he care about what the fae did? He didn’t want any part of them. So, whenever Duncan had gotten going on some stupid history lesson, Pook had taken the opportunity to admire Alex’s figure while nobody was watching.

Maybe I should’ve paid more attention.

Dubh’s lip curled, but he held back the insult he’d obviously just thought of. “The stories are only half-true,” he said instead. “Mortal blood is used to mark the battlefield, to set the boundaries for the conflict. I should have realized what was happening when Darcy killed the Rummies’ leader.”

“His blood disappeared,” Pook said hurriedly, not wanting Dubh to completely show him up. “The fae must’ve taken it somehow, used it in the bread Alex saw being baked—that was the same night, even.”

“And you didn’t think that was important enough to mention?” Mina demanded, flinging her arms in the air. “Damn it, Pook!”

“Sorry,” he muttered, and scuffed the ground with his toes. Then something else occurred to him, and he looked at Dubh. “Mr. Summer. Darcy’s patron. He’s the seelie fae Mina and I saw. Got to be.”

Dubh’s mouth twisted in distaste. “And he’s using the Rat Soldiers, the Firestarters, and anyone else he can get, to mark the boundaries of the battlefield. Setting things in his favor, no doubt. Damn him!”

“Is there anything *else* that you haven’t told us, Pook?” Duncan asked. He didn’t sound real happy

at the moment, and Pook winced. "I believe you mentioned the bean-nighe?"

"Well...yeah." Pook sighed and launched into his tale, beginning with the ill-fated attempt at river piracy, when he'd run into the fideal. Since Alex, Duncan, and Mina were all staring at him with expressions of disbelief, he turned his gaze on Dubh, figuring that was safer. Dubh just looked generally pissed, which was at least normal and didn't make him feel bad.

When he had finished, Duncan sighed, took off his glasses, and rubbed at his eyes. "And you didn't think it important to mention anything about this sword that you are supposed to look for?"

Pook shrugged helplessly. "Well, why should I? I mean, what the hell would I do with a sword? Even if I knew what to do with one, iron and me don't get along too good. I guess I could sell it, but most of the fences I deal with wouldn't know how to move something like that. I could ask Kerry the Gouger, maybe."

"Sell it?" Dubh gasped in outrage.

"Faerie swords are not made from iron, Pook," Duncan said, cutting in before Dubh could get going. "But...please...if something like this should happen again, could you possibly remember to mention it to the rest of us?"

"I guess," Pook said dubiously, although he still didn't see what he would do with a sword even if he had one. Besides, wasn't all this talk about swords and fae distracting everybody from the matter at hand? "But what about the Rat Soldiers? We got to help them! You said yourself that a second taste of faery food would break the spell, right?"

Duncan's grave expression made him feel sick inside. "I said that was a rumor, Pook. I rather fear it is based on wishful thinking, rather than fact."

"No. It's true," Dubh said.

Everyone looked at him in surprise. "How do you know? Who are you?" Mina asked warily.

Dubh shrugged. "I know. And I am a faeling, like yourselves. That is all I wish to say."

"Who cares?" Pook asked, feeling more charitable towards Dubh than he ever had before. "We can save the Rat Soldiers, right? We can make some more faery food?"

"I don't know how," Mina said, her eyes still on Dubh. "What about you?"

Dubh hesitated, then nodded sharply. "I can."

"And who will bleed to make it?"

That stopped Pook cold. Darcy had killed the Rummie leader for the fae, or at least that seemed like what had happened. Were they going to have to kill somebody too?

Can I go along with that if we got to do it? Even to save the Soldiers?

"We can use our own blood," Dubh said. "If we all give a small amount, it will be enough."

"Well, then, let's get on it!" Pook exclaimed. But no one seemed nearly excited as he was, and it made him scared. *Nobody cares about them but me, just like nobody cares about me but them.*

But that ain't true no more, is it?

He looked at Alex, where she stood nearby, her face solemn. "We are going to help them, ain't we?" he asked tentatively.

Their eyes met...then she took a step closer and put her hand lightly to his arm. "Of course, Pook."

"We'll need a proper oven," Dubh said. "As well as some other ingredients."

"Well, we'll just ask Marek and Madeline and Beatrice and Chloe and Kate and Ophelia if we can borrow theirs." At last, *finally* a piece of luck going his way, and it was all Pook could do not to laugh out loud.

"And what will you ask them?" Duncan said mildly. "Excuse me, may I borrow your oven to bake some magical bread?"

"The seelie fae put a sleeping spell on them," Alex said. "Can we do the same?"

Duncan's eyes grew thoughtful. "Perhaps. I will have to look into it. Much depends on the list of ingredients that we need."

"They are not so difficult," Dubh said. "The true requirement is enough power to set the spell."

"Well, we've got Mina, so we're set there," Pook said, feeling better and better about the whole situation with every moment. "Let's get started!"

“We must wait until the bakery closes, at the very earliest,” Duncan replied. “Otherwise, it will seem too suspicious. In the meantime, I suggest we all get a few hours of rest.”

* * * *

Before heading back to bed, Duncan and Mina had gone into their library with Dubh, intent on figuring out, before they went to sleep, how to do the spell. Pook didn't bother going with them—Dubh and Duncan had the know-how, and Mina had the power, so that made him one too many wheels on the cart. Besides, Mina and Duncan had gotten at least some sleep, whereas he hadn't so much as closed his eyes.

At the same time, though, he felt a little too restless to go straight to bed. His blood was still up from the fight with Dubh, and a mixture of hope and fear about the Rat Soldiers was tearing him apart inside. So he went and sat on the divan in the study, staring out the window and watching the sunrise.

He sensed, rather than saw, movement out of the corner of his eye; turning his head, he found Alex hovering in the doorway, looking at him with concern. “I thought you went to bed,” he said.

“No. I just wanted to check on you. I'm sorry if I disturbed you.”

“Course you didn't.” He shifted around so that he could recline against the divan, dropped one leg off the side, and patted the space in front of him. “You can sit with me, if you want. I was just watching the sun come up.”

He could see the blush on her cheeks, even in the dimness. But she came over and sat down. The pins were slipping out of her hair, and she reached up absently and pulled one loose.

“Here, let me,” he said, and eased the rest free. Her hair came down in soft, curly waves that spilled over his hands, and he combed it out carefully with his fingers. She made a small sound of pleasure in her throat and closed her eyes.

“Mmm,” she said at last. “That's too relaxing. You'd better stop, or I might fall asleep sitting up.”

“Then fall asleep, baby.” He tugged lightly on her, letting her know that it was okay if she wanted to lean against him. For a minute she looked uncertain, but then she hesitantly shifted into his arms, removed her glasses and tucked them into a pocket, and laid her head against his chest.

He wrapped his arms around her, his heart feeling as if it might burst at any second. She was soft and warm and smelled so good that it drove him crazy.

The sun came up, and he felt her relax against him. It was the best thing ever, he decided, even better than fighting with the Soldiers or having a big meal in his belly. And who would've thought that there could be anything better than that?

Chapter Twenty

Alex opened her eyes to find the light of late afternoon streaming through the windows of the study. For a moment, her surroundings made no sense. Then she remembered, and her heart gave a lurch.

Pook was still asleep, as far as she could tell, although she didn't want to move and disturb him just to make certain. She didn't want to do *anything* to break the moment, truthfully, because what if it all turned out to be nothing more than momentary insanity on his part? Surely it couldn't last—surely he couldn't have any real interest in her. Could he?

It doesn't matter. I'll take whatever he wants to give me, and enjoy it for as long as I can.

She could feel the heat of his skin through the thin layer of fabric against her cheek, accompanied by the gentle rise and fall of his breath. His arms were still wrapped loosely around her shoulders, and his long dancer's legs bracketed her body. The intimacy of the embrace made her ache all over.

A shadow glided into the room, and Alex started. Pook was instantly awake; she felt his muscles go taut and his arms tighten momentarily around her. Then he relaxed and laughed. “Damn, Mina, don't go sneaking around like that.”

Alex fumbled her spectacles on, and her aunt came into focus. An unlit cigarette dangled from between Mina's lips. Her dark eyes looked like holes in her pale face, and there was something

predatory in the way she moved. *She's anticipating a battle*, Alex intuited, and wondered with whom.

"Time to get up," Mina said. "I gave Dubh your bed, Pook, as you didn't seem to be using it."

Alex felt herself blushing, as if Mina had caught them making love. That thought made her blush even harder, so she sat up quickly. Her hair spilled down around her arms, unbound as a peasant maiden's. *Chernovog, how must this look?*

"Should've made him sleep in the stables," Pook said, sitting up and running his fingers through his hair. "I don't know what he's up to, but don't trust him, Mina."

Mina smiled faintly, but there was a dangerous edge to the expression. "Funny. He said the same thing about you. What in the world did you do to him, Pook, that he's got it in for you so bad now?"

"Hell if I know," Pook said with a shrug. "But if it's a fight he wants, he's come to the right b'hoy."

"Not now. Not until this is over with." Mina moved abruptly towards the door. "It's getting late. We'd best be on our way, if we want to do this."

* * * *

The bakery had hung up its "closed" sign by the time they pulled up in front of the bookstore, and it occurred to Pook that Blackthorn Books had lost a whole day of business, thanks to this mess. He put another black mark down in his mental tally of grievances against the fae.

As they climbed out of the brougham, Marek came out the door of the bakery. Pook waved cheerfully at him, trying not to contemplate the treachery they had in mind against the baker family. Marek was dressed in his best, like he was on his way out somewhere, and only had time for a distracted wave of his own before hailing a hansom.

"Well, that makes things simpler," Mina said with satisfaction from the driver's seat.

Pook helped Alex down. Her dress was still rumpled from their nap on the divan, and her hair hung loose, its long curls brushing the hand he put to her waist. "How's that?" he asked.

"They'll be sitting down to dinner shortly. We've got the faery dust to make them sleep—" Mina held up a sealed pouch "—but we have to get it into their food somehow. The safest way will be to distract them so one of us can slip inside under a glamour. And with Marek gone, that only leaves the girls to distract."

"Mina," Duncan said, with a trace of exasperation in his voice.

"Trust me, Duncan."

"What? What are you going to do?" Pook asked, confused.

"Never mind. Just go inside, and then I'll take the brougham around the corner."

They went into the bookstore, Dubh trailing behind them. Vagabond came running up and circled Pook's legs, purring loudly and rubbing her head on him. *Like she knew when I left that I wasn't meaning to come back*, he thought, picking her up.

"Is that...a cait sidhe?" Dubh asked, sounding surprised. He took a step towards them, but Vagabond hissed a warning.

"Yeah, and she's a good judge of character," Pook said with a smirk. He could feel Vagabond's low growl thrumming against his chest. "Don't like you none, so you better stay away before she turns you into a mouse."

The idea must have pleased the moggie, because she started purring again. Pook set her carefully down on the counter, away from the more precarious piles of books. As he did so, he heard the clatter of a cart pulling up outside. Surprised, he looked up, and saw that Mina had returned. Only now, she was disguised by glamour as a male teamster, and the brougham as a cart filled with boxes of books.

"What is she doing?" Alex wondered.

Mina hopped down and clumped inside. As soon as she was away from view, she dropped the glamour around herself, although she maintained the one on the cart. "Perfect timing," she said with satisfaction. "I peeked through the window, and the sisters are just sitting down to dinner. Dubh, you and I will sneak inside and spike their drinks. Pook, you go unload the boxes."

It made no sense, and he started to wonder if maybe Dubh had done something to mix up Mina's brain. "There ain't no boxes."

"I know. Now go unload the boxes that aren't there, like a good boy."

He didn't like the way Mina was smirking at him, like she was having a joke at his expense. "Fine," he muttered, and went outside.

Mina's glamour was good, but he interwove some of his own magic, just to be sure. Then, pretending like he was lifting a heavy box, he took the first one out and set it down. *I feel like an idiot.*

The repaired bell on the bakery door chimed. Looking over his shoulder, he saw all five of the sisters hurrying across the street towards him, one with a loaf of bread, and another with a tankard of what he hoped was beer. Well, that was normal, at least. They'd always been real concerned with his health.

That ain't what Alex thinks they're concerned with.

But that was just plain silly, wasn't it?

"Pook! What on earth are you doing, working at this hour?" Madeline asked, as they came up. Her big blue eyes practically shone with concern, although he thought she might have an eyelash in one or something, because she kept blinking at him.

"We saw the bookstore was closed today—is everything all right?" Chloe added, resting her hand lightly on his arm.

Thinking fast, he said, "Oh, yeah, everything's fine now. Turns out old Duncan wasn't feeling too good this morning—touch of the gripe or something—so they didn't open. But this shipment was coming in, and Duncan was feeling better, so Mina said I should get over here and unload it before it rains."

"Oh, you poor thing!" exclaimed Beatrice, snagging his free arm. "Have you at least had dinner?"

Truth was, that sandwich he'd had last night had worn off hours ago, and the bread Ophelia was holding did look awful good. "Well, no, there wasn't time."

"How terrible, to make you do all this heavy work with nothing to eat," moaned Chloe, as if he'd just said that Mina was some kind of demented slave driver who tortured him in the back room all day long. "Here, have some bread."

"And some beer!" added Kate, pushing forward with the tankard. "I—oops! Oh, Pook, I'm so sorry, I've spilled it all over you!"

The shock of the cold beer spilling down his shirt into his pants made his stomach muscles tighten, and he did his best to wipe it off. "It's all right, Kate."

"No, it isn't! I'm such a clumsy oaf. You must let me wash that immediately, so it doesn't stain."

"Really, it's okay," he tried to say, but Ophelia and Beatrice had already yanked his suspenders off his shoulders, and someone else was pulling his shirt loose from his trousers. Then they had it off him, and there were just way too many hands wandering around, and he felt the first flutterings of panic.

The door to the bookstore slammed shut, making everyone jump. Alex stalked over to the glamour-disguised brougham, both of her hands curled into tight fists at her side. The look on her face said that someone was in trouble. General experience told Pook it was probably him.

"Hey!" he said, grateful for the distraction anyway. He grabbed the opportunity to slide out from between the sisters and put his arm around Alex's shoulders. "Hey, you've all met my girl, Alex, right?" he asked the sisters.

Alex blinked up at him, looking surprised...and then, for whatever reason, her anger seemed to evaporate. "I-It's time to come in, Pook," she said.

"Bye," he said to the sisters, and used the arm around Alex to get her turned around and headed back towards the bookstore before something else could go wrong.

"Am I?" she asked, after a moment.

"What?"

"Your girl."

Fear clenched his chest like ice. What if he had misread everything? "I...the way you was talking last night, I thought...but if that ain't what you want, or you changed your mind..."

"No! I mean, yes, I do want that." She flashed him an uncertain smile, and he felt her arm twine around his waist. "We'd best find you a shirt."

* * * *

“That was cruel of you,” Duncan said quietly.

Mina perched on a stack of crates in the back room, swinging her legs idly. They had decided to wait until the sun was fully down before crossing the street to the bakery, both to cover their trail and to give the sisters plenty of time to pass out. Alex had gone down the street to the café to bring back dinner for everyone, while Pook kept an eye on Dubh. *Ironic, since Pook’s the only one who’s actually stolen anything from us.*

Mina and Duncan had come to the back room in an attempt to get some work done during their wait. Now she cast her husband a curious glance. He sat very straight in his wheelchair, his long hair loose around his ascetic face. The light caught on his earrings, flashing gold sparks at her every time he moved. His long, ink-stained fingers rested lightly on a book, and his blue-gray eyes were grave.

“What did I do?” she asked, trying to think of what might have upset him so.

“The trick you pulled on Pook.”

“It worked, didn’t it? Besides, it was funny. What happened to your sense of humor?”

Duncan’s disapproving gaze made her feel vaguely like a naughty schoolgirl caught by a teacher. “You told me about the first time you used your dyana powers,” he said quietly. “Don’t you remember?”

Mina frowned, uncertain where this was going. “Yes.”

“What was it?”

“If you already know—”

“Humor me.”

Mina shrugged. “Fine. Janine was flirting with you, and I hated it. I was jealous and petty, and I made her stop.”

“Indeed. And how do you imagine Alexandrea felt this evening?”

That brought her up short. “But...that was different,” she protested weakly, even though she knew it wasn’t.

“Indeed it was. It was different because Janine’s joke meant less, because disaster didn’t await the day she forgot that other people have feelings just as valid and painful as her own. But if you forget that, then I fear we are all doomed, amulets or no.”

Mina closed her eyes, feeling cold inside. “I didn’t think. I’m sorry.”

She heard Duncan sigh. The wheelchair creaked softly, and a moment later she felt his hand on hers. “I know, my dear. And perhaps I am merely paranoid. But the sight of you manipulating anyone, even in jest, even to help, worries me. Particularly given that you behaved as if Alex had no feelings to be hurt, no heart to be bruised.”

“I know. I’m sorry. And I certainly can’t say I blame you for worrying.” She opened her eyes and read concern on his face. “Watch me. Talk to me if you don’t like what you see. I promised once that I would do what I could not to give in to temptation again. But...if I ever do...Pook could stop me.”

Cold fear flickered in the depths of his eyes. “Could he?”

“Yes. Maybe.” She put a hand over Duncan’s and squeezed gently. “It’s funny—he doesn’t think of himself as powerful. But he is. And I wouldn’t want to have to face off against him. We’d do a hell of a lot of damage to each other before it was over.”

Duncan’s fingers tightened on her own. “Then see it never comes to that.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Alex and Pook sat together on the window seat, their backs to the view and the remains of their dinner balanced on their laps. Both of them had neat white bandages on their left wrists, where Mina had made a tiny cut to drain their blood into a bowl. Oddly enough, Pook had turned away and refused to look when it was Alex’s turn to be bled, although he hadn’t shown any squeamishness when it had been done to him.

Dubh lurked around the counter, glaring at them both; he had refused all offers of food. The way he stared at Alex made her feel awkward and uncomfortable, as if he were judging her.

And finding me lacking, she thought bitterly. But what else should I expect?

“You got some pastry stuck on your lip,” Pook said. And leaned over and kissed it off.

On second thought, who cares what Dubh thinks?

Dubh made a sound of disgust. “Ignore him,” Pook whispered in her ear. “He’s jealous.”

Somehow, she doubted that was the cause of Dubh’s discontent. But before she could say so, there came a polite knock on the door. Startled, she looked out the window and saw Kuromori standing in the street outside.

The eastern faeling bowed when Pook let him inside. “I received Mina-san’s message,” he said, calm and unperturbed as a still lake. “She requested that I come here. I have brought my katana.”

Pook frowned. “I didn’t figure she knew where you live.”

Kuromori bowed slightly to Pook. “The dyana does not need paper to call one to her. It is good to see you again, Pook-kun. You seem in better spirits than when last I saw you.”

Pook grinned, flashing white teeth in his dark face. “Yeah, I—”

He stopped abruptly, his entire posture tensing, his head cocked to one side as if he’d heard some distant call. Alex felt...something, as if a hot wind had briefly brushed her face, then died away. It was so faint to her senses that she might well have imagined it.

But, no matter how thin her fae blood might be, the rest of them had no such trouble. “That was seelie,” Dubh spat. “Curse them to hell!”

“No wards,” Pook murmured. He moved to Alex’s side, as if he meant to protect her. “Why would they do it out in the open like that? They got to know we’d feel it.”

Mina’s boots sounded on the wooden floorboards, followed by the creak of Duncan’s wheelchair. “It’s a challenge,” she said tightly, as she entered the room. “We took Pook back from them—there’s no question now that we know about them. So they’re challenging us.”

“Or luring us into a trap,” Alex pointed out quietly.

Dubh took a sudden step towards the store window, then stopped. “What is that?”

Alex followed his gaze. Against the deepening backdrop of night, she could see a glow that seemed brighter than gaslights could account for. Even as she watched, the first plumes of smoke floated upward, obscuring the early stars.

“Fire,” Pook said, and there was real fear in his voice. “From down near the river. Looks like...like it might be Rat Soldier turf.”

“Damn them!” Dubh struck his open palm with a fist. “They’ve begun in earnest. They’ll mark this whole city in human blood tonight.”

“We got to stop them!”

“We will.” Mina’s voice was cold as the river at midnight, and even Alex could feel the slow pulse of her power. “Pook, Kuromori, Alex—go and do what you can. The rest of us will get started on the faery food.”

“I’ll get my flamethrower,” Alex said. But as she started towards the stairs, Pook grabbed her arm.

“If the city’s on fire, we don’t want to make it worse,” he pointed out. “And maybe...”

They stared at each other for a moment, and she saw the fear in his ash-gray eyes as clearly as if he’d spoken of it aloud. It wasn’t hard to guess that he wanted her to stay here, away from danger, and she felt a flash of annoyance. “Didn’t I help get you out of that basement? Didn’t I protect you? How can you not want me with you now?”

“It ain’t that. But if something happens...if you get hurt...” His fingers tightened on her arm, as if he sought to convey through touch what he didn’t seem to have words for.

“And I don’t want you to get hurt. So we’ll simply have to watch one another’s backs.” She pulled away from him, and he let her go. “I’ll fetch the iron bola I made. Just wait for me.”

She ran up the stairs, grabbed the bola, and stuffed it into a pouch. After the battle with the fae in the bookstore, she had made a second pouch and filled it with salt, which she took as well. A stout iron poker had come from a secondhand shop, and she added it to her collection of weapons, before dashing

back down the stairs as quickly as she could.

Kuromori had already hailed a cab in front of the store. They piled into it; Pook hissed and drew back when his arm inadvertently brushed against the poker. Kuromori's dark eyes inspected her weapons, and he nodded to her, as if pleased. "You have prepared for this day, Alex-chan. That is the sign of a true warrior."

She shook her head, blushing at his praise. "No. An engineer, perhaps."

They didn't make it as far as Pennywhistle Lane, which was the destination Pook had given their driver. Even blocks away, they could smell the smoke and hear the clang of the fire bells. Shouts and screams rang out, punctuated by the occasional gunshot. The cab shuddered to a halt, and Alex heard the driver cursing. "There's some kind of riot going on," he shouted down at them. "I'm turning around."

"Then let us out here!" Pook yelled back.

"You're crazy—you'll get yourselves killed, you will, getting out in this mess."

Pook flung open the door and dove out, forcing the swearing driver to stop in the midst of turning the conveyance around. Clutching her weapons, Alex bailed out after him, followed closely by Kuromori.

Her first sight of the streets made her wonder if she had done the right thing in coming, after all. Smoke blotted out the sky, billowing from an inferno a few blocks over. Panic and confusion ruled the day, with people running both towards the fire and away from it. Pook rushed off, his long legs making nothing of the distance, and within moments he had vanished into the drifting smoke.

"Stay with me, Alex-chan," Kuromori said grimly. "I fear that Pook-kun's head has deserted him."

They fell into a quick walk, moving deeper into chaos. A herd of pigs ran past, crowding them off the street and into the gutter; cold, slimy water filled Alex's boots. Ash from the burning drifted down like snow. A small boy raced by, carrying a gaudy lamp in his arms, and she realized that looting must have broken out.

They came unexpectedly on the heart of the riot, rounding a sudden corner to find the roadway in front of them blocked. Handcarts, wooden crates, and paving stones had been piled into a barricade across the road, but the flammable parts burned sluggishly, turning the whole into a wall of hot coals. Bodies lay sprawled all around, some of them burned, others showing wounds from knives or guns. Seeing those, Alex felt her heart stumble—somehow, she had expected to be facing the seelie fae alone. Against pure humans, her weapons would be far less effective.

Figures materialized out of the smoke in front of them. Alex saw soot-streaked faces and hungry eyes. She recognized a girl from the basement where Pook had been held, but the rest were unknown to her. Although they dressed differently, they were all united by the starveling look that possessed them, as though they hadn't eaten in days.

The faery food—until they're freed from the spell, they can't eat mortal food again.

Kuromori drew his sword in a single, smooth motion. "You should not approach any closer," he said, and there was steel in his voice, as well as his blade.

The girl's gaze wandered to Alex. "That's the bitch as killed Hal," she said...but not as if she truly cared. She sounded hollow, lost, deprived of all of the passions that once must have driven her.

Alex didn't know who Hal was, but she remembered the screaming figure she had set afire. "That's correct," she said coldly. "Now back away, or I'll do the same to you."

The girl grinned like a skull. "Don't think so," she said...and raised a gun.

Several things happened at once. Kuromori leapt forward, sword cutting a whistling arc through the air. At the same moment, Pook appeared out of the smoke and flung himself at the girl. "Rose, no!" he shouted.

Kuromori pulled the blow, barely missing Pook's head. But Pook seemed oblivious, grappling wildly with the girl, both of their hands locked about the gun, even though the iron must have hurt him. One of the youths who had come with the girl charged around them, an axe in his hand and emptiness in his eyes as he rushed Alex.

She had only an instant to think. The iron poker came down, all of her strength behind it, slamming across his arm. It wasn't enough to break bone, but it was enough to make him drop the axe. Before she could decide whether to hit him again or just to run, he slammed a fist hard into the side of her head.

No one had ever struck her before. The pain was shocking, almost as disorienting as the ringing in her ears. Alex lost her balance and fell heavily to the muck-covered streets. A moment later, the boy's hard boot connected with her gut, flinging her against the wall. She could feel her dinner clawing at the back of her throat, and she retched weakly.

Chernovog, save me; he's going to beat me to death.

The world around her took on a sudden, painful clarity. She could see the boy drawing back his foot in preparation for kicking her again. Behind him, she saw Rose and Pook still struggling over the gun. It went off, the sound a distant crack of thunder, and blood erupted from both the front and back of Pook's shoulder. He fell to the ground, a red stain spreading across his shirt, as life pumped out of the great artery that ran to his arm.

The iron poker felt cold and heavy in her hand. Tightening her grip around it, she lunged, aiming the point directly towards her attacker's eye. She felt a soft resistance, then a horrible, jarring scrape as it hit bone. He screamed and jerked away, blood and fluids running down his face, and she let the poker fall from a nerveless hand.

Kuromori rushed past her; his katana was covered in blood. "Pook-kun!" he called, and the cry broke Alex from her paralysis. Tearing her gaze away from the boy with the ruined eye, she saw Rose taking a step towards Pook, who still lay on the ground. For a second time, she pointed the gun at him, and this time it was aimed directly at his head.

No!

Pook raised his head, and for a moment it seemed that his eyes met those of the girl. Then he tore aside the mask of his humanity, and all the shadows came rushing in.

Where Pook had lain, bleeding his life out, lurked the dark *thing* which was his other face. Rose hesitated at the sight, and Pook seized the advantage, trotting, flowing, running at her like madness incarnate. Claws of ice raked her, and she screamed, dropping the gun.

Kuromori put his hand to Alex's shoulder. "We have company, Alex-chan," he murmured, and she turned to see other figures coming out of the smoke, as if drawn by the battle. They were bloody and stained with soot, but Alex recognized some of Pook's gang among them.

At their head strutted the seelie faeling, Nigel. His top hat was gone, and blood stained his fine clothes, but his eyes shone like fire. A predatory grin warped his face, and he motioned to those behind him. "Kill the pooka. I'll attend to these two."

"Get behind me, Alex-chan," said Kuromori, and raised his katana.

Nigel sniggered. Alex felt his power, like a hot wind scalding her skin, and she pulled her bola free from her pouch.

"This isn't your fight," Nigel said to Kuromori. "Your kind and ours are distant kin, nothing more. Why throw away your life for one stupid girl?"

Kuromori said nothing, only waited for the attack. But Nigel made no move, and Alex felt the sudden pricking of unease.

A moving spark caught her eye, coming too fast to be borne on the wind, and she cried out a warning. Kuromori pivoted on one foot, his katana gracefully slashing down. The spark dodged, and Alex saw a tiny, cruel face and hair like flames, surrounded by fast-beating wings. It came at him again, and this time his katana struck true, splitting the creature, which dissolved into flame and went out.

Nigel hissed his outrage and shouted something in a language Alex didn't know. A moment later, more of the fleeting sparks appeared, howling in voices like the wind. Kuromori responded, but there were too many of them. Within moments, parts of his coat were smoldering.

Alex dropped her bola, knowing that it would be useless against them, and reached for her pouch of salt. But before she could fumble it free, a hand twined in her hair, yanking her head back.

"Little fool," Nigel snarled in her ear. His breath was unnaturally hot against her cheek. She tried to dig an elbow into his stomach, but he jerked even harder on her hair, bringing tears to her eyes. "I should have gutted you in the alley that day."

His other hand closed over her throat, and she felt it against her skin like a brand. With a desperate shout, she ripped at his fingers with her nails, but his hold didn't loosen. She could feel her skin starting to

blister, feel the heat creeping inside her, into her blood and her breath, where it would ignite her from within.

A dull thud sounded against her ear, as of an axe chopping wood. Nigel staggered into her, his hold loosening. Tearing herself free, she stumbled against the wall and put her back to it, ready to fight for her life.

Nigel swayed, blood pouring down from a terrible wound in the side of his head. Behind him stood Pook, clutching the axe that the boy had dropped earlier. Nigel made a strangled sound and tried to take a step, but Pook lifted the axe once again and swung it around.

Nigel's head struck the filthy street, bouncing away into the gutter. The rest of him collapsed into a heap, blood spraying Alex and the wall indiscriminately.

For a moment, she and Pook stared at each other, both dazed. Then he dropped the axe and ran to her. "Oh, God! Are you hurt?" he cried, even as he pulled her into his arms.

She hugged him back, her heart pounding. "Not badly."

He released her and took a step back. Kuromori fell in beside them; the blade of his katana looked scorched, and he had raw burns on his hands and face, but otherwise he seemed unharmed.

Pook had worked some magic on the enslaved humans sent to kill him, binding them in cobwebs and shadow. But as Alex watched, the bonds began to dissolve, and the first of them staggered free. Pook's face had taken on a grayish cast, and he breathed as if he had run a long race. Drying blood from his wound showed on his shirt, and she realized that it had taken a great deal out of him to heal it. Between that and blood loss, he was swaying on his feet.

Damn it. Nigel might be dead, but his human slaves would keep on trying to kill them until they died themselves.

"Run, Alex," Pook said. His voice was ragged and hoarse.

"Don't be ridiculous. I won't leave you."

A sudden clatter of hooves rose out of the smoke. What little gaslight could struggle through the haze winked off a harness and glittered in a wild eye. Even as the brougham rattled up, Mina sprang down from the driver's seat, catching the bridle in one hand to hold the horses. Her eyes were black as night, and a fey grin showed on her white face.

"We've brought you a present," she hissed at the enchanted humans.

Dubh climbed out of the carriage and grabbed a bag off the back. The smell of fresh-baked bread came to Alex, even through the stench of smoke and blood. "Here!" Dubh shouted, and flung the sack into the roadway.

The hungry eyes of the thralls lit up, and wild cries escaped them. Everything else seemed forgotten, and there was a mad rush towards the sack. Within moments, it had been ripped apart, and the bread with it. The gangsters thrust hunks of the bread into their mouths as if they hadn't eaten in months, and gradually the wildness eased from their eyes. One by one, they stood up and staggered back, expressions of fear spreading across their faces as their wills returned.

Pook stepped towards Rose, then stopped. "Rose?" he asked tentatively. "You okay?"

She stared at him, her eyes wide. Then she began to back slowly away.

"Rose?" he asked again.

Rose shook her head. "Don't. Don't come any closer."

"What? Why not? You ain't still under Nigel's spell, are you?"

A dark-skinned girl came to stand by Rose, followed by a young boy. "What are you?" she demanded, in a voice that shook with fear.

Pook stopped, and a stricken look passed over his face. "It's me, Darcy. Pook. Just Pook, that's all."

"You're lying. I *saw* you. You're one of...one of them! One of whatever did this to us!"

"No! That ain't true! I'm human, Darcy! Or mostly, anyway. Tell her, Rose!"

Rose's face was pale, and her hands shook visibly as she held them up to ward him off. "You ain't human, Pook. And you're lying to yourself if you think you are."

For a moment, he only stared at them. Then he turned towards Alex, and she read the anguish in his

ash-colored eyes. “Alex, tell them.”

She wanted to lie, but the words stuck in her throat. His gaze becoming even more frantic, he swung around to Duncan, looking—begging—for comfort. Duncan sighed, and his blue-gray eyes were sad behind the protective shield of his lenses.

“There is human in you, Pook,” he said gently. “Never doubt that.”

“But I’m—I’m—”

“Almost entirely fae.”

Pook stood very still, as if he had taken some mortal wound. One by one, the humans who had been made slaves by the faery food slipped away. Most of them cast terrified looks at the faelings, and Alex wasn’t certain that she could blame them. If she had been through such an experience, wouldn’t she be afraid?

But this Rose—she knew what Pook was before. And now she’s turning her back, when he needs her the most. May the god of the waning year put ice in her bones!

Alex moved to stand by him, hoping that her presence might make him feel a little better. “It doesn’t matter, Pooshka. Not to me.”

He refused to meet her gaze. “It does,” he whispered hoarsely. “It was the fae who left me, don’t you see? They just...left me. My own mom didn’t love me enough to keep me. What was wrong with me that she couldn’t love me?”

“There’s nothing wrong with you, Pooshka. Nothing in this world.”

“Then why does everybody keep leaving me?”

It broke her heart. Painfully conscious of all the eyes on them, she nonetheless put her arms around him. She could feel his heartbeat, fast and fragile as a bird’s. “I’m not leaving you. They’d have to put me in chains and drag me off first.”

Dubh appeared in her peripheral vision, like a dark shadow in the pallid gaslight. “Very touching,” he sneered. “How weak you are, Pooka.”

Pook stiffened, and she heard the snarl start up in his chest. “Leave him alone,” she snapped at Dubh, at the same time tightening her grip on Pook. Pook was swaying on his feet, and she wasn’t certain that he could win a fight at the moment.

Mina appeared, the smoke parting before her like a curtain. Her eyes were black as pits opening into midnight, and her teeth looked small and very, very sharp. “I think it’s time for you to answer some questions, boy,” she said to Dubh.

Dubh stiffened, his eyes narrowing warily. “I gave you the help you asked for.”

“And now I want answers. I want to know who you really are. I want to know where you came from, where you learned about faery food. I want to know just why you joined the same gang as Pook, and what your problem is with him. Most of all, I want to know what your stake is in all of this. And you’re going to tell me, one way or another.”

Anger smoldered in Dubh’s brown eyes, and his face took on a petulant look. For the first time, Alex realized why his beauty, so similar to Pook’s, had no particular effect on her. It was because he reminded her too much of the boyar’s sons she had known—petty and self-absorbed, with no concerns beyond anything that had an immediate affect on his own life.

“I think I’ll go now,” he said, “and keep my own counsel.”

“Oh, I think not.” Mina took a step closer, and now she was smiling a smile that put ice down Alex’s spine. “Take a look around you, boy. Everybody’s wearing an amulet except for you and Kuromori, and *him* I don’t have a problem with. Surely you must know what I am, and that if I tell you that you’ll answer my questions...you will.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“Why not? I’m giving you a choice, boy.”

“Some choice.”

“The illusion of a choice, then. You can get in the carriage and come back with us to answer questions under your own power...or under mine. Which will it be?”

Silence followed her words, and Alex felt a little trickle of fear. She wasn’t fond of Dubh, but would

she wish such a thing as Mina promised on him?

“Very well,” he said at last, his mouth set in a harsh line. “I’ll go with you.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

I lost everything .

Pook leaned his head against the side of the carriage and stared out the window. Alex sat beside him; across from them, Dubh and Duncan shared an uncomfortable seat. Kuromori had gone back to his own place on foot, declining Mina’s offer of a ride.

Exhaustion ate at Pook, and he was cold, as if the winter that he had never felt had crept inside and wouldn’t leave. His last sight of Rose as she vanished into the smoke and the night played over and over again in his head.

She was scared. Scared of me. Darcy, too, and Raw.

Hal’s dead—got to be. And maybe little Meg, too.

It’s over—the Soldiers, everything. All gone. I got nothing.

What am I going to do?

Alex sat close beside him, her body warm and solid where it touched his. He was tempted to turn to her for comfort...but maybe she wouldn’t want that. After all, she’d heard what Duncan said about him, that he wasn’t human. Or not human enough, anyway. *All my life I spent hating the fae for leaving me. And I’m one of them.*

She’d said that it didn’t matter to her, but he didn’t think he wanted to put it to the test. *And even if that don’t matter, there’s plenty else wrong with me. She’s too smart and pretty for the likes of me, that’s for sure. Noble, too. There ain’t no reason for her to stick around.*

Her hand found his, as if she’d heard his thoughts. Startled, he looked at her; her eyes were grave and sad behind the thick lenses of her spectacles. Flecks of Nigel’s blood still showed on her skin where she had missed it in her hasty cleanup, and the outline of the seelie faeling’s hand was red and ugly against the white skin of her throat.

Her fingers tightened on his, as if to lend him strength, and he suddenly had the irrational urge to cry. Maybe he would have, if it had been just them, but Dubh and Duncan were sitting across from them, so he forced it down.

Maybe I ain’t alone. Why she cared, he didn’t understand, but maybe he didn’t need to, either.

Fighting back the painful tumult of his emotions, he turned to the window again. The storm that had been brewing all night had finally broken, and rain streaked the glass. He saw that they were passing through Box Circle—there was the fountain, and the statue of the angel, with rain running down her face like tears...

Pook bolted upright. “Stop the carriage!”

Everyone stared at him like he was crazy. “Is something wrong?” Duncan asked cautiously.

Pook ignored him, instead beating on the roof to get Mina’s attention. “Stop, damn it! Stop here!”

The carriage creaked to a halt, and he jumped out and ran to the statue. He could hear Duncan cursing him roundly, and Alex calling his name, but their voices seemed very far away. Feet splashed in puddles behind him, and Dubh came up like an unwelcome shadow.

“The thing in the basement,” he said to Dubh. “It told me that the weeping woman would point the way.”

Dubh frowned at him, and Pook figured they’d probably end up brawling on the street. But instead Dubh gazed up at the statue...and a gradual look of comprehension passed across his face.

“Look...her arms are stretched out...pointing. To the fountain.”

Damn it. It made perfect sense. Unseelie loved water, so where else would they hide some crazy sword, but in a fountain he’d walked past a thousand times over the years, never knowing there was anything mystical going on right under his damn nose. Old anger rose in his veins, fueled by fresh pain, and he had the sudden urge to just storm off and leave the fae to their games.

Dubh's dark face broke into a smile of triumph. "It's mine," he whispered. "The sword is mine." Then he seemed to come back from whatever dream he'd been having and cast a black look at Pook. "Mine."

"You're welcome to the damned thing," Pook snapped. Hadn't he said a dozen times already that he didn't want it?

"What the hell is going on?" Mina demanded, as she came up behind them. The rain had plastered her pale hair to her head and soaked her clothing.

"The sword is hidden in the fountain," Dubh said, like he'd figured it all out by himself or something.

Wheels creaked, and Duncan and Alex joined them. Pook saw that Alex was shivering in the cold rain, so he put an arm around her shoulders. She leaned against his body, warm and soft, and he put serious consideration into just telling Dubh to have at it and leaving with her. But he recognized the curious look on her face and knew that there was no standing between her and something she wanted to know.

Still smiling, Dubh led them all to the fountain. The trickle of its water was lost beneath the greater sound of the rain. Certainly it didn't look like much—just an old remnant from the time when there'd been a little more money in this part of the city. Age had cracked its stones and blurred the features on the statue in the center until they were unrecognizable.

"There will be a doorway into Faerie," Dubh went on, like he was giving a lecture. "Most likely, it will awaken when the proper person steps across its threshold." He rubbed his hands together gleefully, then flung out his arms to either side. "Harken to me! I am Prince Dubh, son of Finn Bheara, King of the Unselie, Lord of the Sluagh, and I come to claim what is mine!"

Alex gasped, and Pook felt a little trickle of dread touch his own belly. "What the hell!" he blurted. "Prince Dubh, is it? Finn Bheara? You could've answered all our questions all along, and instead you played us! What the fuck's your problem, you—"

But *Prince Dubh* wasn't staying to listen to a lowlife like Pook. His dark eyes seeming to blaze with an unholy fire, he stepped over the fountain's edge and into the water within.

Shadows sprang up from nowhere, seeming to devour all the light within Box Circle. Pook pulled Alex tighter against him, even as the magic began to sing all around. He felt it in his blood, a terrible call that resonated deep in his bones. The smells of earth and dark water, of winter and ice, filled the air. There were voices in the shadows, the cries and shrieks of demented creatures, and it seemed as if the surfaces of things were nothing more than the cheap backdrops he'd seen in the theater, hiding the truth behind a thin layer of paint and cloth.

Then Dubh was flying backwards towards them. His body slammed into the cobblestones, like a doll flung down by a petulant child. The magic began to die away, folding in on itself, and the world turned back to normal.

"Are you all right?" Alex cried, pulling away from Pook and running over to where Dubh lay. Pook scowled, not liking her show of concern—although, to be fair, Mina and Duncan were both seeing to Dubh as well. Jamming his hands deep in his pockets, Pook wandered over to watch Dubh struggle to sit up. Tears coursed down his face, and his hands were shaking horribly.

"Don't see no sword," Pook said.

Hatred blazed in Dubh's eyes behind the veil of tears. Even Mina shot him an angry look. "You aren't helping, Pook," she snapped. "What happened, Dubh?"

"The sword...it's guarded," he managed. Shoving their hands away, he stumbled to his feet, and humiliation flushed his skin five shades darker. "There is a spell. A test. It was...horrible." He stopped and put a hand to his face, covering his eyes.

Pook had the feeling there was something Dubh wasn't saying, but he wasn't going to put up with being yelled at by Mina again, so he kept his mouth shut. Mina was frowning at Dubh, her hands clenching and unclenching, like she wasn't real happy about anything that had gone on in the last fifteen minutes.

"Fine," she said finally. "I'll try."

"You can't," Dubh said. "You don't have the right. Go ahead—step into the fountain. Nothing will

happen. The doorway won't open for you."

"What is going on here?" Duncan asked sharply. "You said that you are Finn Bheara's son. What do you want with us? What is so important about this sword? Why do only you have a right to it?"

"But it isn't just him," Alex broke in. Her hair straggled loose and wet around her face, and she looked fierce and wild. "It's Pook as well, isn't it?"

"Don't bring me into this," Pook said. There was a cigarette in his pocket, and he toyed with the idea of lighting it.

Alex rounded on him. "But you *are* in it, Pook. The fideal—the thing in the basement—the bean-nighe—they all told you to seek the sword. *You*." She turned back to Dubh, and her voice got colder. "And I want to know why."

But Dubh shook his head. "No. Not from me. The only way he'll learn that is by going through the test—and passing it. And he won't."

Mina took a threatening step towards Dubh, and Pook could feel her power gathering, like an approaching storm. "I'm tired of playing games, boy."

Pook looked at Dubh's frightened face, then at Alex's, then at the worried expression on Duncan's. He sighed, wondered if he was doing the right thing or if he was just stupid, and ran his hand back through his wet hair. "Fine. I'll do it."

His announcement was greeted by several moments of silence. Dubh laughed, a brittle sound like breaking glass. "You'll fail. You're weak—I've seen it again and again. You won't last a second. You'll never hold the sword."

Pook reached the end of his temper. "I'm trying to help you out, you God-damned idiot! You want your brain turned inside out, hell, that's fine by me!"

Alex came to him, one hand outstretched. "Pook, Mina's right. This is dangerous. You don't have to do this."

He took her hand; her fingers were chilled, so he folded his gently around them. "You're wrong, baby," he said regretfully. "I don't know why this is on me, but it looks like it is. I got to do it."

"That's crazy! You don't have to do anything!"

"Yeah, I do." He brought her hand to his mouth and kissed it. "Dubh says it's me or him, and he just got his ass kicked. God knows, I'll probably get my ass kicked, too. But I got to try."

She just stared at him, and he wasn't sure what the expression in her eyes meant. He wondered if she was right, if it was dangerous, and if maybe it had gone easy on Dubh because it was just waking up, and now he was going to get his fool head ripped off. The thought brought fear into his heart and words into his mouth; words he'd never said, nor ever heard spoken to him.

"I love you," he said. And let go of her hand and stepped into the fountain.

* * * *

He was standing in the bookstore.

The light streaming in through the big window was odd, making everything it touched seem unreal, or brittle, or both. He turned to the window, but there was nothing to be seen through it—not the street, not the bakery. Nothing but...nothing.

"Send him back," Mina said.

Startled, he turned and saw her standing by the counter. Her eyes were black as night, and her skin was the color of a corpse two days dead. There was an iron collar around her neck, and it burned and smoked wherever it touched her skin.

Pook's heart sped up, and he swallowed against the sudden dryness in his mouth. This wasn't real. It couldn't be real. Mina was standing just a few feet behind him, near the fountain.

"Who are you?" he asked, and his voice shook a little.

"Who are you?" echoed Alex. She emerged from between the bookshelves, but her eyes were the eyes of an owl. Snow swirled around her bare feet, falling from her long, unbound hair.

"He doesn't know anything," Duncan said. He sat in his wheelchair behind the counter, long hands folded over his belly like a pair of spiders.

The thing with Mina's face moved closer to him, sniffing like a dog on a scent. "He does, though. He knows fear."

Alex was beside him suddenly, though he hadn't seen her move. "I taste fire in his heart," she whispered.

"Send him away," Mina said again. She held up a piece of paper that Pook hadn't seen before, and even though it was too far away for him to read, he somehow knew what it said.

It was the warrant for his arrest. They were going to send him back to Gloachamuir. Back to Fergus.

"No!" he shouted, backing away. "You can't do this to me! Alex, don't!"

But Mina and Alex had each grabbed hold of one of his wrists, refusing to let him pull away. And in the shadows behind the counter, he heard the paper-dry sound of Duncan's laughter.

* * * *

"Gie up! Gie up, ye lazy sons of bitches!"

Pook opened his eyes and stifled a moan. He'd been dreaming of...something. What, he couldn't remember—another life, maybe.

The door leading down to the basement thudded open, and Fergus' heavy boots clomped on the rickety stairs. Pook forced himself to stand up, even though he was tired beyond words, because if he didn't, he'd end up with a boot in his ribs and have to get up anyway. All around him, the rest of Fergus' small band of climbing boys rose up from the soot sacks that served them as makeshift beds. The sacks were all the softness or comfort many of them had ever known, and they clung to them as they picked them up.

"There'll be no lying about today, ye filthy guttersnipes," Fergus went on. Pook had to tilt his head back to look up at the man's towering figure. "First the shave, then we gots to hie ourselves over to old Moorshead Inn. They got lots of flues as want cleanin', and that'll take most of the day, if I know ye lot."

No one made any response to this news. Boys learned early on that talking to Fergus only got them a beating or worse. Instead, they scurried up the stairs, their kits clanking in the sacks they carried, and lined up beside a stool in the upstairs hall. The hall was filthy with soot, but no more so than they. Less, really, because at least it was washed occasionally, whenever Fergus' wife took it into her head to do so.

"Ye first, Freak," Fergus said to Pook, and he hopped up on the tall stool. The razor burned as it passed over his scalp, trimming away any hair, to keep down the lice. His skin was already covered with old nicks and scars from the weekly ritual, so he made no sound when Fergus' careless hands sliced off a small bit of flesh.

Once Fergus was done, Pook went and stood by the front door, waiting for the rest. Collin had managed to get the next spot in line and soon joined him. "Looks like he got ye a good one," Collin murmured in a low voice.

Pook touched the cut on his head; his hand came away smeared with a mixture of blood and soot. "Not so bad as some," he said. It was true: Fergus had once cut a boy's ear off, when he'd had too much to drink.

Soon enough, they had all been shaved. Pook had been hoping that they might get some breakfast this morning, but Fergus had either forgotten it, or else drunk away all his money, because they didn't get so much as a crust before being herded out into the street. While Fergus strode along watchfully behind them, they straggled down the road, calling out "sweep, sweep" as they went.

The streets of Gloachamuir were crowded, and the smoke from the foundries and smelters was thick today. The gaslights were lit, even though the sun had long ago risen, but their light looked wan and sickly in the perpetual gloom that enveloped the city day and night. The exertion of the walk caused several boys to start coughing, Pook among them. He spat into the gutter; the phlegm was black with soot.

They passed by a woman striving to clean the door of her house. "Fagh! Get those filthy things off my stoop!" she shrieked, shaking a hand at Fergus, who ignored her.

One of the older boys, Birk, chuckled from where he walked just behind Pook and Collin. "Wonder

how she could tell with Freak,” he said, and jabbed Pook hard in the back.

Pook bit his lip, feeling the familiar sting of shame. He’d seen a few dark-skinned people like himself in Gloachamuir, but not many, and the teasing that the soot wouldn’t show on him had started the day Fergus bought him.

“Dinnae mind him, Pook,” Collin murmured.

“What’s that?” Birk called. “I dinnae catch it, Collin—I’m not having big bat-ears like yer freak friend, ye know.”

Pook clenched his hands until the nails bit into his palms. The urge to turn around and light into Birk was nearly overwhelming, but he knew that if he did that, Fergus would beat him. Or worse, lock him in the pit below the basement. The memory of rat teeth nipping on his toes made him shiver.

When they reached the Moorshead Inn, they found the innkeeper waiting impatiently. Fergus had been putting away the booze throughout the walk, and his hand was less than steady when he greeted their employer. Pook paid no mind to their brief conversation, instead taking the chance to look around the common room where they stood. The servants had put down paper for the sweeps to walk on, to prevent them from tracking soot onto the floor, but he could see polished wood through the gaps. The brass rail on the bar gleamed softly in the muted light, and the tankards, lined up on their shelves, fairly glowed. Pook marveled at how clean it all was.

A faint memory tried to come back to him, of a tidy little cottage and a laughing face. But he shut it away quickly. That life had ended years ago, when he’d been apprenticed to Fergus. Remembering it would only make the present seem even worse.

Fergus came back carrying a bottle of whiskey, which Pook guessed was at least part of their payment. “All right, ye lazy scum, ’tis time to get working. Collin, ye’re in the common room chimney here. ’Tis a double flue—Freak, ye get around the other side and start from there. The rest of ye…”

Pook started off as soon as Fergus told him what to do, knowing that waiting around would just get him a kick in the ass. “See you on top,” Collin called after him.

“See you,” Pook replied. It was their ritual, spoken every time for luck, even though of course they wouldn’t actually see one another until they’d finished the cleaning and climbed back down.

Pook scurried around to his chimney. Setting his bag down in the hearth, he dug out a wire-bristled brush and grasped it firmly in one hand. Then he ducked inside the fireplace. The maids had been lax about putting out the fire the night before, and the ashes were still warm enough to sting his bare feet.

He braced his elbows and shoulders against one wall, his feet against the other. The rough brick scraped open sores that never healed, but the pain was too familiar to be noticed anymore. Once his shoulders were in place, he shuffled his feet up. Once his feet were steady, he worked his elbows and shoulders up, and then repeated the whole process again.

Soot dislodged by his movements rained down around him, and within minutes, the flue was filled with a black fog that stung his eyes. Closing his eyes and trying not to breathe in more soot than he had to, he continued to make his way up.

The sound of someone moving about below came to him, and he was glad that he’d managed to get well out of arm’s reach. Fergus was making his rounds—drinking all the while—and if a boy were still low enough to reach, Fergus would stick hatpins in his feet to get him to climb faster. It had been a long time since he’d had to do that to Pook.

Collin was another matter, though. At one time, he’d been the fastest of the climbers, his small body easily able to eel up through even the tightest passage. But ever since he’d gotten so sick last year, he’d lost his speed and a lot of his strength. It scared Pook—what would happen to Collin if he couldn’t climb anymore? Would Fergus just lock him in the pit until he died?

And what would I do without Col? Collin was his only friend, the only one of the lot who didn’t torment Pook and call him names.

He heard Fergus move away, going to check Collin’s chimney next. *Please God, let Collin be high enough he don’t get poked.*

But God wasn’t listening any more today than she was any other day.

“Pook!”

It was Collin's voice, coming through some crack in the brickwork from the flue next to him.

Pook pressed his mouth to the brick, breathing in soot. If Fergus heard them yelling back and forth, he'd lock them in the pit for sure. "Col? What is it?"

"Pook! Pook, I'm stuck!" Collin cried, and even muffled as his words were, Pook could hear the panic in them.

It froze his heart. Boys died that way, suffocated by soot, or by their own bodies, if their knees were jammed tightly enough against their chests. "Ye're going to be fine, Col! Just relax and work yer way out of it, that's all!"

"No! Help!" Collin screamed, giving in to terror. "I'm stuck! Help, please, I'm stuck!"

Pook swore and began to work his way back down the chimney. "'Tis all right, Collin!" he shouted back, and to hell with Fergus and any punishment. "I'm coming to get ye! Just hang on!"

But Fergus had already heard them. "Get back to work, ye two layabouts! I'll show ye what's for—"

"No!" Collin shrieked again, a sound of terrible despair. "Not the fire, please, don't light the fire!"

"Collin!" Pook screamed, but he could smell the fresh smoke seeping into the chimney. Collin's shrieks grew more and more horrible, and Pook knew that the heat was slowly roasting his friend alive.

"And would you take his place?" asked a voice from above.

Shocked beyond words, Pook looked up. Something clung to the brick above him, a long-legged thing with sharp, many-jointed fingers. Its eyes were somehow even darker than the shadows of the chimney, as if they were the very antithesis of light, so that Pook could see them watching him, even in the dimness.

This ain't how it happened.

But the thought made no sense—or, at least, no more sense than the thing above him. "What are ye?" he whispered.

"In a few moments, your friend will be dead. His eyes cooked, his flesh roasted. A horrible way to die, you surely agree."

Tears streamed down Pook's face—tears born of fear, and loss, and horror. "Dinnae let him die, please."

The thing nodded. "And if I told you I could save him, but only if another took his place? Only if *you* took his place?"

His heart clenched with blind terror. *I can't die that way—Oh God—don't let this be happening—I can't—I'm so scared—*

"Do it, then," he whispered. And the brick crumbled beneath his hands, and he felt himself falling into flame.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Pook pitched forward into the waters of the fountain.

For a moment, the change was so disorienting that he no longer knew who or where he was. Dark water came up to his elbows; though still liquid, the water was colder than ice, colder than the bitterest winter ever known. The ripples his splashing had made settled with unnatural quickness, and he could see the reflections of stars, huge and sharp as chips of ice. His breath plumed in front of him, and he realized that the water showed him no reflection of himself.

Startled, he looked up. The fountain had changed utterly. No longer was it the neglected ruin, but, instead, a work of pure, chill beauty. Black water spangled with stars poured from the mouths of white marble maids, like the flow of heart's blood. Around the neck of each stone maiden was a silver collar, and every collar was connected by a silver chain. The chains linked to a single leash, and holding the leash... was a woman.

Pook stumbled to his feet, shivering and wet. The woman was beautiful, the way a sunset or a painting might be beautiful, pale as snow and just as remote.

“Well done, my champion,” she said in a voice like shadows and smoke.

It all came back to him—the chimney, Collin, the pain and the terror. And the offer.

“You lied,” he managed to say through chattering teeth. “You—that thing—whatever—you lied to me! You said you’d save him!”

If his anger disturbed her, she gave no sign. “The test was of you, little pooka. The past cannot be changed, even by us.”

He could feel her power, as if a dark river flowed all around him. But he was cold, and hurt, and pissed as hell, so he ignored it. “Then what was the damn point?”

She smiled, and her teeth were those of a carnivore, sharp and deadly. “I believe that this was the point, little pooka,” she said, and held out her hand.

Mist and shadows writhed in her grip, forming an outline that might have been that of a sword. “It will not take its final form until it finds its true master,” she said. “One with a warrior’s heart.”

Pook snorted. “You should’ve got Alex in here, then. I ain’t got no warrior’s heart.”

Her chuckle was terrifying, the sound that of a child laughing as she pulled the wings off flies. “You faced your fears and embraced death, the worst death you know. I do not choose foolish champions with empty bravado, little pooka. Now take the sword.”

For a moment, he thought about just turning around and leaving. Or telling her to go to hell and take her damned sword with her. *Yeah, but I didn’t just spend a few hours reliving my happy childhood to go back with nothing. Ought to have something to show for my trouble, even if I don’t know what to do with it.*

He fished his last cigarette out of his pocket, along with his last match. The match was still dry, so he struck it. *I ain’t afraid of you*, he told it wryly, even though what he’d just been through had sure as hell put the lie to that. As soon as the cigarette was lit, he flicked the match casually into the black water, which swallowed it without trace.

“Fine,” he said, once he had taken a long drag and breathed out the smoke again. The fae turned the shadow-smoke shape towards him, and he reached out and grasped the hilt.

Icy cold stung his fingers, welding the shape to his skin. He cried out and tried to fling it away, but his hand had gone numb, and he couldn’t let go. Shadows writhed in his grip, and he imagined that it would turn into a snake and bite him, and he’d die, and it would all have been some stupid trick.

Then the writhing thing in his hand settled and solidified. A katana lay in his hand, its lines beautiful and pure. Frost covered the blade, but he could see that it was etched with designs that might have been stylized snakes. Filled with wonder, he lifted it up and inspected it.

Never had anything like this before. Never had anything this beautiful.

Wonder how much it would bring if I sold it?

“Goodbye, my champion. Use it well,” the woman said. And then she was gone, and the fountain with her, and there was nothing but darkness.

* * * *

“Pook!” Alex shouted, as he appeared once again, standing in the shallow water of the fountain. She ran to him, relief flooding into her heart to see him safe and unharmed. As she reached out to help him climb out of the fountain, she saw that he held a sword much like Kuromori’s in his brown hand.

“You did it! I knew you could.” Once his feet were back on solid ground, she gave him a quick, impulsive hug.

He hugged her back with his free arm. His face had a dazed look to it, and the edges of his eyes were reddened, as if he had been crying. “How—how long was I gone?”

“Only a few seconds.”

Surprise lit his eyes briefly. “That’s all? Felt like hours.”

What did they do to him? “Are you all right?” she asked, touching his face lightly with her fingers.

For a moment, she felt as if he were looking through her, seeing some other place and time. Then he shook his head sharply, and his eyes focused back on her face. “I’m fine,” he said with a grin. “And look—I got Dubh’s sword!”

“That’s your sword, my prince,” said a new voice.

Alex jumped, and she heard Mina swear furiously. A dark shape sat casually on the edge of the fountain, as if he had stumbled across the scene unexpectedly and stopped for a moment to rest. Long golden hair tumbled luxuriously about the collar of a tunic centuries out of style. Its bright color contrasted sharply with the unrelieved black of his clothing; even the lace at his wrists seemed spun from shadow. Catlike eyes watched them with an amused expression; they were set in a face that would have been handsome, could such a human word be applied to it.

“Get away from them!” Mina snarled. “Alex, Pook, back away!”

The fae smiled, and Alex felt a horrible start of recognition, because it was Mina’s smile, as well. “Ah, a child’s love is such a touching thing.”

Mina strode up and put herself between them and the fae. Even Alex could feel the crackle of her power. “They are under my protection, *father*. So go back to hell where you came from, or else I’ll feed you to the aughisky.”

Camhlaidh. Mina’s father. The one who murdered her friend, who pushed her to use her dyana powers.

God of the waning year, protect us.

Alex deliberately stepped in between Pook and the fae, pulling her bola from its pouch as she did so. Pook made a muffled sound of protest, then moved around so he was beside her.

Camhlaidh only laughed. “How fierce are the daughters of the fae,” he said, with a mocking bow. “But surely, even such an honor guard will not deny the right of a loyal servant of the Unseelie Host to congratulate his prince on his victory?”

“If you’re looking for Dubh, he’s over there,” Pook snapped.

Alex felt her heart sink. It all made a terrible kind of sense, and, although she wished for Pook’s sake that she was wrong, she knew in her heart that she was not. “He isn’t looking for Dubh, Pook,” she said quietly. “He’s looking for you. Isn’t that right, Dubh?”

Dubh made an animal sound of anger and pain and turned his back on them all.

“You’re talking crazy, baby,” Pook said, but she heard the uncertainty in his voice.

Alex shook her head, even though she kept a wary eye on Camhlaidh. “I don’t think so. Dubh said that only he and you could awaken the doorway. He declared himself the son of the unseelie king before he tried to go through. And...he looks like you.”

“He don’t!”

Alex ignored the protest and forged ahead, even though she knew that she was hurting him. “Pooshka, I’m sorry. But you’re a changeling. You don’t know who your parents were. Or whether or not you might have any siblings. Any brothers.”

Pook stepped away from her, looking as if she had stabbed him in the gut. “That ain’t true!”

Camhlaidh chuckled. “My, what a clever girl your consort is, my prince. I’ll confess, I had wondered at the allure of someone so...human.”

“Shut up,” Mina snapped at him. “No one wants to hear your lies.”

“When did I ever lie to you, daughter? Can you tell me that?” The amused look on Camhlaidh’s face strengthened when Mina said nothing.

Duncan spoke, and Alex started; she had almost forgotten that he was there, so silent had he been. “I fail to see why the royalty of Faerie would leave one of their own as a changeling,” he said calmly. “In fact, the very idea is preposterous.”

Camhlaidh shook his head. “I never did approve of my daughter’s choice of teacher. You have always been so far beneath her. But I will answer your question.

“You know of the war in Faerie—I spoke of it to Mina five years ago. Seelie and unseelie fae have never been friends, and ever have we striven to overthrow one another. There have been victories and setbacks throughout the centuries. During all this time, however, few paid much attention to the human world—or to the bastards spawned during our incursions into it. At least, not until the seelie managed to birth a faeling that they placed upon the throne of Niune, thus beginning the slaughter of our unseelie offspring.

“The human world does affect the fae one—that is the truth so many of my kin don’t wish to hear. And so we began to lose ground in our war. As I was not wearing the blinders that others had deliberately put on, I saw it, and I began to wonder if the human world might not be the best place from which to launch our own next offensive. A powerful child, allied to her—or his—fae kin, might be able to turn the tide of the war. She would not be bound by the prejudices and misconceptions that beset many of our kind—nor, perhaps, their weaknesses.”

“And so you fathered me,” Mina said. “Old news, Camhlaidh. No one here cares about your little scheme.”

“Oh, but they do, Mina. It took an interminably long time for you to grow up and come into your power, and I was never shy about espousing my theory to anyone who would listen. In particular, to the Lord of the Sluagh, Finn Bheara. It so happened that Finn Bheara was more receptive to my words than most, because his own consort, Oonagh, had a bit of human blood in her veins. Her grandmother, I believe, had dallied with a human knight—but that is an old scandal. Yet, although my lord agreed with me in principle, he believed I had made a grave error, leaving Mina to be raised in the human world. Better to have a halfling child raised among the fae from the start.

“I argued against this. I believed—although you, my darling daughter, went far towards proving me wrong—that a child raised in the human world would be best, because she would be far more alien to the seelie fae than one of our own would be. Human thoughts, beliefs, and failings have confounded the fae in the past, after all.”

“Not to mention that you hoped I’d be so pathetically grateful for your intervention, I’d do whatever you wanted,” Mina cut in.

Camhlaidh smiled. “That is true as well. Now, as it happened, Oonagh was soon with child. Even better—all the signs declared that she carried twins.”

“No,” whispered Pook.

Camhlaidh gave no indication that he had heard. “So it was decided to put my theory to the test. One son would be kept and raised in Faerie. The other would be left as a changeling in the human world. At some undetermined time in the future—whenever the threat from the seelie fae became great enough—they would undergo a test. A special sword, crafted to fight our enemies, would be hidden, and whichever of them was the first to find it—and to pass the test required to wield it—would become the champion of the unseelie fae. And in the end, of course, would prove either myself or Finn Bheara right.” Camhlaidh smiled. “Naturally, I am most pleased with the outcome.”

A wild look crossed Pook’s face, and he shook his head. “No. You’re wrong. You got the wrong b’hoy. I ain’t no prince. I ain’t...”

The fae’s eyes gleamed with malevolent glee. “Oh, but you are, my prince. One son was kept and raised in Faerie. That was the younger of the two, Dubh. And the other—the elder—the heir—was exchanged for a human baby. His name was Tamnais. You.”

Tamnais. Alex should have guessed. Of course the seelie fae and Nigel had been looking for Pook—they had known who he was from the start. That was why they had been so certain he would know Finn Bheara’s plans.

It was probably why Dubh had hated him before they even met. What must it have been like for him, raised in Faerie and knowing that a brother he’d never seen was the heir to everything around him?

Pook closed his eyes briefly, as if against some sudden pain, and Alex knew that his thoughts mirrored her own. “Fine,” he said at last, and opened his eyes again. For a moment he looked down at the sword in his hand—then he spun around and thrust it at Dubh. “Here! Take it, then! I don’t want it!”

Dubh’s eyes widened, and he jumped back, hands held out before him in a warding motion. “No! The sword knows only one master. I can’t take it.” His eyes met Pook’s then, and some of the rage eased out of them. “I can’t.”

“Then I’ll throw the fucking thing in the river!” Pook yelled, turning back to Camhlaidh. The sword he didn’t know how to use waved dangerously in the air, and Mina took a cautious step away. “I don’t want it! I don’t want any of it! I hate all of you!”

Camhlaidh’s sensual mouth turned down into a frown. “Do as you wish,” he said stiffly. “I suppose

when the seelie fae come for you this summer, your all-too-human consort will protect you?"

Pook went still, as if he'd been clubbed over the head. "I got power," he said at last. "I won't let nothing happen to Alex. They'll have to kill me first."

"So they will. Then they'll kill her, as well. An interesting way of proving your love, but perhaps it's a quaint human custom I've never heard of?"

Alex shot a hard glare at Camhlaidh before she turned to Pook. He looked vulnerable, suddenly—young and afraid, his heart broken by this news of a family he'd never known and that had willingly given him away. "Pooshka," she said softly. "Don't listen to him. If you truly don't want to keep it, then throw it away. But...you don't have to decide now, do you? At least think on it first? It's just...you've been through so much for this stupid sword. I hate to see you suffer, but I hate it even more when it's to no purpose." She hesitated, then took his free hand in hers, holding it against her heart. "Whatever you decide, you know that I'll stand by you."

"It seems that Alex's advice is the best," Duncan offered hesitantly. "We know more than we did, but not nearly enough to make a final decision."

Camhlaidh stood up, his black clothes rustling. Mina hissed a warning, but he ignored her. "Do not think too long, Prince Tamnais," he said. Then he bowed extravagantly, the ebon lace of his cuffs nearly brushing the filthy cobbles. "The seelie will not give you forever."

He vanished then, as if he had never been. Mina snarled a curse and kicked the stones where he had sat. "Damn him! I shouldn't have let him talk at all. I should have known better."

"Recriminations will get us nowhere," Duncan said. The gaslight caught spangles of water in his hair, and Alex realized that the rain had finally stopped. "We should go back to the house and sleep before we make any further decisions."

Dubh stood at the edge of their group, like a shadow with no one to cast it. "Am I free to go?" he asked, and Alex heard the bitterness in his voice.

The gaze Mina cast on him could have frozen stone. "Get out of here. And don't darken my door ever again."

Dubh nodded stiffly and turned. But Pook let go of Alex's hand and took a step after him. "Dubh, wait!"

Dubh stopped and looked back. Pook hesitated, then ran a hand through his thick hair. "I don't...I never wanted..." He trailed off, clearly at a loss.

Dubh's full mouth warped into an angry smile. "But you have it anyway," he said, and turned and walked away.

* * * *

The brougham clattered off, leaving Pook and Alex alone in front of the fountain. Pook had refused the offer to go back to Mina and Duncan's house, and Alex—hoping that her intuition was right and he wanted her company—did so as well, choosing instead to walk back to the bookstore and her own bed there.

Weariness had settled in her bones, and she remembered those long days and nights of her journey across the taiga, when all she had wanted to do was lie down and sleep. *But if I had done that, I never would have come here.*

Pook looked as exhausted as she felt. The delicate skin beneath his eyes had taken on a bruised quality. His hair was disheveled, and his clothing was wet, wrinkled, and spotted with blood. "You don't have to walk me back to the bookstore if you don't want to," she said, feeling suddenly guilty for even suggesting he come out of his way.

He gave her the smile that never failed to make her weak in the knees. "Nah. I don't mind."

"Then we'd better put a glamour over ourselves, or else the constables will have us in chains as vagrants," she said, with a faint smile. "Not to mention your sword."

He looked at it, as if he'd forgotten it. A moment later, it was gone from normal sight.

"I don't even know what to do with the damn thing," he said, as they started walking.

"Kuromori can teach you, surely."

"I suppose." He gave her a sidelong look, as if he suspected that his next words wouldn't sit well with her. "Maybe it would be better if...if you thought about getting out of Dere until this business with the seelie fae is over."

"You know better than that, Tamnais," she said, testing the name on her tongue.

Pook shook his head sharply. "Don't call me that. I'm just...I'm Pook, that's all. Not this Prince Tamnais b'hoy."

They fell silent after that. Pook slid his free arm around her shoulders, and she leaned against him and slipped her own arm around his slender waist. The sun began to rise as they walked; tradesmen appeared on the street, hurrying to their jobs. A muffin vendor pushed her cart down the street, singing like a sparrow. Factory bells rang far away, the sound pure in the clear air.

A few people glanced at Pook and Alex, and she saw their smiles. For this moment, at least, they were nothing more than a boy and a girl, out for an early stroll, ordinary as anyone else.

They stopped in front of the bookstore, and Alex dug out her keys. "Would you...would you like to come in for a bit?" she asked hesitantly, not entirely sure what she was offering, or what he might accept.

But Pook shook his head, a faint smile lighting his face. "Nah. I ought to be going."

"All right." She opened the door, then stopped and turned to him. "I meant what I said earlier, you know. It doesn't matter to me if you're more fae, or more human, or whether your name is Tamnais or Pooka. I don't care about any of it. I only care about you."

The slight smile bloomed into a full one. He set his sword carefully aside, then pulled her into his arms and kissed her. A passing newsboy paused long enough to make a gagging sound, but Alex barely noticed.

"Well," Pook said breathlessly, when they were done. "See you tonight, then?"

"Yes. I'll see you tonight."

Pook picked up his sword and rested it on his shoulder like a coal sack. Flashing her one last grin, he turned and walked off, whistling tunelessly. Alex leaned her head against the doorframe and watched him go, until his lithe form was lost in the rising sun.

About The Author

When Elaine Corvidae was eight years old, she came home from school one day and declared that she was going to be a writer. Elaine is not certain what prompted that declaration, but unlike so many other decisions in life, it stuck from that day on.

Elaine 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 their three cats, who are just like children, except they never ask to borrow the car.

Elaine is a vegan (strict vegetarian) and interested in animal rights. She enjoys backpacking, wasting time on the computer, good beer, and loud music.

Her first published novel, *Winter's Orphans*, was the recipient of the 2001 Dream Realm Award and the 2002 Eppie Award.

Elaine's second book of the Lord of Wind and Fire series, *The Crow Queen*, won the EPPIE for Best Fantasy of 2005.

Elaine's third book of the Lord of Wind and Fire series, *Dragon's Son*, won the EPPIE for Best Fantasy of 2006.

To learn more about Elaine Corvidae visit her official website at <http://www.onecrow.net>.