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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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Chapter One

The setting of the sun woke Pook from troubled dreams.

No light touched him within the little hideaway he'd found to sleep out the long spring day, but he could nonetheless feel it deep in his blood when the last of the sun's rays vanished from the sky, abandoning the world to the dominion of night. Awakened by the shift in power, he opened his eyes and found himself staring at a rough wooden plank only a few inches from his face.

For a moment, he didn't know where he was—not the Sevens, he hadn't slept there in months, and it sure wasn't the Trap, either. He started to sit up, only to ram the top of his head into a low ceiling. Blinking the stars out of his eyes, he slumped back onto the dirt that had been his bed.

A staircase in the alley across from the bookstore—that's where I am. It had been well after dawn when he had been looking for somewhere to hole up for the day, which meant that he couldn't just sleep right in the alley like he usually did. All the doss houses closed up as soon as the sun rose, so that was out. He didn't dare sleep too far away from Alex, anyway, not when the seelie fae were wandering around the city and stirring up trouble every chance they got.

So tired and aching, at the very limit of his endurance, he'd spotted a little service stair in the alley, leading up to a tiny loading dock. Planks closed the stair up underneath, maybe to keep stuff from the dock from rolling under and getting lost...but one of the wooden boards had been noticeably loose. It had been the work of a moment to pry it off, slip inside, prop the plank up behind him, and lie down.

Remembering where he was led to remembering other things— things he didn't particularly want to think about. Like the fact that he was a prince.

Some prince, he thought, staring at the warped boards that were all he could claim as a roof over his head. *Maybe I just dreamed it all. Just dreamed that the Rat Soldiers was fed faery food. Just dreamed that they turned their backs on me.*

Just dreamed that I'm barely human at all. The reek of soot and dried blood clung to his hair and clothes, a grim reminder of the reality of the riot that had burned down part of the slums. *Clothes are still damp, too. So I guess I really did go into that fountain and get out that damned sword.*

He reached blindly behind him, half-hoping that the sword had gone away by itself sometime during the day, while he slept. For a moment his fingers met nothing, and his heart leapt...but then he felt the cold kiss of metal an instant before it sliced his skin.

"Ow! Damn it!" he yelped, and stuck his bleeding fingers in his mouth. Then he froze, listening, but nobody seemed to have heard his voice coming from where it shouldn't be, so he relaxed again.

Well, the damned sword was there all right, just where he remembered leaving it. So the rest of it had to be true, too.

What am I going to do?

For a moment, he wondered if maybe the Rat Soldiers would take him back after all. Then he saw again the look in Darcy's eyes: fear, loathing, and hatred.

And Rose. Rose had *known* what he was, but after what she'd gone through, she didn't want to have anything to do with him.

Ain't my fault the seelie fae decided to give them all faery food, make them slaves. Hell, I helped get them free, didn't I? Can't they see that?

Don't matter. They ain't taking you back, b'hoy. You got to find your own way in the world, now.

Alone. Just like I was when I ran away from old Fergus in Gloachamuir.

But no, that wasn't true, was it? Even if his human friends had deserted him, the other faelings hadn't. Mina, Duncan, Fox, and Kuromori had stuck right with him, backed him up all the way. And Alex...maybe she wasn't in love with him the way he was with her, but she had to care about him, didn't she? She didn't seem like the kind of girl who just went around kissing guys for no good reason, so maybe there was something there with her, too.

Then there was Dubh...

My brother.

A surge of bitter jealousy went through Pook, catching him off guard with its intensity. *Damn Dubh.* Their parents, whom Pook had never seen since the day he was born, had decided to keep their precious Dubh and abandon Pook in the human world as a changeling. *They loved him, not me. I was just a baby, for God's sake—what did I do that they couldn't love me, too?*

I hate them. Him too.

And now Pook had ended up stuck with the sword that Dubh wanted, so Dubh was pissed at *him*, which just made Pook madder the more he thought about it. He'd tried to give the damn thing away when he'd learned the truth, but would Dubh take it? Hell no, because that would've meant he couldn't go on whining all the time.

At least he wouldn't have to worry about seeing Dubh hanging around the bookstore anytime soon. Mina had threatened the b'hoy but good last night, and if he were smart he'd get the hell out of Dere.

"But you know how dumb Dubh is. What if he comes by when Mina ain't there? Starts chatting up Alex again?"

Pook pulled aside the loose board and wiggled out. The alley was deserted now, after business hours, and the closest gaslight came from the street, so there was no one to see him. He reached back in and pulled out the sword, pausing a moment to weave a glamour around it to make it look like an ordinary stick. Then he pushed the board back into place and headed towards the main street and the bookstore.

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The combined sound of someone pounding on a door and a cat meowing brought Alex awake. Startled, she sat up in bed and fumbled on her heavy spectacles. Vagabond, the one-eyed faeling cat who shared Alex's flat above Blackthorn Books, perched at the top of the stairs, mewing imperiously. The muffled thud of a fist on the front door below paused momentarily, only to be replaced by a loud jangle as the caller started pulling on the bell instead.

Oh, for Chernovog's sake! He's going to pull the accursed thing right off!

The window was directly beside the bed. Alex flung it open and stuck her head out, ready to give whomever it was a good tongue-lashing. The sun had already gone down, but gaslight revealed shining black hair, delicately-pointed ears, and skin the color of coffee lightly cut with cream.

Pook.

Her heart seemed to flutter in her chest, so she sternly told it to stop immediately. Not that her internal admonishment worked any better tonight than it ever did. From the first moment she'd seen him, his beauty had made her feel like every nerve in her body was acutely attuned to his presence. For the most part, it had been something she resented but was powerless to control.

And now?

"You don't have to knock the door down," she called.

He looked up, and she saw the flash of bright teeth in his dark face as he smiled. "Hey!" he yelled up guilelessly. "Wasn't sure if you was awake or not."

"I don't think the dead could have slept through that racket," she said dryly. "Just give me a moment to dress, and I'll be down."

Pook waved cheerfully in acknowledgement. Suppressing a sigh, Alex closed the window. Vagabond, who seemed to have followed the conversation, ran off down the stairs, purring loudly.

Is there any female he can't charm? Alex wondered as she hurriedly pulled off her nightgown. A row of sensible dresses hung sternly in the wardrobe, and Alex wryly acknowledged that she already dressed like the aged spinster she someday expected to be. Between her spectacles and her pear-shaped figure—which, to be honest, had a bit more padding on it than was fashionable—society would never consider her so much as pretty.

Then there were her interests, none of which would possibly be looked upon as suitable for a proper lady, even here in Niune where women had far more expectation of education than in her homeland. The flamethrower she had built sprawled across the floor near the stair where she had left it, and the sturdy table in her sitting room was covered with half-finished inventions and experiments. Parts of a galvanic light lay next to a hand-cranked generator, which butted up beside the teapot she had hoped to incorporate into an automatic tea-making machine. The precious tin foil that might become part of a speaking machine sat on a shelf, out of reach of a playful cat who might tear it to shreds.

Even in a man some of her tinkering would have seemed eccentric; in a woman, they were simply damning.

So why not dress as if she had neither hope nor desire of catching a boy's eye?

"*I love you,*" Pook had said last night, in the moment before he'd stepped into that accursed fountain. Like an idiot, she had stood there and said nothing in return, wasting her time wondering if it could possibly be true while he walked into danger.

Chernovog... could it be true?

She pulled on one of the dresses at random, wincing as the cloth inadvertently touched her throat. A quick look in the mirror revealed a reddened patch of skin—a light burn in the shape of a human hand. *That's where Nigel grabbed me.* A shiver went through her at the memory. *He meant to kill me.*

But he's dead now. Dead. Trying not to think of the sound the ax had made as it chopped his head off, she turned away from the mirror.

"Hey, baby," Pook said cheerfully when she unlocked the door for him. He had his sword propped against his shoulder. To her right eye, which wasn't anointed against glamour, it looked like a stick. As he walked in, he went to prop it against the counter—and in the process swept a pile of books into the floor. "Oops—I keep forgetting how long the damn thing is. You ought to see what I did to a lady's hat on the way over here."

Unsure if she should sigh or laugh, Alex went to help him pick up the books. As she knelt beside him, he took the opportunity to lean over and give her a kiss that scrambled her thoughts and turned her knees to water.

The bell above the door jingled as it opened. Alex started and felt her face heat as her uncle, Duncan RiDahn, maneuvered his wheelchair through the doorway. His long hair, brown liberally streaked with gray, hung loose around an ascetic face. Light flashed from the lenses of his spectacles, and from the gold earrings he wore. He carried a covered basket on his lap, from which rose the smells of fresh baked bread and other food. "Good evening. I trust we aren't intruding?"

Pook stiffened slightly. "Hey, Duncan," he said, but there was a wary edge to the greeting.

Duncan either didn't notice, or pretended not to. He pulled a crumpled newspaper from under the basket and tossed it onto the counter. HORRIBLE FIRE screamed the headline, followed by a line of smaller type that proclaimed: "Fire ignited by rioting gangs burns three blocks." And underneath that: "Mayor RiCorryn calls for police sweep of slums area."

Mina came in; seeing Alex's interest in the paper, she gave a bitter smile. "We're famous."
"Bigger headlines than when me and Rose painted makeup on General Gladstone's statue in Triumph Square," Pook agreed ruefully.

Mina's dark eyes were restless in her pale face, like a wild thing that had been caged. "We need to talk about what happened last night and decide what we're going to do next."

Pook was eyeing the basket like a starveling wolf. "Can we eat first?" he asked hopefully.

"Eat and talk at the same time. This is a council of war."

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Kuromori and Fox came in just as Duncan was unpacking the basket at the table in the back room. While Mina set about catching them up on everything that had happened, Pook set his attention on the food. The basket yielded up some kind of cold bean salad, bread, and tarts made from preserved fruit. He got Alex's share out first; she seemed surprised when he handed the laden plate to her. After helping himself, he sat down beside her on a crate of books, seeing as all the chairs were taken by the old folks, and tucked in. Habit made him bolt everything he could; for most of his life, he'd never been sure when or if the next meal was coming.

Now...he didn't think Duncan or Mina would let him starve, truthfully, even if they hadn't been paying him a salary for his work at the bookstore. He wasn't sure how he felt about that—glad, in a way, but kind of weird, too.

When he finally got back around to paying attention to the conversation, Mina was just about wrapping up. Into the silence that followed, Duncan said, "The question is, what do we do now?"

Mina's heavy boots clunked across the floor as she prowled the confines of the room restlessly. Something had her blood up tonight, like she was expecting a fight, and he felt it in the little whispers and eddies of power that pricked his skin. "That's easy," she said, and when she smiled her teeth were small and sharp. "We fight back."

Duncan raised an eyebrow. "Whom are we fighting, *Wilhelmina*?"

She stopped her pacing, looking surprised that he even had to ask. "I seem to remember that the seelie fae want to kill us, Duncan."

"Indeed. And the unseelie fae appear to expect Tamnais to act as some sort of champion for them."

Pook's gut cramped around the food, and he suddenly wished he hadn't eaten so much. "Don't call me that," he snapped before he had time to consider that Duncan might not much like a lowlife like Pook ordering him around.

Duncan only gave him a measured look before responding. "You cannot deny who you are."

"I ain't. I'm Pooka. Freak, if you'd rather call me that."

"You are the son of very powerful fae. It is possible that they will simply leave you alone, even though you have won the sword rather than Dubh, and even though Camhlaidh has no doubt reported your activities to the court of the Unseelie King. But I very sincerely doubt that will be the case."

"Then we'll fight them, too!"

Mina had paused in her pacing, and now her look became a little less feral and a lot more grim. "Hold your temper, Pook," she said. "God knows, there's no love lost between me and Camhlaidh. I'd like nothing better than to send him to hell myself for killing Abby. But the aughisky helped us in the past, and it sounds like the fideal and some of the others were trying to help you. I'll fight any seelie fae that comes near Dere, but we don't have so many friends that we can alienate those we've got."

Pook clenched his fists. "I ain't helping them," he muttered. "And if they come near me, I'll fight them, too."

Mina laughed darkly. "Going to take on all of Faerie by yourself, boy?"

It made him mad. "If I got to. Been fighting the seelie by myself already—I ain't afraid to add the unseelie to that list."

"You are both missing the point," Duncan said, sounding put out. "We don't know the motives of either seelie or unseelie. *Why* did the aughisky help us five years ago? Is she allied to Camhlaidh?"

Alex cast Pook an uncertain glance. "Dubh might know the answer to that. I'm sorry, Pook, but it's true."

"Dubh might lie," Mina pointed out. "And he made it pretty clear last night that he didn't want to have anything to do with us."

"If I may ask a question," Kuromori interjected. He rose from his chair and bowed politely to them all. "This sword, which the unseelie fae have given to Tamnais-kun...has it any unusual properties?"

"You mean like magic?" Pook asked, trying to ignore the use of the hated name. Why the hell was everyone so damned determined to call him the wrong thing, anyway?

Duncan steepled his long fingers in front of him and scowled thoughtfully at the sword. Pook had brought it into the back with them, and propped it just inside the door, not knowing what else he ought to do with it. "I would be greatly surprised if the sword did not have any magic. There would be little point in setting up such a test only to reward the victor with nothing more than an ordinary lump of metal."

"What sort of metal is it?" Alex asked, peering owlishly at the blade. "It can't be iron, because otherwise Pook couldn't touch it. Oh! I could shave a bit off and run some tests—"

"Your enthusiasm is admirable, Alexandreya, but perhaps we should wait before reducing it to bits for chemical analysis. Tamnais, were you given any hints as to its nature?"

Pook shook his head. Like the fae ever gave him anything he could *use*, whether it was information or a sword. "Nah. There was some bit—uh, I mean, some cherry in the middle of the fountain. She just gave it to me. Oh, but it did do something!" he added, snapping his fingers. "Something magic. It started out like smoke, just in kind of a sword shape. It didn't turn solid until after I'd touched it."

The look on Kuromori's face was neutral, but Pook thought he saw curiosity in the easterner's dark eyes. "Maybe I inspect the blade, Tamnais-kun?"

"Sure."

Kuromori picked it up carefully, sighting down the blade, then inspecting the grip. Mina came over to take a closer look herself.

"This is a katana of great craftsmanship," Kuromori said gravely. "Moreover, I would judge that it is the perfect length and weight for Tamnais-kun to wield."

"It formed itself just for him, when he touched it," Mina speculated. "That's why it looks funny—his idea of a sword is the eastern style because he's used to seeing yours."

Then it came to Pook. He jumped up off the crate, almost dumping his plate off his lap in his excitement. "I bet I know what it does! The magic, I mean. It probably makes me a great swordsman or something."

Kuromori bowed, offering the weapon hilt-first to Pook. "Then shall we step outside where there is more room and discover for ourselves, Tamnais-kun?"

Grinning, Pook grabbed his sword. Mina jumped out of the way when he nearly caught her with the tip of the blade. "Sorry," he said, and went out the back door.

Everyone else trailed after. Feeling confident, Pook stopped in the yard and turned to face Kuromori. The easterner bowed to him again, then drew his own katana in a soft hiss of steel. Unlike the fae of Niune, those of the east had no trouble handling cold iron.

"Be careful—I don't want to hurt you," Pook cautioned him.

"I appreciate your concern for me, Tamnais-kun. Perhaps you should make the first move?"

Pook raised his sword and brought it around.

A few seconds later, he found himself lying on his back in the muddy yard, his now-empty hands stinging smartly, with no clear idea how he'd gotten there.

"Pook! Are you all right?" cried Alex. She ran up and dropped down by him on her knees.

Feeling stupid, Pook just nodded. So much for any chances of impressing her with some fancy sword-work.

Kuromori appeared on his other side. "Forgive me, Tamnais-kun," he said, "but I fear that we have yet to discover the properties of your weapon."

"Yeah...well, it was an idea," Pook muttered, rubbing at his bruised rump. "Guess the damn thing's pretty much useless to me, then."

"Not entirely," Kuromori said, holding out his hand to help Pook up. "The sword may not make one a great warrior simply by holding it, but perhaps one might learn to use it by more conventional means."

Startled, Pook glanced up. "You offering to teach me?"

"If that is your wish, Tamnais-kun."

"But...why?"

A faint smile tugged at the corner of the easterner's mouth. "Perhaps it is my fate in this lifetime, Tamnais-kun, that the gods have seen fit to place me here at this moment, when I might be of use. Or perhaps it is simply fortunate chance. Either way, it would please me to impart to you the way of the warrior. You are an impetuous young man—it is your nature, even more so than that of all young men—but you have your own peculiar code of honor, and I believe you would be a worthy student."

Pook wasn't sure he followed all of that, but he did get that Kuromori was offering to help him figure out how to use the stupid thing. "Okay," he said, and let his friend pull him to his feet. "When?"

"The evenings would be best, I think."

"Yeah." Pook's spirits sank again, remembering the Rat Soldiers. Time was, he'd get off work at the bookstore and head straight for his gang's turf, to spend the night running black market stuff up the river, or picking pockets, or brawling, or just boozing it up. That was over for good, now. "Not like I got anything else to do."

"Which brings me back to my original point," Mina said. She drifted up, her hair a pale smear in the gaslight. "We can't just sit here and wait to find out what the seelie are going to do to us next. We have to go on the offensive."

Duncan looked up sharply, his earrings flashing in the gaslight. "What do you have in mind?"

Mina smiled her razor smile. "I mean that the seelie declared war on us last night, and by God I mean to take the battle to them."

"We don't know enough about the situation," Duncan objected.

"Hell yeah we do!" Pook met Mina's gaze, felt an answering smile starting up on his own face. The blood thrummed in his veins, carrying its dark river of power through his body. "We know they want to kill us. Nothing more we need to know, is there?"

"And where are you going to find them?" Duncan asked.

Mina laughed. "We'll use the signposts they've put out themselves. They marked their battlefield in human blood, remember? They'll return to the site of the riots. We only have to lie in wait."

"But wait where, and when?" Alex asked. She absently pushed her spectacles higher on her nose as she regarded Mina with a steady gaze. "The riots covered a fair amount of ground, and according to Pook there were other killings before that. There aren't enough of us to keep watch on that much of the city. Nor is there any way of knowing when the battle will be fought, or if the seelie have yet more gambits to play beforehand."

Pook frowned and scuffed the ground absently with one hob-nailed boot. When two gangs wanted to get together and fight, they just issued a challenge and showed up at the right time. But even he could see that sending a challenge to the seelie fae wouldn't be too smart.

"Maybe Fox could help?" he asked, half to himself. When no one answered, he glanced up uncertainly. "I mean, she can see things, can't she? Maybe she could take a look-see and figure out when and where the fae are hanging out."

The mention of her name had gotten Fox's attention, but she only looked confused. Her hands endlessly reworked the bits of string she constantly carried with her, weaving cats' cradles. She glanced down at the string and frowned at it, as if surprised to find it there. "I see fog, and smoke," she said in a singsong voice. "The maze is dark—I can't find anything." She shot a pleading look towards Duncan, as if he could do something to help her.

"It's all right, my dear," he said soothingly. "Do not distress yourself. But if you do see anything of use, you will tell us, won't you?"

She nodded uncertainly.

Well, that was a disappointment. "Maybe one of us could try too?" Pook asked doubtfully.

Duncan looked vexed. "If you had paid more attention to my teachings, Tamnais, you might recall that such seeing is women's magic. The woman must be a maid who has never been a mother, and she must have power."

"I've got the power, but I've been pregnant," Mina said. There was a darkness in her eyes that made Pook wonder what had happened, and at the same time warned him not to ask.

"And I don't have the power," Alex concluded glumly. "Chernovog curse the luck."

"So there ain't nothing we can do?"

"There is a special case," Duncan said hesitantly. "Although I fear that once again it will be of no use to us. There is an obscure spell in which a virgin male may add power and clarity to the woman leading the vision. It might help lead Fox through her confusion."

Pook blinked, trying to sort out what the problem was. "I got power, don't I? Weren't you the one going on last night about how much fae blood I'm stuck with?"

Duncan seemed surprised for some reason. "You do have the power, yes."

"Well, then, I'm your b'hoi!" At least some good might come of his complete lack of a social life. "That sound okay to you, Foxy-Fox?"

Fox beamed at him. "Oh, yes."

"Tomorrow night, then," Duncan decided. "I will need some time to investigate the spell further and make certain that we have what we need to perform it."

"Tomorrow," Mina said, and Pook felt the faint dance of her power on his skin as she stirred restlessly. "And then we'll take the fight to the seelie, and make them rue the day they set foot in Dere."

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Pook walked along the bank of the Blackrush, smoking a cigarette. The seasons had finally turned all the way, and there was no denying now that spring was here to stay. The air so near the river stank of slime and sewage, and the infrequent streetlamps cast pallid reflections onto the rippling water.

We're at war, he thought, and asked himself how he felt about that. Not that he hadn't already been fighting the seelie in his own way, but this was somehow different. Then, he'd hunted them. Now...maybe they were going to start hunting him, too.

"Mina won't let it come to that. She's knows what she's doing. We're going to take them on their own turf, teach them not to mess with us."

But Duncan don't think we're doing the right thing. And I got to admit, he's pretty smart.

Something moved in the weeds by the river.

Pook froze, his heart in his mouth. *Damn it, not again.* The last time he'd run into something nasty near the river, it had been the bean-nighe, the washerwoman of Dere. She'd told him that his friends would become his enemies...and she'd been right.

"She so much as opens her mouth, I'm running the other way."

But it wasn't the bean-nighe this time. Instead, a dark shape rose up out of the water beside a bridge, pushing through the dense thicket of reeds that had sprouted along the bank with the warming of the weather. An eye that glowed a sickly, greenish-white turned towards him, and he saw a lank mane, its wet strands entangled with waterweeds. Barnacles encrusted its gray coat, and the chitinous remains of a crab hung snagged in its long tail.

The aughisky.

The water horse's lips pulled back, exposing carnivore teeth, and Pook wondered if he ought to just pull foot out of there. The aughisky had eaten one of the Rat Soldiers—or, at least, he suspected she had. *Maybe she's got a taste for Rat Soldier now. Going to gobble me up even if I ain't one of them no more.*

"Good evening, my prince," said a voice from the shadows of the bridge.

Pook let out a startled yelp and swung his sword around wildly. The edge connected with nothing but air.

"Where are you?" he yelled. "Show your damn face!"

"Of course, my prince," said the calm, honeyed voice. A tall man stepped from the darkness; gaslight touched his blond hair and pale skin. His clothing was entirely black, down to the lace that dripped from his cuffs and nearly swept the ground when he bowed. "I am, as always, at your service."

"You're Camhlaidh—Mina's dad," Pook said flatly. Fear warred with anger, and this time anger won. "I don't want nothing to do with the likes of you, so why don't you just bugger off and take the pony with you?"

"If that is what you truly wish, then of course I will do so," Camhlaidh said with a smile that Pook suspected was

more than a little patronizing. "I thought simply to see if there were any ways in which I could be of service to you."

Pook swallowed. *It's a trap. Got to be. Mina said he's bad news.* "I don't want nothing from the fae. 'Cept maybe for you all to stay the hell away from me. You want to serve somebody, you find Dubh."

"Prince Dubh is well known to me." Camhlaidh's smile turned conspiratorial. "Well enough that I cannot say I was greatly surprised that he failed the test that your sword required."

"Well, yeah—that goes without saying, don't it?" Pook said, pretending to a bravado that he didn't really feel. *Then again, that Dubh is dumb as a brick wall and twice as thick.*

"I thought that perhaps you might have some questions," Camhlaidh went on. "Questions that only one of us might answer. The aughisky came with me as a show of good faith, as it were. I am sure that my daughter mentioned that she has been an ally in the past."

Pook hesitated. Yeah, Mina had always spoken well of the aughisky. But Duncan worried about the water horse's motives. "I got a question, then," he said. "Did she eat George?"

The aughisky snorted...then spoke a single word.

In George's voice.

"Yes."

The hairs on the back of Pook's neck tried to stand straight up.

"Y-you can talk," was all he could manage.

"Only in the voices of the dead," said the aughisky, and if Pook's eyes had been closed he would have sworn that was George standing right there. Well, George if he'd had the brains to put together a complete sentence, anyway.

"Stop that!" he said. The aughisky watched him through emotionless, glowing eyes, and he wondered again if she was thinking about putting him on the menu, too. "Don't talk like him. Gives me the crawlies."

"The boy was bleeding out his life when he hit the water," the aughisky said...but this time, thank God, she sounded like somebody Pook didn't know. A little girl. "I took the offering that was made."

"Um, yeah." Pook nervously ran his free hand back through his hair. Deciding that it was safer for the moment, he turned his attention back on Camhlaidh. "If Mina was here, she'd say don't listen to you. She says you killed her friend."

Camhlaidh's eyes darkened, but his smile never wavered. "And does Mina rule you, my prince? Has the dyana taken your will and made you her puppet?"

"No!"

"Then perhaps you should make your own judgments. I fail to see why you put such faith in her to begin with. You have spent the last two years fighting against the seelie fae, and in all that time has she done anything to help you? Or has she sat at home, in her comfortable mansion, while the seelie devoured the lives of children?"

Pook hesitated. "She...she didn't know."

"Didn't know...or didn't *want* to know?" Camhlaidh sighed and shook his head sadly. "I fear that wealth has corrupted my daughter as it does all mortals. She no longer remembers where she came from. No longer cares for the lost, the hungry, the homeless. If I am not mistaken, I believe that she even told you that you were wrong to flee Gloachamuir? That you should have been grateful to be beaten, starved, and locked in a pit?"

Pook swallowed hard. "How...how did you know about that?"

"The unseelie fae have watched your life more closely you than you realize, my prince." Camhlaidh bowed again. "I see that you have a great deal to think on, so I will withdraw. If you have need of me, simply call my name beside the river, and I will come to you."

At Pook's mute nod, the fae turned and slipped off into the shadows, disappearing as if he had fallen through a crack in reality. The aughisky snorted, then made her way to the water, vanishing beneath its black surface in a swirl of bubbles. Feeling cold and alone, Pook stood there for a long time, watching the ripples fade.

Chapter Two

Pook's sword lessons began the next night, as soon as the bookstore had closed for the evening. Perhaps out of habit—or perhaps from necessity, if he had nothing else—he changed back into the ratty old sleeveless shirt that had once heralded his membership in the gang. As he came from the back, absently combing his hair with his fingers, he stopped by the counter where Alex stood.

She was busy counting the money in the till; he waited silently until she was done. As she closed the account book for the day, he flashed her a brilliant smile. "I'm heading over to Kuromori's. Want to go with?"

Pleased that he wanted her company, Alex gave him a smile of her own. "Of course. Shall we get dinner on the way?"

They left Mina and Duncan to lock up and started walking. As the workday ended, the streets began to fill up with people. Businessmen, factory slaves, and day laborers brushed shoulders as they made their way toward their homes. Hansom cabs rushed past in a jingle of harness, the drivers yelling imprecations at anyone who got in their way. Vendors pushing carts appeared; taking advantage of the evening crowd, they called out the virtues of their wares. "Fish for the pan! Straight off the boat! The freshest fish in Dere!" "Pepperpot right hot!" "Mussels, I've mussels for the tussles!"

They bought vegetable pastries to eat as they walked, washed down with two bottles of ginger beer that Pook swore was his favorite drink but which burned Alex's nose and made her cough. At one point, Pook suddenly dashed off across the street without explanation. Alex stopped, surprised, and saw him talking to a pretty young woman selling small bouquets of spring flowers. At a loss, she watched for a moment, wondering if Pook's affections were as flighty as his attention span.

The woman laughed at something Pook said, then handed him a bouquet. He flipped a coin to her, then raced back across the street, dodging an omnibus as he did so. "Here you go," he said breathlessly, holding the flowers out.

Blushing, Alex took them from him. Their sweet scent drifted up, momentarily obliterating the street smells of dung and garbage. "Thank you," she said, feeling awkward. *What do you say when a boy gives you flowers?* She didn't know, had never needed to know. "They're beautiful."

He smiled and took her hand, long brown fingers twining around her short pale ones. "No problem. I seen them and thought you might like something pretty. The cherry selling them was nice, too—gave them to me for half price."

Alex wasn't sure if she should laugh, sigh, or just resign herself to the fact that Pook would always attract more than his share of attention. "I'm sure women do you favors all the time," she said wryly.

He frowned, as if vaguely puzzled. "I guess. Some people are just nice and all."

"I'm sure."

"And anyway, it ain't just women."

"I'm sure of that, too."

As they walked, the quality of the buildings around them slowly began to deteriorate. Streetlamps became more infrequent, trash piles higher, and saloons more numerous. Even at this early hour, it seemed that the groggeries were going full tilt. A drunken woman screeched something incoherent at them from a window, and slouching men in doorways followed them with their eyes. Bands of children ran wild in the street, seeming little different than the herds of pigs that rooted through the same garbage. Feeling suddenly nervous, Alex shrank back against Pook's side. He let go of her hand so that he could drape an arm around her shoulders, drawing her closer.

"You ain't come down here by yourself since that day you ran into the seelie faeling, right?" he asked.

The memory wasn't a pleasant one, in part because it didn't reflect well on Alex's judgment. She had challenged Nigel in broad daylight, with no thought for her own safety, and only Pook's timely intervention had kept the seelie faeling from killing her and leaving her body in an alley. "No. I learned my lesson, Pooshka."

"Good. It ain't real safe, especially for somebody who looks like they don't belong."

Glancing around, Alex realized that these squalid streets had been his home. *But you don't belong here either, Pook. You're too good for this. Maybe anyone is.*

Although their path didn't take them through any of the areas that had been burned during the riots the previous day, Alex could smell the scent of smoke on the air whenever the breeze came from the direction of the river. Once, as they crossed a street, she got a glimpse of fire-blackened rafters stark against the distant sky.

When they finally turned onto Crevice Street, it was as if they had entered another world. The narrow streets and brick buildings were the same as those they had left behind, but now the shop signs were written in strange characters. The smells of exotic spices wafted through the air, accompanied by great gouts of steam from the open doors of restaurants. Brightly-colored curtains shielded the windows, and strings of beads hung in the doorways. Although there were crowds on these streets as well, they moved more with an air of purpose than of revelry, and any drunks and rowdies were kept discreetly indoors. Most of the people had dark eyes and hair, and brown skin, and for the first time in her life Alex felt as if her fairness marked her apart. *Does Pook feel this way all the time?* she wondered, with a surreptitious glance at his coffee-and-cream skin.

Pook seemed used to the strange sights and smells, but it was all Alex could do to keep from gawking. She caught a glimpse of fireworks being unloaded from a cart, and itched to run inside the shop they were destined for and see what other wonders might be found therein. "Perhaps we could come back another time, when we aren't in a hurry?" she asked wistfully.

"Sure," he said, seeming surprised. At her questioning look, he shrugged. "Most people don't like coming down here, that's all. Scared of what's different from them."

Alex smiled wryly. "When everyone is different from you, you don't have much choice but to embrace it."

For some reason, that struck Pook as funny, and he laughed as he led her to a wooden stair that wound up the side of a two-story building. The stair let out onto a balcony on the upper floor. Several gnarled trees stood in pots on the balcony, and in the center of them was an arrangement of water-worn stones that seemed purposeful but which signified nothing to Alex's eyes.

"We got to take our shoes off," Pook said, stopping for a moment to undo the laces on his boots.

"Why?"

He shrugged. "Kuromori likes it that way. He's got all kinds of rules and stuff. Big on manners. I don't get it, myself, but I guess it makes him happy."

A sliding door, made from a latticework of wood covered with paper, opened off the balcony. Pook pounded on the wall beside the door, then slid it open, blithely certain of his welcome. "Hey, Kuromori!" he chirped as he went in. Alex followed more slowly.

She found herself in a large room whose only furniture consisted of a cabinet against one wall, a low table, and a stand that held two swords in black lacquer sheaths. The floor was covered in reed mats, which were surprisingly comfortable beneath her stocking-clad feet.

Kuromori rose from his seat on a pillow beside the low table. As usual, he was dressed in a tunic-like shirt held in

place by a sash, loose pants, and socks. He bowed to them both. “Tamnais-kun, it is good to see you. Alex-chan, welcome. Your presence is as a fragrant blossom in my home.”

Alex blushed, uncertain how to react. Pook had been in the midst of a return bow, but stopped and gave Kuromori a suspicious look. “You ain’t putting moves on my girl, are you? Cause I’m standing right here, you know.”

Kuromori retained a straight face, but Alex saw laughter in his dark eyes. “Do not fear, Tamnais-kun—I harbor no romantic intentions towards the young lady. Alex-chan, please take your ease at my table. I shall prepare tea for your refreshment.”

“That isn’t necessary,” she said, blushing again. “I just came to watch. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Of course not. And tea is a requirement of civilized behavior—it is no trouble to prepare.”

Alex gingerly lowered herself onto one of the pillows and found it a comfortable enough seat, although she wasn’t sure if it would be better to kneel, put her legs out to the side, or sit tailor-fashion. Her skirts rucked up annoyingly, and she thought of Mina’s trousers with envy. *If only I dared. But I fear my figure wouldn’t lend itself to such a costume.*

Kuromori served tea in a delicate pottery cup, whose sides were so thin they were almost translucent. The ornate pot—its handle was shaped like a dragon—he left sitting on the table for Alex’s use. Once assured that his guest had been made comfortable, he turned his attention back to Pook.

“I have spent the day considering the best way of instructing you, Tamnais-kun,” he said. “I have never before attempted to teach an outsider, and many of the things which seem natural to me may not apply to you. In particular, I have questioned the wisdom of trying to instill discipline and patience in a pooka, a venture which seems doomed to failure.”

“Hey, I’m human, too,” Pook objected.

“And the patience of young men is renowned.”

Although Alex wouldn’t normally have put Pook’s name in a same sentence with “patience,” she felt as if she should defend him. “Pook can do whatever he puts his mind to.”

Pook looked surprised at the statement, but Kuromori simply bowed. “Indeed, Alex-chan. I did not intend insult.” He turned back to Pook. “I think it best if we begin with the care of your blade, however. I have taken the liberty of acquiring a sheath for it, which will help protect it. There are other things that must be done to maintain the metal, however—cleaning and oiling to protect it from damp. Have you chosen a name for it?”

Pook blinked. “A what?”

“You have a blade of great distinction, Tamnais-kun. It is tradition in my land to give names to such weapons. To honor the spirit within them.”

Pook held up the sword and looked at it doubtfully. “I don’t know about this, Kuromori. Two guys sitting around oiling their weapons

and calling them names? Sounds kind of phallic if you ask me.”

Alex snorted her tea and began to choke.

Kuromori frowned slightly. “Tamnais-san!” he said, and there was a sharper note in his voice than he had ever used in Alex’s hearing. “This is a matter of serious import. If there is any dignity whatsoever in your human nature, you will call upon it now.”

Pook sobered—but Alex thought the silver flecks in his eyes had started to shade towards red. “Yeah. Okay.”

“Yes, sensei.”

Pook’s nostrils flared slightly, and for a moment Alex thought he would give in to temper. But after a lengthy pause, he gave Kuromori a stiff bow. “Yes, sensei.”

“Thank you. There may be hope for you yet.” Kuromori went to the sword stand, picked up the longer of the two weapons on it, and unsheathed it. “This is *Swift Wind Over the Mountain*. It has a long and honorable history. My father personally cut the head from a daimyo with this sword.”

Pook looked as if he wasn’t sure that was such a good thing. “Uh, that’s great,” he said weakly.

“Now, Tamnais-san, what name shall be bestowed on your honorable blade?”

Pook held up the sword and studied it thoughtfully...but Alex didn’t miss the gleam of mischief in the depths of his eyes.

“This,” he said solemnly, “is Bob the Magic Sword.”

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Much to Pook’s disappointment, Kuromori didn’t start him using Bob right away. Instead, he had to do everything with a wooden sword— which, he supposed, would at least keep him from slicing his own fool head off. But they didn’t start whacking on each other, not even with the wooden swords. Instead, there was a lot about how to hold the stupid thing, and how to stand—even how to breathe, for God’s sake. It didn’t take long to figure out that there was a whole lot more to all this sword crap than he’d ever even thought about. He also realized that Kuromori’s offer of training him represented a big investment in time on Kuromori’s part.

Huh. Who would’ve thought it? Somebody spending that much time on a waste like me.

By the time they were done, he had aches in muscles that he hadn’t even known he owned. They had left the sliding door open to catch the breeze, but even so sweat made his hair stick to his face. When summer rolled around, it would be pure hell.

“Well enough, for a beginner,” Kuromori judged. “You have promise, Tamnais-kun.”

Alex stood up to leave with him, stifling a yawn as she did so. He felt a pang of guilt at that—it had been his idea

to drag her here with him. "Sorry, baby. You must've been bored."

The smile she gave him did funny things to his stomach. "No. I enjoyed watching you."

Feeling self-conscious, he ducked his head and ran a hand through his hair. When he looked back up, he was surprised to see that Kuromori had thrust both of his swords through the sash at his waist, and was putting on a long coat. "You going out?"

"I will be returning to the bookstore with you," Kuromori said. "I am interested to learn what it is that you and Fox-san may discover. I will also confess that I have had few opportunities until recently to observe magic as it is done in Niune, and I am curious."

Well, that was just great. He'd have every faeling in Dere gawking at him while he was trying to figure out what to do. Now if he managed to screw up the spell, all his friends would be there to see it, so his humiliation would be complete.

They walked back to Blackthorn Books, although Pook wished he had the money for a cab. He was already exhausted and aching all over; by the time they got to the door, he felt thoroughly done in. Hopefully this spell wasn't going to be too complicated, because if it was he didn't think he could follow it well enough to do anything useful.

Duncan and Mina had set up the space in the back while they were gone. Two chairs faced each other, with a silver bowl of water set in between. Somebody had drawn a circle on the floor around the chairs, and added a few runes in a language Pook didn't know. Something was simmering in a pan on top of the potbellied stove; it smelled a little like damp soil, and Pook hoped it wasn't meant to be dinner.

Fox was sitting in one of the chairs, humming and staring at her string. When they came in, she jumped to her feet and clapped her hands together. "Are you going with me tonight? I'll show you pretty things!"

"I fear that Tamnais will not have time to look at pretty things," Duncan said. He was sitting in the far corner, well away from the heat of the stove, tuning the strings on his violin. "You are looking for evidence of seelie activity, remember, Fox?"

Fox looked so disappointed that Pook felt bad for her. "Don't worry about it, Fox. Maybe you can show me stuff some other time."

Mina took the pan off the stove, sniffed its contents, made a face, and poured them into a mug. "Here you go, Pook."

She held it out to him, but he didn't move to take it. "No way. I ain't drinking that."

"It is needed for the spell," Duncan said patiently. "According to everything I have read, it is the only way for those faelings who have no natural inclination towards visions to share in a seeing spell."

The evening was just getting better by the minute, wasn't it? Thinking that he would have been a little less eager to volunteer if he'd known he was going to have to drink some nasty sludge, Pook took the mug but just held it. "What's in this stuff? Something you scraped off the bottom of the river?"

"The decoction has many ingredients, but the primary ones are a certain type of mushroom and mistletoe. I fear that it may make you feel a bit ill."

Alex's brows snapped together, and she straightened and gave Duncan a glare. "Perhaps Pook shouldn't drink it, then."

"He has to," Mina said impatiently. "For God's sake, Alex, we aren't going to poison him. Much, anyway."

"You should have said something about this earlier!"

"We didn't know earlier."

Alex had gotten her back up and wasn't about to let it go, though. "So none of you have ever taken it. What if the recipe is wrong? What if you put in the incorrect amounts? I have seen serfs die because they mistook one species of mushroom for another."

Mina threw up her hands. "We were careful! Do you think I want to kill Pook? This is the only way we're going to find out what the seelie are up to. If there are any lurking in Dere, this is our only chance to find out where they are so we can hunt them."

"Hunting the fae may not be the wisest course, my dear," Duncan interjected.

Mina hissed at everyone, like an annoyed cat. "We're going to have to face them eventually, Duncan. They aren't going to just leave us be, not after what's happened."

Everybody was fighting with everybody else, and Pook didn't like it. So he held his breath and drained the mug as fast as he could. It didn't help much; the second the bitter, earthy liquid hit his tongue he started regretting ever getting involved. Somehow, he managed to swallow it down without gagging.

"There," he said, and put the mug down on the table near the wall. Alex gave him a worried look, but he tried to pretend he hadn't seen it, because otherwise she might start in on him next. "I'm ready. What do I do?"

"It will take a while for the drink to take affect," Duncan said. "I suggest you sit on the chair across from Fox while we wait."

Pook plopped himself into the chair and stared at nothing, feeling stupid. Everybody was looking at him, and he wondered how they'd know when the potion started to work. *Maybe when I start puking my guts up*, he thought wryly. *Or maybe my head will turn blue.*

The mental image struck him as funny, and he laughed out loud, which probably made everybody think he was crazy. No one said anything, though. After a while, Duncan picked up his violin and began to play.

"What are you doing?" asked Alex. Her voice seemed very far away.

"The books suggest that music might help," Duncan replied. He sounded like he was way off in the distance, too—a lot farther away than his violin. That didn't seem right. Pook wanted to look and see if the violin was

maybe playing itself, but the shimmering reflections in the pan of water had caught his attention.

He started to lean forward and look at them more closely. Fox held out her hands, and he took them automatically. The string had raised calluses on her fingers, and they felt rough as gravel against his skin.

"Look," she breathed. The water shimmered and danced, stirred by her breath. The music spiraled towards it, formed a chute that carried them down, down, down...

It was very dark, so black that even he couldn't see anything. Somehow, Pook knew that he was in a maze, just like the fancy ones rich folks made out of hedges. He put out one hand and felt wood beneath his fingertips. There was somewhere he had to go...something he had to get...

Then the maze was gone, replaced by a blasted desert where the wind howled and blew the dead earth into giant clouds of dust...

Two disembodied hands held something out to him. He took it, and found that it was a flat rock of some kind, its surface covered with writing he didn't recognize. The stone plaque had been split down the middle, however, and he held one fragment in each hand, wondering what would happen if he put them together...

The scene changed and the broken rock disappeared. A flurry of images rushed past: Mina, her hair white as frost and her eyes blacker than night; a swamp and a carriage; Alex, beautifully nude, the candlelight soft on her bare skin; Duncan lying still on the ground, blood leaking out of his mouth; a high hill against the sunset; a prison cell; a saloon; a tree. Faster and faster the images came, a blurring rush that lost all sense, all coherence. Pook tried to slow it, to linger, to get more than a confused glimpse, but everything was moving too fast. He was spinning out of control, sliding down, down, down, until he slammed back into his body with a jolt that brought everything to sudden, crashing halt.

He just had time to lean over and throw up before weakness overcame him and he passed out.

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"Here," Alex said gently. She pressed the steaming mug of tea into Pook's hands, and he took it with a wan smile. Although sweat had plastered strands of his dark hair to his face, his entire body was wracked by shivers. They had wrapped him in a blanket and put him close to the stove, and although his shivers had eased a bit, his color had not returned to normal.

"Poor moth, fluttering too close to the flame," Fox said sympathetically.

Alex carefully brushed a strand of hair out of Pook's eyes. "Are you feeling any better?"

"Yeah. Thanks. Sorry about that." He seemed embarrassed about getting sick, although Alex thought it silly of him. Hoping to comfort him, she leaned over and pressed her lips against his forehead.

"What did you see?" asked Mina, breaking into the moment of tenderness. Alex cursed her silently.

Pook sighed and slumped. "Not a damn thing worth mentioning," he said unhappily. "Just a bunch of pictures, but most of them went too fast to tell what was going on. I saw a maze...then some kind of weird rock that had been split in two...and some kind of desert, I guess. Then a whole bunch of things that just went too fast to really even get a good impression. Sorry."

"And you, Fox?" Duncan prompted. "Were the visions any more clear to you with Pook there?"

She nodded happily. "I saw the king!"

There was no king in Niune...no human king, at least. "Finn Bheara?" Alex guessed, naming the king of the unseelie fae...and Pook's father.

Fox frowned in puzzlement. "No. The king."

This is why I could never rely on magic, Alex thought. *Even if I had power like Mina's or Pook's. So much effort, and what do we have to show for it?*

Mina seemed to be thinking the same thing. "Damn it. I was hoping for something more."

"A big sign that said that 'here's where the seelie fae are and what they're doing' would have been nice," Pook agreed.

"Visions are seldom so clear. The things that Pook and Fox saw may be important clues, even if we cannot interpret them at this point," Duncan pointed out. "Both of them have seen a maze, now. Pook also mentioned a desert and a stone. Was there anything else you can recall? Anything that stood out, even if it was only a brief glimpse?"

For some reason, Pook looked towards Alex—then glanced away hastily. "Um, no. Nothing."

Duncan frowned slightly, as if he suspected that Pook wasn't being entirely truthful. If so, he did not voice his suspicions aloud, however. "I don't recall any references to these things, but I have hardly memorized every book in my collection. Mina and I can go through the texts and discover if we can learn anything that might shed light on the visions."

"I can help," Alex put in quickly.

"Excellent, my dear. But the night is getting far gone. We shall begin tomorrow."

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Pook wedged himself into the space beneath the stair that he slept in and found his sketchpad. The art set he'd stolen had been confiscated—and would presumably be returned to its owner, not that the guy could possibly appreciate it as much as Pook, considering the damned thing had never even been used when he found it. But since he'd used up half the sketchpad, there hadn't been much sense in giving it back; he'd found it tucked away underneath the counter at the bookstore and had quietly made off with it when nobody was looking.

The rest of the stuff was harder to replace. His work at the bookstore paid fair, though, and since he wasn't spending any of his wages on rent nowadays, he'd splurged and bought himself a nice set of charcoals and pencils.

Although he could see pretty well in the dark, it wasn't good enough for the kind of fine work he wanted to do tonight, so he lit a candle stub that he shoved upright into the ground. He took a moment to weave a glamour from the shadows outside. After all, it wouldn't do for somebody to wander past and notice that there was light coming out from under the steps.

Satisfied, he settled back and closed his eyes, trying to recall his vision. *Alex*. The details were already starting to fade, like something from a dream, so he had to get it down on paper tonight or else he'd never do it.

Unless she'd let me draw her from life...

His entire body ached. He wanted...anything, he supposed. Everything. Whatever she would give him.

But he was scared, that was the plain truth of it. Scared of disappointing her, mostly. Or scared that one day she'd wake up and realize that she could do a hell of a lot better than a street thief like him.

"I'm a prince though, ain't I? Don't that count for something?"

He looked around at the squalid little cubbyhole that was the closest thing he could claim to a home. *Yeah. Some prince.*

Not sure if he wanted to laugh or cry, he set pencil to paper and started to draw.

Chapter Three

Alex walked across the ballroom, her lace-encrusted dress weighing her body down like iron chains. Snow fell from the ceiling, sifting into the corners and dusting the heads and shoulders of the dancers with white. She glanced around, wondering where her father was. He would be displeased if he realized that it was snowing inside the house

There was no sign of Aleksei. Instead, she found herself standing by a knot of young men, the same ones she had seen at party after party. So far out in the countryside, there were only a few of the nobility within easy traveling distance, and so every gathering featured the same faces as any other. Dread pooled in Alex's stomach and made her hands shake. Some day, one of these youths would be her husband.

"Really, I hope Father can find someone more suitable for me than that fat cow of Aleksei's," one said. He had a broad, piggy face, and his cheeks were flushed from too much vodka.

Alex felt her heart shrivel with shame, and she wished that the floor would open up and swallow her. The other boys laughed and began to joke about the attributes of various serving women.

One of the shadows in the corner appeared to come to life, slinking across the floor amidst the dancing couples. No one else seemed to notice it.

"Do you think the dowry will be enough to make up for seeing that naked?" one of the boys asked, pointing at Alex.

Humiliation burned her cheeks, and she felt tears spring into her eyes. Turning away, she left to search for her mother. When she glanced back, half-afraid that her tormentors would have followed her, she was startled to see that they had all turned to solid ice. The shadowy thing slunk among them, biting and snarling.

Through the swirl of dancers, Alex caught a glimpse of Moira and Gosha, walking arm-and-arm down the length of the hall. Relieved, she ran to them. "Mama, you must stop the snow. Father will be angry if he sees it."

Neither Moira nor Gosha paid any attention to her. "So which of these fine young men do you think our Dreya will wed?" Gosha asked. His skin was white as death, his lips blue and his fingertips black with frostbite.

Moira shook out her long hair. The chains that shackled her ankles clinked as she walked. "My Dreya will marry no mere boyar," she said haughtily. "I will give her to nothing less than a prince."

Alex stretched out her hand to the side. The shadow-thing snuffled her fingers with a cold nose. "Mama, please, make it stop snowing."

Moira looked at her, and to her horror Alex saw that her mother had no eyes. "Murderess," she whispered. Gosha screamed.

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Alex sat on the edge of her bed, the light of early morning streaming across her shoulders. Her night had been restless, plagued with dreams that she feared Pook had shared. She had risen with the sun, dressed, and tried to apply herself to one of her half-completed machines. Her concentration had not been up to the task, however.

Had Pook heard the damning whisper? It seemed impossible that he had not. Did he wonder what it meant?

Once before in dreams, she had asked him if she had killed Gosha yet. At the time, she had not realized that the Pook in her dreams was literally him, and not simply a fragment of her own imaginings.

He never asked about that, though, after we learned the truth.

Mina and Duncan seemed to regard the dream-sharing as something positive, but it made Alex feel horribly exposed. She couldn't control the images her sleeping mind conjured up. *At least, thank the gods, I haven't dreamed anything intimate.* That would have been beyond embarrassing.

When Pook arrived at the bookstore for his work shift, he gave no indication that he wondered about Alex's dream, and after a while she began to relax. Most of her day was spent in the back room, going through the books on

faery lore that Duncan had selected, looking for anything that might hint at the meaning of the visions that Fox and Pook had shared. Because the bookstore had been closed for several days running, thanks to the upset the fae had made in their lives, the bell over the door rang constantly as a steady stream of customers came in and out.

Towards the end of the day, she heard the voices of the sisters who ran the bakery across the street. All five of them had been relentless in their pursuit of Pook, so Alex quickly put down the book she had been reading and hurried to the front. Pook was leaning on a broom, talking to the sisters in his usual guileless manner.

"We have tickets to the theater," the eldest—Madeline?—was saying.

"How fascinating," Alex said coolly as she came up. Pook turned to her, his smile blooming, so she dared to slide her arm around his slender waist. It didn't seem entirely possible that he would rather have her than tall, slender Madeline, but he gave her a warm hug and brushed his lips across her forehead. The conversation immediately turned from theater tickets, and within a few moments the sisters were making their goodbyes and heading out the door.

"They're probably going to plot my death," Alex observed as she watched them cross the street.

Pook snorted. "You're being silly."

Alex arched a brow at him. She had been called many things in her life—stern, cold, over-serious—but never silly. "I certainly am not."

"Yep. Silly." He kissed her playfully on the tip of the nose, and drew a laugh from her despite her best intentions. "It's about time to close up—you want to come to Kuromori's with me?"

"I do," she answered truthfully. "But I need to go by the chemist's before the shop closes for the evening."

"Oh." He looked momentarily disappointed. "Is it okay if I check in after I get back, then? I worry about you."

His confession startled her. "Of course, Pooshka. I'll have tea on for you."

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Night had just fallen when Alex arrived back at the bookstore from her errand. The days were getting longer, although they were not as long as they would have been in Ruska. By midsummer, nights lasted only a handful of hours at her father's home. Humming to herself, she set her packages down for a moment while she pulled her keys from her reticule.

"Now there, where have ye been off to, girl?" asked a feminine voice from behind her.

Startled, Alex spun around. The lamplighter had not been by yet to kindle the streetlamps, and deep purple shadows cloaked her surroundings. Light and noise came from the café down the street, but it seemed suddenly far away.

Alex took a cautious step back, ready to run towards the café if she had to. "Who's there?" she demanded.

The nearest gaslight suddenly came to life, apparently on its own. A young woman stepped into the sudden brilliance. She was built small and thin like Mina, and like Mina, she wore a pair of men's trousers and boots. A bright red frock coat, covered in patches of different colors, clashed violently with her carrot-colored hair. Her face was narrow, her cheekbones sharp, and her mouth slightly too wide to harmonize with her other features. Blue eyes sparkling, she winked at Alex, then sketched a little bow.

From her back protruded a pair of insect-like wings.

Alex's heart beat hard against her ribs, but she managed to keep her voice cold and steady as solid ice. "I'd advise you to go away and leave me be," she said, even as she wondered how she could edge around the fae to make a run for the relative safety of the café.

The fae smiled; had she been human, Alex would have thought it a friendly, open smile. "There's no reason to be afraid of me, love. I'm not here to bring ye harm."

"Considering the last two seelie fae I met tried to kill me, you'll excuse me if I don't believe you."

"Aye—ye do have a point. But I'm not meaning ye harm, nonetheless." The fae sketched another little bow. "Ye may call me Padgett. Ye're from Ruska, are ye not? I once got drunk with a bannik—nice chap, but a bit too settled for a wanderer like me."

Alex stared at Padgett, wondering what she could possibly want. *To kill me, what else? All this talk is nothing but a distraction.*

"Then why not just get it over with?"

"But I can see ye're not interested in tales of me life," Padgett added with another infectious smile. "Which is a pity, because it's been an interesting one. Traveled all over, I have. Not had much choice, really—it got me as far away from me relatives as possible, didn't it? Actually, that's what I've come to talk to ye about. Me relieves, that is."

"If you make any move towards me, you won't live long enough to regret it," Alex said, and was astonished that her voice didn't tremble. She wondered if her lack of power to enforce the threat would be as obvious to a seelie as it would have been to an unseelie.

Padgett laughed. "I'm not here to hurt ye. For one thing, I imagine the dyana would hold a grudge. Not to mention Tamnais. Quite a looker, he is, although that would be robbing the cradle for the likes of me. Gets it from his mother's side, he does—a real beauty, Oonagh is. If only she wasn't such a bitch, but there ye have it."

Despite herself, Alex felt a flicker of curiosity. "You know Pook's mother?"

"Pook, is it? Suits him, it does. Seems like a down-to-earth chap, from what little I've seen. As for Oonagh, I more know *of* her than know her meself, if you get me meaning. We don't see eye-to-eye on much, although that has less to do with our being seelie and unseelie than ye've been led to believe." Padgett paused, then nodded her red head towards the café. "What say we have a bit of drink to go with our talk, hey? I can't stay long, but talking is thirsty work."

If this is some sort of trap, it's a very strange one. "All right."

Padgett nodded amiably, turned, and started towards the café with her back towards Alex. It was either a sign of trust, confidence, or nonaggression—or maybe all of those, for all Alex knew. At any rate, she was glad to have the fae in front of her rather than at her back.

With the onset of milder weather, the café had set tables and chairs out on the sidewalk; even so late at night, several were filled. A group of young men argued about politics as they drank their coffee, jabbing their fingers at a newspaper clipping to make their points. Further toward the edge of the light, a pair of young lovers gazed into each other's eyes while they sipped hot chocolate.

Padgett's tattered wings faded in the sight of Alex's right eye as they approached the tables. To anyone purely human, she would seem nothing more outrageous than a young woman with poor fashion-sense. "Two coffees, me good man," Padgett called to the nearest waiter as they sat down.

Alex settled cautiously into her chair, ready to bolt should Padgett show any inclination towards violence. The coffees arrived quickly; Padgett took a small flask from inside her coat and added a generous dollop of whiskey to the cup in front of her. "There. That'll warm the blood quicker than coffee alone. Would ye be having any? No?" The fae shrugged and made the flask vanish with a mixture of glamour and sleight-of-hand.

Although Padgett had offered her no threat, Alex refused to relax. "What do you want of me?"

"Straight and to the point, are ye? That won't win ye many points among the fae."

"Perhaps I don't care to win points, as you say."

Padgett grinned. "Ye're no pushover, are ye, girl? Got some steel in that spine of yers. Well enough. I came to ye for a reason. Don't trust what the other fae tell ye. They've been lying to ye and yer friends from the beginning."

"But I suppose I'm to trust you, is that it?"

Padgett's smile broadened. Alex noticed that her teeth were sharp as those of some feral beast. "Nay. I'm not thinking ye would do that. So before I say more, I'm going to prove to ye that ye can have some trust in me. I'll be giving ye three gifts—a show of faith, as it were."

The fae held up her hand, index finger extended. "The first is the gift of knowledge. There's a *sceach* in Hurley Park—go there at midnight and knock, and I think ye'll be finding something of interest."

Such as a trap? Alex thought, but did not say. "What?"

"Ye'll see." Padgett stood up and tossed a few coins onto the table. Alex glanced at them, then hissed in outrage.

"You're trying to pass faery gold!"

Padgett glanced at the scattering of leaves, glamourised to look like coins. "Aye, lass. What else would I be paying with?" she asked, puzzled. Then she turned and walked away.

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Alex spent the hours until Pook returned barricaded inside the bookstore. A quick search through the books gave her the meaning of the word Padgett had used. A *sceach* was a lone tree, usually a thorn tree, which marked a place of faery habitation. In other words, Padgett had essentially told her to go and knock on the front door of some fae's house.

"Chernovog preserve me, what could it be but a trap?"

But if it is a trap...why make it so complicated? Padgett could have killed me herself on the street tonight, with no one the wiser.

The fae are bound by strange rules sometimes...could this be one of those instances? Perhaps Padgett couldn't do away with me herself for some reason, and so is sending me to a fae who can?

I could ask Duncan to help me decide what to do. Or Mina.

But that would mean heading across town to their house. A quick look at the clock told her that she didn't have time to go there, explain things to them, and still arrive at Hurley Park before midnight. *That's assuming they're even there. They could easily have gone to dinner, or even to the theater, and not be back for hours yet.*

When Pook rang the bell, Alex all but flew from the back of the store to open the door for him. He looked tired, and she could smell the sweat on his skin. "Kuromori's trying to kill me," he complained as soon as the door was open. "We started whacking at each other with the practice swords—or, to be more accurate, he whacked on me and I hit the air a lot. But if that wasn't bad enough, there's even more bowing and honor and discipline and crap I have to learn."

"I'm sorry." She hated to cut him off, but there was no time, and she knew from experience that Pook could ramble on for quite a while. "Pooshka? Would you do a favor for me?"

"Sure." He dropped tiredly into the chair behind the counter and beckoned her over. When she drew near, he surprised her by wrapping his arms around her waist and pulling her into his lap.

"Oh!" She wasn't sure what she ought to do with her own arms, so she settled for draping them around his neck. The ends of his long hair brushed over her hands, soft as silk. The silver flecks in his gray eyes were even more startling when seen so close, like a spray of stars against the evening sky.

He kissed her, the feel of his full lips against hers so good that it made her ache. His thighs felt firm and tight under her rear, and a sudden surge of desire heated her blood. Until recently, she had watched him from afar, never thinking that there might ever be anything between them save friendship. The acute physical attraction she had always felt towards him had been painful, but in its own way safe, because there had never been any chance of acting on it.

Now...things were different. The possibilities suddenly seemed both exciting and a little frightening.

“What do you need?” he murmured when the kiss ended.

For a moment she couldn't even think. *You*, flitted across her mind, and for a moment she gave serious consideration to forgetting about the sceach in favor of staying here and discovering the boundaries, if any, of their new relationship.

In the end, responsibility won out, but it had a tough fight. “I need you to help me with something,” she said, when she could form sentences again. “I saw a seelie fae tonight.”

She told him about her meeting with Padgett. Throughout her recitation, he grew more and more alarmed; she could feel his lean muscles going taut with suppressed fear. When she was done, he muttered an oath that made her blush—and she'd grown used to the swearing of sailors on the steamer that had brought her to Dere.

“So you're going to go, then? To the sceach?” he guessed.

“Yes. I had hoped that you might come with me, though.”

He looked at her as if he questioned her sanity. “Well, yeah. Goes without saying, don't it?”

“Thank you, Pooshka.” She glanced at the clock again and swore silently. “Do you think we have time to get there and find the sceach before midnight?”

“I think she was talking real-time, not clock-time.”

“What do you mean?”

He paused, as if mulling it over. “Just because the clock's pointing hands at the twelve don't mean it's the exact middle of the night,” he said at last. “The real middle of the night, halfway between dusk and dawn. It's later than clock-midnight, this time of year. You can't feel it?”

Alex shook her head. She was dead to the primal tides that so moved Pook, her fae blood too far diluted by human ancestors. It made her wonder what else she might miss. “So we have enough time?”

“I think so. But we shouldn't just sit around, I guess.” He waited for Alex to slide out of his lap, then stood up with a groan. “Let's hail a cab, though, okay?”

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Mina reined in the brougham before the bronze gates of their house. She and Duncan had enjoyed a pleasant evening at the theater, although she wondered if they should have invited Alex and Pook to go along.

No. It was nice to have some time just for us. Not to mention they would probably prefer to go alone rather than chaperoned.

Mina climbed down from the drivers seat to push open the gate. *God. I don't know if I should be glad or not that Pook and Alex finally got things straightened out between them. They've been making eyes at each other since day one. No, before that—Pook had latched onto her years ago, even before she came to Niune, though God only knows how or why he managed that. Maybe it wasn't even something he did. Maybe it was fate, or magic, or some combination that nobody understands, least of all Pook.*

So maybe it was inevitable. Not that I have a problem with it—I don't. I don't think Duncan does either. But if Alex gets pregnant now, there goes any chance of her going to the university in the fall. I'd hate it if she missed out on that just because she did something stupid.

Then again, I'm obviously borrowing trouble for the moment.

“You look worried, my dear,” Duncan said as she returned to the brougham.

The gaslight from the street flashed off the lenses of his spectacles, making his eyes impossible to read, but his mouth was set in an expression of concern. Mina sighed and paused beside the window. He reached out, and she automatically took his hand, feeling his long fingers tighten gently over hers. “Just thinking about the perils of young love.”

“Ah.” He shifted so that the reflections disappeared, and she saw the mirth twinkling in his blue-gray eyes. “I assume you refer to Alexandreya and her unlikely paramour?”

“Yes. Mostly, remembering how damned stupid I was at that age and cringing in anticipation.”

The humor disappeared, replaced by something darker. “I need not remind you of my own folly over Aerin, and I was no older than Alexandreya at the time. Indeed, if nothing else, I can at least content myself that her heart has chosen more wisely than mine did at her age.”

Mina snorted. Compared to the psychotic Aerin, Pook was the very picture of stability.

“And I am encouraged in other ways,” Duncan continued.

“Pook surprised you when he offered to do the vision spell with Fox, didn't he?”

Duncan chuckled. “Given the amount of female attention he attracts, I had assumed that he would have, ah, taken advantage of the numerous opportunities provided him. But that isn't what I meant. I am encouraged that Alexandreya is capable of trusting a male as much as she seems to trust Tamnais. It is a good sign, I think.”

Mina winced. “I hadn't thought if it like that. We still don't know what happened to your sister, or why Alex ran away from home in the first place.”

“No, but it seems very likely that her father was involved in some way.” Duncan's mouth tightened, and Mina thought that if they ever met Alex's father, the man would come away from the encounter far the worse for wear. “I will admit that it grieves me that she has not said what befell Moira.”

“It's probably still painful for her.”

“Perhaps. Perhaps I'm wrong to see her motive as lack of trust rather than natural grief. No doubt she will tell us in her own time.” He shook his head sadly. “At any rate, I think it best if we turn a blind eye and let their relationship progress as it will. It is perhaps just as well that the RiDahn line is so obscure. No one will care with whom Alex makes

a match, should it come to that.”

“Factory slaves and street thieves—your ancestors are probably turning over in their graves.”

Duncan chuckled. “Say instead the Prince of the Unseelie Fae,” he corrected loftily.

“Why am I thinking about silk purses and sows’ ears?” Letting go of his hand, she pulled herself into the drivers seat.

As she picked up the reins to guide the horses into the courtyard, a small carriage suddenly clattered up, drawing to a halt only a few feet away. Its driver was formally dressed in the royal livery, and Mina felt a twinge of dread as he climbed down and bowed.

“Do I have the honor of addressing Lord and Lady RiDahn?” he intoned, his bearing as stiff as his starched collar.

“I’m Duncan RiDahn.”

The man bowed, then extended a piece of parchment, folded over and sealed with wax, through the open window. When Duncan took it, the messenger immediately turned and went back to his conveyance, as if he disdained to spend even another moment in the company of such scruffy folk as they.

“What the hell?” Mina asked.

She heard the rustle of parchment as Duncan broke the seal and unfolded it. “It’s from Queen Dagmar,” he said unnecessarily. “She wishes a private audience with us. Tonight.”

“Bloody hell,” Mina muttered. “When?”

“As soon as possible.”

Mina swore again and guided the brougham back into the street.

Chapter Four

The hansom cab clattered away, leaving Alex and Pook standing at the edge of Hurley Park. Marble chips gleamed on the paths wherever moonlight found its way between the spreading tree branches, hinting at the park’s depths without revealing anything useful. The river flowed alongside the park, and Alex could smell its polluted water on the night breeze. An owl called once and was answered by another.

Before leaving the bookstore, Alex had strapped on her flamethrower. Now, while Pook waited, she lit the ignition system at the end of the nozzle, determined to be ready should they need the weapon. The weight of its tanks made her back and shoulders ache, and she didn’t look forward to a long hike through the park.

Pook glanced at her, troubled. With the sword thrust through a sash at his waist, he looked like the rakish hero of a dime novel. “You know which of these trees we’re looking for?”

“It will most likely be a lone thorn tree.”

Pook cast a dubious look at the foliage. “So...you know which of these is a thorn tree? ‘Cause I’m a city b’hoi, and they all look the same to me.”

Alex’s heart sank. “No. I don’t. Chernovog blast it! How could I be so stupid?”

“Well, well. I guess little miss know-it-all isn’t so smart after all.”

Pook spun with a snarl, as if he was about to shift into his other shape. The gaslight wavered over a slender form, illuminating a delicately-pointed ear, brown skin, and a sensuous mouth. For a moment Alex almost thought they were facing Pook’s doppelganger. Then she saw the other boy’s short-cut hair, and relaxed marginally. “Dubh. What do you want?”

Dubh came closer; by the careful way in which he walked, Alex suspected he’d been drinking. “Want? What should I want, when my older brother has it all?”

Pook’s mouth tightened. “Oh yeah. I’m in the lap of luxury—see? Servants taking care of me all day long, not a care in the damn world. So why don’t you just bugger off and leave me to it, b’hoi?”

“What do you want, Dubh?” Alex asked again, heading off whatever retort he would have made. “Or do you really expect us to believe that it’s a coincidence you’re here?”

“Oh no, no coincidence.” Dubh pulled a flask from his pocket with exaggerated care, then took a long swallow. “I’ve been following my loving brother here.”

“Don’t call me that! And share the damned bottle!” Pook snatched the flask, causing Dubh to stumble back.

“Pook! You can’t drink now!” Alex exclaimed, scandalized. Pook looked at her blankly, the flask stopped halfway to his mouth. Shoving aside a wave of irritation, she took it from him, screwed the top back on, and threw it at Dubh. Dubh fumbled the catch, and Pook made a sound of disgust.

“If you *boys* are done, perhaps Dubh would like to explain why he’s following us?” Alex asked coldly.

Dubh shrugged carelessly. “I wanted to see what my brother was doing with his windfall, of course. Did you know that I am considered an excellent swordsman? I’ve had lessons since I was old enough to walk. How are you faring with it, Tamnais?”

Pook muttered something that didn’t sound particularly flattering. Alex sighed. “Enough. He’s useless. Come on.”

“Wait!” exclaimed Dubh. Alex paused on the very edge of the park and raised her eyebrows. “All right. I’ve been following Pook and thinking. And drinking. Fine. What are you two doing here?” Dubh’s dark eyes raked Alex. “It hardly seems likely you’ve come to this place for a lovers’ tryst.”

Alex felt a furious blush heat her face and silently cursed her fair skin. “We were told that there is something to be found at a sceach in this park. And no, I won’t say who told us that. Now, either help us find it, or slink away with your tail between your legs.”

“We don’t need him,” Pook protested.

If Alex had wanted an argument to persuade Dubh to come with them, she couldn’t have picked a better one. The fact that Pook clearly *didn’t* want him there was guaranteed to ensure Dubh’s cooperation. Shooting Pook a dark look, Dubh said, “It might be amusing to help you. It isn’t as if I have anything else to do, after all.”

Privately, Alex wondered what made Dubh say that. Had he been banished from Faerie because of his failure to obtain the sword that Pook now carried? Were his parents no longer interested in him, seeing him as a failed experiment? Or was he simply too ashamed to return?

I can’t ask, though. Not that he’d answer in the first place. But Pook...I don’t think any mention of his parents would sit well with him. It’s hard enough for him to endure being near Dubh, and Chernovog knows I don’t want to hurt him any more.

The three of them moved slowly into the shadowy park. Alex stumbled over the uneven ground and swore softly, wishing that she were even half as cat-eyed as the two boys. At first, they went in silence, but Pook was unable to keep his peace for long.

“You seen any of the Rat Soldiers?” he asked Dubh.

Dubh snorted. “Why would I concern myself with a bunch of humans?”

“What the—Darcy was your girl!” Pook sputtered, outraged by Dubh’s desertion of the gang that had been his entire world. “Ain’t you even worried about her?”

A shaft of moonlight found Dubh’s face, revealing his faint sneer. The cold expression stripped away all similarity to Pook. “She was nothing. I only slept with her because I thought it would upset you.”

“And why the hell would it do that?”

“I assumed.” Dubh shrugged carelessly. “Mostly, I assumed that you had ambition. When I first came to Dere and discovered that you ran with one of the gangs but were not the leader, I thought that surely you were at least making some attempt to gain power within them. It was what I would have done. But instead I find you shagging this creature—”

Pook’s fist slammed into Dubh’s mouth, so fast and violent that it shocked Alex. Dubh staggered back—then brought up his foot, connecting solidly with Pook’s groin. Pook went down, and Dubh went after him. Within seconds, the two boys were rolling on the ground, snarling and cursing one another.

Chernovog, preserve me! “Pook! Dubh! Have you lost your minds? We already know there are fae in the park—will you call them to us?”

Pook rolled off Dubh, who was bleeding from a cut lip, and climbed to his feet with a wince. “You heard what he said,” he exclaimed defensively.

“God of the waning year, Pook, we have better things to worry about.” She turned away from them and started towards the interior of the park. “I’m going ahead. You two can either come with me, or keep acting like a pair of children, I don’t care which.”

Pook fell into step with her a few seconds later. He had both fists stuffed deep into his pockets, and his shoulders slumped a bit. “Sorry.”

“This is serious business, Pook.”

“I know. But when we—the Rat Soldiers, that is—was going out on a job, we always passed around a bottle or two before and during. To keep our courage up. And brawling...it’s just, you know, brawling. How you keep your place in the gang.”

“This isn’t your gang, Pook. No one is going to take your place with me.”

He perked up a bit at that. It seemed strange that he worried so about the opinion of a chubby, bespeckled bookworm such as herself.

“We should look near the river,” Dubh said after a brief silence. “If we are looking for unseelie fae, that is.”

His words gave Alex pause. “I don’t know what we’re looking for,” she said at last. “Would both types of fae live near a sceach? I know that trees are one of those in-between things, but the text I consulted didn’t say if such habitation was characteristic of seelie or unseelie.”

Pook had taken the lead; now he cast a puzzled glance over his shoulder. “In-between things?”

Alex didn’t look at Dubh; she could imagine his sneer. Truthfully, she was beginning to feel a little put out with Pook herself. “Don’t you remember Duncan talking about them?”

“No.”

“Not much of a student, are you?” Dubh asked mockingly.

“I know what I need to know,” Pook said. Although he was scowling, Alex sensed his embarrassment.

Pook might not have paid enough attention to Duncan’s informal lessons, but at the same time she knew he wasn’t stupid. *Chernovog, he couldn’t be—not and have survived on the streets of Dere. Let alone survived his battles with the fae.* She had the feeling that his hardscrabble life had led him to quickly learn things vital to survival, but to dismiss anything else as being a waste of the very energy and cleverness that he needed to get by.

“Some things are obviously anathema to one type of fae or the other,” she explained. “You aren’t going to find a seelie living under the river, for example, or an unseelie dancing among the coals of a forge. But trees partake both of earth and air. Their roots run deep, and many love to live near water, but their branches are bathed in sunlight and wind. So both seelie and unseelie will make homes in or near them.”

“Oh.” Pook ran a hand back through his hair, absently tousling it. “But if we’re showing up at midnight, that means it’s probably unseele, right?”

“I would think so.”

“Then let’s look near the river first.”

“Just because you’re their prince doesn’t mean they will welcome you,” Dubh said sharply. “Don’t expect them to bow and scrape before you.”

The silver flecks in Pook’s eyes shaded towards red. “You don’t know nothing about me, Dubh. You and that Camhlaidh, sneaking around, thinking you got my number. You don’t.”

His words gave Alex pause. “You’ve seen Camhlaidh?”

“Yeah.” Pook’s snarl revealed white teeth, bright against the darkness of his face. “I’m staying clear of him, though.”

In the end, the sceaich was not as hard to find as Alex had at first feared. The trees gave way to a broad lawn that followed the curve of the river. In the center of the open space, someone had built a folly; the fake ruin looked foreboding in the moonlight even though Alex knew it was no older than the park itself. Beside the folly, a lone tree lifted its limbs to the sky.

“That’s it,” Dubh said. Alex didn’t question how he knew.

As they drew closer, she could see the thorns, gleaming like hidden daggers between the rustling leaves. Pook had been in the lead, but now he stopped, letting Alex and Dubh catch up. She could feel the tension in his body, see it in the way he flexed his hands, as if preparing for a fight.

Dubh gave her a sidelong look. “Now what?”

Alex took a deep breath to calm her nerves. “Now, we knock.”

“What—just like that?” Dubh shot her an incredulous look. “You are either brave or stupid.”

“It’s what I was told to do. If you’re afraid, then leave.”

Dubh’s brows drew together in a frown. “You forget that I was raised in Faerie. But even I know to use caution when approaching strangers. Our people are wild and dangerous, and even those of us who are lords among them must tread carefully in such a situation.”

“Well, don’t you just sound like a damned politician?” Pook rolled his eyes. “‘Those of us who are lords’—what a load of crap.”

He stepped up to the tree, beneath its spreading branches, and rapped soundly on the bark with his knuckles. “Hey! Anybody home? Open the door, you got visitors!”

Nothing happened. After staring at the tree for a moment, Pook shrugged and turned back to them. “Ain’t nobody home.”

Even though there was no wind, the branches above his head began to creak.

Pook jumped back in alarm. The branches continued to stir, groaning as they rubbed against one another, as if the tree stretched after waking from long slumber. There came the sound of rending wood, and the trunk split open, the crack widening to reveal the hollow darkness at its center.

The branches ceased their thrashing, and silence fell. “Guess somebody was home after all,” Pook said uncertainly. “Should we...should we go inside?”

“After you,” Dubh said nastily.

Pook shot his brother a dark look—then shrugged and walked to the opening.

“Pook, wait!” Alex called, but he had already vanished inside. Swearing one of the oaths she had learned on the steamer, Alex tightened her grip on her weapon and followed him.

Darkness closed around her. The tiny blue flame at the end of the flamethrower’s nozzle should have illuminated something—there should have barely been enough room for her to fit inside by herself, let alone with Pook. And yet she felt as if she stood in the midst of a great, echoing cavern, whose walls were too far away for the light to find. A cool breeze touched her face, and she smelled fresh-turned earth and dark water.

It’s like being underground. It’s like...it’s like the basement they kept Mama in.

“Pook?” she called, trying to keep the quiver out of her voice. “Are you here?”

“Yeah. I’m here.”

He appeared out of the shadows so suddenly that she started. As her eyes began to adjust to the feeble illumination, she saw that they were indeed beneath the ground, although how they had come to be there she didn’t know. Raw earth formed the ceiling, decorated by a network of pallid roots. Moisture collected on the root hairs and dripped off, each splash waking echoes that whispered of the true vastness of the place. The floor was ancient stone, worn thin by the eons of dripping water, and treacherously slick. The walls of the round room were a mixture of crumbling stone blocks and damp earth. Here and there, an arch pierced them, opening onto blackness beyond.

“Couldn’t just send out the welcoming committee, could they?” Pook muttered. “All right, Dubh, since you know so damned much— which way?”

Dubh seemed to have regained his bearings, as if he had finally come home after a long exile. He stood straighter, and a haughty look chilled his handsome features. “Very well, then. Let’s go towards the river—most like, anything of importance will be there.”

As Dubh strode off, Pook made a face at his back. Torn between laughter and exasperation, Alex followed them, stepping carefully on the slick floor.

The tunnel Dubh chose slanted down deeper into the earth. As they walked, Alex became aware that another light had joined that of her flamethrower; after a while, she realized that the sickly bluish glow had no single source,

but seemed to emanate from nowhere and everywhere at once.

The temperature dropped, until the moisture on the walls and ceiling had become frost. Fog seeped from the ancient stones, reducing the world to shadow and mist. Pook put a hand lightly on Alex's shoulder, whether to help her navigate the dimness or to comfort her she didn't know.

From ahead came a strange rattling sound. Dubh hesitated, then squared his shoulders and plunged through the mist. As she and Pook followed, Alex became aware of the mist thinning slightly, the walls drawing back until they were standing in a small chamber. In the midst of the chamber crouched a shrunken creature that might have been either male or female for all that Alex could see of it. Its clothing consisted of a shroud of shells sewn into netting; it was the rattle of the shells that had made the sound they'd heard.

"My lords," it said in a voice like the scrape of scales over stone. "I bid you welcome."

"What do you want?" Pook demanded.

There came a cold flicker from beneath the shell-coated hood. "You are the ones who knocked on my door, yes? I offer you hospitality, and you come asking questions. This is not how things are done, oh no."

Dubh frowned in puzzlement. "I don't know you," he said.

The creature bowed in a clatter of shell-on-shell. "No, my young princeling, you do not. But I know you, oh yes. The Unseelie King banished me from Faerie these many years ago. I have lived out my sentence here in the mortal world, unable to return to the black mere where I was born."

"What did you do?" Pook asked curiously.

Alex thought she sensed anger in the thing's voice when it answered. "Such rude questions, yes. But I will answer, Tamnais. Yes, I know you, too."

"We all do," said a cold, malevolent voice just behind Alex.

She jumped and spun awkwardly, bringing up the nozzle of her flamethrower. Behind her stood a very tall, very thin woman, her lank green hair doing nothing to cover her nakedness. The fae hissed, showing ravenous teeth that were horribly the same mossy green as her hair.

"You dare," she hissed.

The fae moved, so quickly that she was only a blur. Alex got a confused glimpse of claw-like nails raking at her eyes. Instinctively, she jerked back, her finger spasming on the trigger. A jet of flame rushed out, and the green-tooth dropped back with a scream.

Pook snarled, moving to put himself between Alex and the fae. "You okay?"

"I'm fine."

The shell-coat wailed behind them. "Was it not enough that Finn Bheara banished us? Now you come to our home, bearing fire in your hands! Are you spies? Or has the King so secured his victory that he can send you to hound us? Do you think to rise in his favor even higher?"

Dubh laughed hollowly. "I don't think either of us are high in our father's favor at the moment," he said. "Why were you banished, Shell-coat and Green-tooth?"

The woman let out a frightening hiss, but she stayed well out of the range of Alex's flamethrower. Her green hair was burned, and there were blisters on her hands. "We would not follow him to battle the seelie. Any who would not join the war were banished long ago, before you were born. Camhlaidh's smooth tongue made certain that no opinions were tolerated save for his own. But surely you know this."

"Camhlaidh." Pook scowled slightly at the mention of the fae. "I can't get away from that bastard."

The shell-coat shook its head, sending up a clatter. "Leave us alone. We are nothing to you. We are no danger to Camhlaidh, to the aughisky, to no one. Leave us be, and take your fire with you."

Dubh scowled blackly. "They don't know anything. This was a waste of time"

For once, Pook didn't argue with his brother. "Come on, then." He started back the way they had come, but Dubh put out a hand to stop him.

"Don't you know you can't leave a fae dwelling the same way you came in?" he asked, sounding disgusted. "This way."

Pook rolled his eyes but followed Dubh. Keeping a tight grip on her weapon, Alex fell in behind them, guarding their backs. The shelly coat moved away from them with a clatter, then ran away deeper into the burrow, moving faster than Alex would have credited. The green-tooth, however, watched them go with malice in her eyes, until a bend in the tunnel cut her off from sight.

The dank tunnel began to slope upwards, and the roots punching through the roof grew sparser. The smell of slime and rotting fish became stronger even as the tunnel began to narrow, and Alex guessed they were heading towards the river.

The burrow ended in a small crevice between two stones, scarcely large enough to let a body pass through. Dubh climbed out immediately, but Pook hung back. When Alex threw him a questioning look, he gestured at the hole. "Go on—I'll keep an eye on things here in case those two change their minds."

Alex suppressed a shiver at the thought of the green tooth's skinny fingers grabbing her ankles while she squeezed out the hole on her belly. Moving as quickly as she could, she pulled off the flamethrower and shoved it out the hole, then clambered awkwardly through herself. She had a bad moment when the quizzing glass at her waist caught on the rock, and she thought that she might not be able to fit through after all. But then Dubh's dark hands grabbed her upper arms, pulling hard, and she popped out like a cork from a champagne bottle.

They stood surrounded by the pilings of a low pier; Dubh had to duck to keep from striking his head against the algae-slimed planks. A little reflected gaslight illuminated the area, but not enough for Alex to make out anything more

than silhouettes, and she suddenly realized how easy it would have been to ambush them as they emerged from the burrow. Wanting to get away as quickly as possible, she turned to help Pook, but he had already wormed his lithe body through the crevice and was readjusting the sash and sword at his waist.

They clambered out from under the pier, Pook helping her over the slick rocks piled around it, and onto the gray mud of the water's edge. Dubh glanced at the nearest gaslight, then back at them. The pallid light frosted his black hair, outlining the sculpted lips twisted into a sneer.

"Well," said Dubh, "if I ever want to waste another evening harassing foolish fae with little wit and even less knowledge, I know upon whom to call."

"Not like we asked you to come in the first place," Pook shot back. "Got nothing better to do, ain't that what you said?"

"And if I hadn't come, what would you have done? Wandered aimlessly about the burrow? You need me—you both do."

Pook opened his mouth, no doubt to deny it, but Alex put a hand to his arm. The muscles beneath her fingers felt drawn tight under the cocoa skin, as if he expected the argument to turn into another fistfight.

"He's right," she said with a wry twist of her lips. "Dubh, you know far more about the fae than we do—of course you do. You lived with them the first sixteen years of your life. If you're willing to help us then...then I for one am grateful."

Dubh seemed genuinely surprised at her words. Then he shrugged and looked away. "Do not put too much faith in me. I am hardly a favorite amongst the Sluagh now. When Pook took the sword instead of me...well, let us just say that some people were very disappointed."

He said that he was no longer high in his father's favor. Chernovog, that wouldn't be an easy thing. What would it be like to grow up knowing that a brother you had never even met was the heir to everything around you? How many years had Dubh spent dreaming about the day he took the sword instead, the day he finally got to show up his rival? And then, to lose even that...

It's a wonder he doesn't hate Pook outright. But, whatever he feels, he hasn't offered us any violence. She remembered the fistfight. Well, none that Pook didn't start first, anyway.

Pook pulled away from Alex but didn't say anything. Dubh shrugged, then turned and walked away, as if they had simply ceased to interest him whatsoever. Alex watched him go, then glanced at Pook. To her surprise, he had his arms folded defensively over his chest, his shoulders hunched and his head down.

"Pook? Are you all right?"

He didn't look at her. "You like him, don't you?"

"Dubh?" Alex frowned, puzzled. "Just because I don't abuse him with every breath hardly means I have affection for him. He does know things that we don't, yes, and I think he might be valuable to us. Why ask such a thing?"

Pook scuffed his boot on the dirt. "Well, he's kind of a fancy b'hoy, ain't he? Got all those princely manners and all. Talks like a book, and he's, you know, a looker I suppose."

It took her a moment to figure out what he meant. "Are you trying to ask me if I think he's handsome?"

"I guess."

Alex wryly reflected that any attempt at shaking some sense into Pook was probably doomed to fail. "He is your brother, and there is a resemblance, so I suppose he is handsome enough. But compared to you...no, I don't find him attractive in the least." Feeling as if she were doing something bold, she slipped her arm around his narrow waist.

He glanced at her through long lashes, then suddenly grinned and draped an arm around her shoulders, a position made awkward by the flamethrower's tanks. "Just checking. You heard what he said— if he was desperate enough to sleep with Darcy just 'cause he thought it would make me nuts, I figured he wouldn't hesitate with a pretty girl like you."

"I shall try to resist his charms," she said dryly, even as she privately thought that it was highly unlikely Pook's prediction would come true.

"Good." He leaned down to brush his warm lips across hers, then sighed. "Guess we better try to find a cab home, huh?"

Chapter Five

For anyone else, Duncan reflected, a private audience with the Queen of Niune would at least entail going in through the front door. No doubt there would be much bowing and scraping by minor functionaries, mingled with jealous glances from those who wondered why they were not so honored. There would be refreshments, perhaps even a light meal, attended by silent servants who would pretend to neither see nor hear the conversations of those who were supposedly their betters.

For them, however, it meant sneaking in through the back wall.

Mina didn't say anything as she draped a glamour around them both, making them invisible to the guards on the high wall, but Duncan knew his wife well enough to read her nervousness. To be honest, he was feeling somewhat nervous himself. The last time he had been at the palace, it had been as a prisoner. The Seelie Court had overpowered him and his student, Bryan Shopper, and brought them before the woman who had been Queen of Niune at the time. Bryan had been fed faery food and had his will enslaved to their enemies.

As for Duncan...he had been offered what he once had believed to be his heart's desire. The only catch had been that to gain it, he would have to betray Mina.

He had betrayed...but not Mina. There were nights when he still woke up sweating, remembering the horrible scrape of metal against bone as he ran a knife through the heart of the first woman he had ever loved.

There is no use dwelling on it, he told himself firmly. *If Dagmar has summoned us after five years, it isn't because she wants us dead. Indeed, she has never indicated anything but gratitude for killing her parents.*

They had left the brougham on a side street. Now, as they drew near the wall, Mina took the handles of his wheelchair. He started to protest, then subsided, knowing it would be easier for her to get them through the wall this way.

Stone parted before them like water, and then they were inside the palace grounds. Mina let go, and Duncan took over the task of wheeling himself along, ignoring the little voice that said he was being foolishly proud. Fortunately, a veritable army of gardeners kept the grass trimmed and any hummocks level, so that he found it easier to cross the lawn than to make his way along the street outside.

"The note didn't indicate where to meet her," he said after a few minutes, once they were out of earshot of the guards.

"There's only one place she would be," Mina replied, and turned towards the burned ruin that still loomed up against the rising moon.

The rest of the palace had been rebuilt in the last five years, but this wing had been left to decay. The faint scent of wood smoke still came from it when they drew close, and Duncan eyed the tumbled beams with trepidation. Mina might easily climb among them, but his chair would never make it.

Fortunately, there was no need to even make the attempt. A white figure appeared at the edge of the ruin, walking slowly through the grass. Bare feet showed beneath the hem of her silk gown, and a hundred seed pearls encrusting the bodice gleamed in the moonlight. Her long hair, a strange mixture of black and white, straggled across her face and reduced half of it to shadows. When she turned towards them, he thought he saw an echo of Aerin in her strange, inhuman features, and his heart flinched unexpectedly.

"You received my summons, then," she said. One of her eyes gleamed oddly in the dark, like a cat's.

"Yes, Your Majesty," he said, and bowed as deeply as was possible for him.

"There was a riot two nights ago, they say. I am told that some human gangs started it, down by the river. But I felt the heat of seelie power, as I have not felt it since my father—since Prince Roderick—died."

Duncan hid his surprise—it seemed that Dagmar was sensitive indeed, given the distance between the palace and the riots. "There was a battle, Your Majesty."

Mina cleared her throat awkwardly. Her brown eyes were narrowed, whether from distrust or simple nervousness, Duncan didn't know. "It involved the same seelie fae I told you about before, Your Majesty. The faeling who worked with him gave faery food to some of the human gangs and got them to do his fighting for him."

Dagmar's mismatched eyes betrayed nothing of her thoughts. "Tell me everything."

They did, each one supplementing the tale, reminding the other of things that had been skipped or forgotten. There was no choice but to include Pook's doings in their narrative, given that a great deal of what had happened seemed to have been provoked by his identity as Finn Bheara's son. When they had finished, Dagmar slowly sank down onto a pile of rubble, her hands flat on her thighs, as if she sat on a throne.

"There is a foreign power in Niune, and you have not made me aware of it?" she asked, and there was a dangerous edge to the words that sent a chill through Duncan.

Mina frowned. "I told you everything I knew the last time. Your Majesty. I know that included the presence of the fae."

Dagmar waved her hand dismissively. "Not the fae. This Prince Tamnais. He is the son of the Unseelie King, yet he wanders freely in my realm, without even the courtesy of presenting himself to me?" Light flashed in the depths of her green eye. "Such an act is not that of a friendly nation."

Mina gaped. "You mean Pook?" she asked, forgetting even a pretense at manners.

Duncan could feel his heart beating hard in his throat. "Your Majesty, Tamnais didn't even know his given name until a few nights ago, let alone that he had royal blood. I am sure that he would be the first to tell you that he is most certainly not the representative of any nation, friendly or otherwise. Indeed, he harbors great mistrust and anger towards his royal parents, and I doubt he would represent them even if they asked. Which they have not, I might add."

"You say he would tell me this," Dagmar said. "Then he shall. I shall have it from his own lips. Tomorrow night, you will bring him to me, that I may decide for myself. Bring your niece as well." Her eyes narrowed suddenly. "And come in through the *front* door."

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The tolling of the city bells woke Alex the next morning. Exhausted after having been up for most of the night, she stumbled blearily to the washstand and splashed tepid water on her face. Her arms ached from lugging around the flamethrower, and she sincerely hoped that the fae of Dere took tonight off so that she could catch up on her sleep.

By the time she finally stumbled down the stairs into the shop, Pook was already waiting on the front stoop. A newsboy had stopped to talk to him; the youth looked disappointed when Pook broke off their conversation and went inside. Alex shut the door on the boy with a resigned sigh.

Pook said his good-mornings with a kiss instead of words. "I brought us some rolls—you had breakfast yet?" he

asked when they were done. Alex wondered if the rolls were yet another in the unending line of gifts from the bakery sisters—and if they knew how many of their gifts had ended up in her stomach.

Before she could reply, however, the bell over the door rang. Peering over Pook's broad shoulder, she saw Mina and Duncan come in. "Good morning," she called. "Pook's brought rolls, if you would like some."

"I fear that we have no time for rolls," Duncan said. He looked uncharacteristically put out this morning, and Alex felt a little flutter of fear in her belly, irrational though she knew it to be.

Pook looked puzzled. "Why not?"

"Because you and I have some shopping to do. Alexandrea, I fear you and Mina will have to manage without us for a few hours."

Alex exchanged a confused look with Pook. "What for?" he asked.

Duncan eyed up Pook's worn trousers and threadbare shirt, his hob-nailed boots and raggedly-cut hair. "We are going to a tailor, Tamnais. I greatly fear that we must make you as presentable as possible by tonight. You have an audience with the Queen."

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One time, a couple of years back, Pook had seen a runaway omnibus. Something had spooked the horses bad, and they had gone crazy, dashing through the streets and taking the bus with them. It had finally crashed, one wheel hitting a curb and tilting the whole thing over. Just before that had happened, though, he'd gotten a glimpse of the faces inside, and their helpless terror had hit him deep in the gut.

He felt like that right now, he thought as he slouched low in the seat of the cab Duncan had hired. Like maybe his whole life was the omnibus and he was just a passenger, hanging on as best he could and praying he didn't get killed when the inevitable crash finally came.

Duncan had dragged him around town all day, trying to find clothes that would make him look less like a b'hoy and more like...whatever the hell it was everybody seemed to want him to be. For the first time in his life he had clothes that nobody else had worn before him, and he didn't know how he was going to pay Duncan back for them. Not that he'd asked, either—he hadn't dared to, really.

So now he had a nice black velvet frock coat with silver buttons, a silk waistcoat that matched his eyes, and a white silk shirt with lace at collar and cuffs. Duncan had wanted him to add a pair of fancy trousers and dress shoes, but Pook had managed to dig his heels in at that point and get a kilt and pair of boots instead. People outside of the highlands didn't know anything about plaids or clans, so he didn't worry too much about the pattern, just picked a red and yellow one he liked and hoped that there weren't any clansmen at this shindig they were taking him to.

"Don't slouch, Tamnais," Duncan reprimanded. But his tone was mild, just like always. That was one of the things Pook liked about Duncan—he never yelled. Got mad, yeah—he'd been pretty upset this morning, when Alex told him and Mina that they'd been chasing the fae all over town last night by themselves—but even then he hadn't yelled. Didn't smack Pook around either, or get Mina to do it for him.

"Perhaps we should consider a stop at the barber's," Duncan said, eyeing Pook's untidy mop of hair.

Pook shrugged. "Won't stay cut if the barber ain't a faeling."

"True. Perhaps Alexandrea can trim the ends, at least. I would suggest Mina, but I fear that her idea of cutting hair involves a pair of kitchen shears and a great deal of randomness." Duncan paused, but didn't turn back to the window, which made Pook think he had more to say. "Tamnais...please remember your manners this evening, if at all possible. You have an audience with the Queen of Niune, and it is an official audience, no matter how informal. There will be others watching as well. Do try not to insult anyone."

Pook hunched his shoulders. So far as he knew, an "audience" was what gathered at a theater to see the show, but it didn't sound like Duncan was talking about that. "I ain't going to."

Duncan looked faintly pained. "And...it might be best if you don't speak any more than absolutely necessary."

Pook scowled at his shoes. So he didn't talk like a book, like Duncan and Alex. So what?

So you ain't good enough for them fancy people, b'hoy. Ain't even good enough to be a servant, far as they're concerned.

"Mina going to keep quiet too?" he asked.

Duncan paled a little at that. "Dear God, the mind boggles," he murmured. But he smiled when he said it.

"You love her," Pook blurted, then wished he hadn't.

Duncan gave him a mild look of surprise. "That was the reason I married her," he said carefully.

There were a thousand things Pook wanted to ask, but he kept them locked behind his teeth. He'd never given a lot of thought to the lack of any older males in his life, maybe because most of the men he'd known weren't the kind he wanted to end up like. He sure didn't want to turn into Fergus, beating up on everybody weaker than him. Which was kind of funny when he thought about it, because even before he'd run away, he'd realized that a lot of the other climbing boys had started to imitate the master they all hated. And Hal had talked bad about his old man, but hadn't he been turning into another just like him before he died?

Kuromori and Duncan were different, though, maybe because they were faelings and maybe because they were just made that way. He couldn't imagine talking to Duncan about personal stuff, but maybe he could talk to Kuromori, if he could catch his sensei in a good mood when Alex wasn't around.

Something of what he was thinking must have showed on his face, because Duncan cautiously asked, "Was there something you wished to talk about, Tamnais?"

Pook flushed and shrugged, looking back at his shoes again. "No."

What am I going to say? That I'm in love with Alex, even if she don't love me? He's got to think I ain't good enough for her. And I guess that'd be true.

Maybe I could be, though. Maybe...if I do what everybody wants, if I pretend to be a prince like they want, that would be different?

Maybe Alex can't love a nobody like Pook, but what about Tamnais?

The cab pulled to a halt in front of Duncan and Mina's house; the plan was to change clothes and meet up with Mina and Alex there, before a carriage sent by Queen Dagmar came to pick them up.

Damn. I'm going to meet the Queen tonight. Imagine that.

He took the wheelchair out, then Duncan. Duncan wasn't very gracious about being moved around, but then he never was, even when it was Mina helping him, so Pook didn't take it personally. The bronze gates were unlocked and open, and light showed from the windows of the house.

"It seems that the ladies have arrived ahead of us," Duncan said, wheeling determinedly ahead of Pook as if to prove that he could get around by himself after all.

Pook carried in the boxes with his clothes and went up to the guest room where he'd stayed before. Well, he hadn't really ever slept there, just taken a bath and changed his clothes. There wasn't enough time for a bath, so he just washed up quick, marveling at the miracle of water coming out of a tap right there in the house.

He took off his sash and sword and tucked them into the back of a tall wardrobe. Duncan had told him that nobody was allowed to come before the queen carrying any weapons, and that included Bob.

Once he had changed and brushed his hair so that it mostly covered his pointy ears, he wandered back out in the hall. Mina and Alex were at the lift, talking together, and his breath caught in his throat at the sight. Alex had on the same dress she'd worn at the equinox, and the soft green brought out the roses in her cheeks and found sparks of red hidden in the masses of her long brown hair. She'd taken it out of its usual bun, and it hung loose to her waist, except for a few bits near her face that were pinned back to keep it out of her eyes. The gown bared her shoulders and showed off her breasts and waist, and she looked so soft and warm that he ached all the way down to his toes.

Maybe I could be good enough for her.

He was lost—he knew it then. He'd been lost, maybe, since the day he was born, or since he dreamed of that far-off country where she had been. But it came home to him suddenly, in a way it hadn't before, that if he screwed things up with her now, that if he failed her somehow, there'd never be another chance for him.

And it scared him to death.

Chapter Six

By the time the carriage pulled up in front of the palace, Pook's gut felt like he had swallowed a lead weight.

The ride over had been pretty quiet—nobody was in the mood for talking. Alex had reached for his hand, though, which made him feel a little better. Her too, maybe; he hoped so, anyway. He could tell something was wrong; her face had settled into a carefully-schooled mask, and she held herself ramrod straight. Asking her what had made her so nervous was impossible, though, with Mina and Duncan both sitting right across from them and no privacy to be had.

When the footman opened the door and Pook got his first glimpse of the palace, his nerve almost failed altogether. *I'll just wait with the carriage, thanks.* The place was *huge*—bigger than the whole block he'd lived on with the Rat Soldiers. Light spilled out of the windows, and he didn't know if it was gaslight or some really clear-burning candles, because it wasn't anything like the smoky flickering lanterns he was used to.

No way did he have any business going in a place like that, no matter what kind of fancy clothes he had on. But the footman was giving him an impatient look, so he forced his wobbly legs to move and climbed out. Alex let him help her down; her long hair brushed over the back of his hand, soft as silk. While the footmen were busy helping Duncan, he bent over and whispered, "Don't let me do nothing too stupid, okay?"

She gave him a smile, which was at least better than the grim expression she'd been wearing for the last hour. "I'm sure you'll do fine."

He wasn't nearly so sure, but he let it pass. One of the footmen started towards the palace, and Duncan and Mina followed, so it was go or get left behind. He offered his arm to Alex, who took it with another small smile, and prayed that he didn't trip over his own feet or step on her skirt.

Now wouldn't that be the thing—end up ass over elbows, with my kilt around my waist and my tosh hanging out in the air.

Once they were inside, Pook didn't know where to look first. Portraits crowded the walls, and all kinds of fancy vases and statues stood around on pedestals or in niches. The floors were marble, with brightly-colored carpets on them that he would bet cost more than anything he'd owned in his life. Everything was gilded, from the candlesticks to the picture frames, and his fingers started to itch. Could he get away with pinching something here—just a little something, that nobody would notice missing?

And the people! Their clothes made even the fancy stuff he had on look like old rags. Jewels winked at him from rings and necklaces, even watch fobs. He wondered what they were all doing here, if there was some kind of a party, or if they were just hanging out with their pals. What the hell did rich people do, anyway?

They got to a door that seemed small in comparison to everything else, and the footman left them there. Some

kind of crusher was standing in front of the door, but he had on a different uniform than the city watch wore, so maybe he was a personal guard instead. He knocked politely on the door, then opened it for them when a feminine voice called permission to enter.

Pook's first impression of the little room was that it was really crowded. Not with people, which made him feel better, but with stuff: furniture, books, statues, gewgaws, and knickknacks. There were more portraits here, too, and he wondered if the queen kept a whole army of painters hiding somewhere turning them out.

Three tall windows opened onto the gardens, and Pook breathed easier to feel the cool night air on his face. Long, gauzy draperies waved in the breeze like the hands of ghosts, and he almost took a step towards them before realizing that a woman stood there.

Her white dress had blended so well with the draperies that it had fooled him a minute; he felt Alex start on his arm when the woman moved into the room, and knew he wasn't the only one. On second assessment, the figure was more girl than woman, no older than him or Alex. A faeling, too, and although to his right eye she looked normal, his left could see through the mask she put between her and the world.

Underneath the glamour, she was one of those skinny types, like Mina, with long hair that was a weird mixture of black and white. Her eyes were large and a little slanted, like his; one was green and the other brown. The bones of her face were prominent, and if she'd had a bit more padding on her she might even have been pretty.

"Lord RiDahn," she said to Duncan. And then her eyes went past him to Pook, and she froze, staring like she'd never seen a freak like him in her whole life.

Duncan bowed, and Mina and Alex were both curtsying, but the girl wasn't even paying them any attention. Pook didn't know what to do, so he just stood there, feeling dumb while Duncan said, "Your Majesty, please allow me to present Prince Tamnais."

Pook remembered then that he had been supposed to bow, but he hadn't, and now he wasn't sure if it was too late or not. "Nice to meet you," he said, and gave a little bob of his head, to make up for missing his cue earlier.

Mina shot him a look that let him know he'd already screwed something up, though damned if he knew what. But the girl—the queen, he corrected himself—just gave him a big smile. "It is a great pleasure to meet you," she said, crossing the room and stopping just a little way away. "I understand you've been in Niune for some time?"

"Oh yeah, I'm from up in the highlands, near Gloachamuir," he said. Relief flooded through him—why had Duncan and Mina been so nervous about all this? The queen—Dagmar—was just a regular cherry, no different from most anyone else he'd met. What the hell had they thought he was going to do to offend her, piss on the carpets or something?

"Really?" she said, like she thought it was fascinating. "I've never been there, although the crown owns several estates in the area. Perhaps you have seen them?"

Pook blinked. "Me? Nah, we didn't clean the chimneys in any fancy places. 'Cept this one tavern; it was pretty nice, had brass on the bar and everything."

Dagmar seemed a little taken aback at this, but then she smiled again. "I see. Then...what do you think of my home here?" she gestured vaguely at their surroundings with one hand.

"It's real nice," he said, figuring it damn well ought to be if it was a palace. "Lots of portraits. Don't see none of you, though."

"No." Her smile faltered, and she put a hand distractedly to her hair. "It isn't as if I could show an artist my true face, after all. I suppose one will have to be done eventually, of my public face...but it would be nice for someone to see me as a truly am, beneath the glamour."

She sounded so sad that he felt sorry for her. Who would have thought a queen would be lonely? If he'd even thought about it before, he would have figured that she would be living the high life up here, with lots of food and plenty of booze and not a care in the world.

"Well, I done some sketches," he said, thinking maybe he could make her feel better. "From memory and all, mostly, but I could maybe do one for you if you want."

He'd meant later on, but she jumped on the idea, and before he knew it she had dragged paper and a pen out of a desk, and sat down near the light so he could draw her. So he did, trying to be careful about it, the way he was when he was doing a memorial or something other people would look at. Mina started talking about the fae, going on about Camhlaidh and Padgett and God only knew what else, but Pook tuned her out, falling deep into himself the way he did when he drew.

Almost before he knew it, he was done, and he had to say himself that it was a pretty good job. Nothing like the real paintings hanging all over the place, but maybe not bad for a sketch that was just going to get hidden away in a drawer anyway.

When he handed it over, Dagmar just stared at it for a moment, her eyes wide and her lips slightly parted, until he started to get nervous and wondered if it wasn't as flattering as he'd thought after all. But then she swallowed and gave him a grateful smile. "I...thank you. Thank you so much." She glanced at the clock above the cold hearth and sighed. "I'm afraid that there are things I must do this night, no matter how badly I wish I could put them off. But I...that is, there will be a masquerade on the solstice, to honor my great-grandmother's triumph over the Grynithian invasion. Perhaps you will come to that? All of you," she added, the color rising to her cheeks.

"Thanks," he said, thinking that was really nice of her. His first judgment had been right—just a regular cherry after all.

As they left the small drawing room, Alex found herself trying to breathe deeply against the hurt encircling her heart. The colorful crowd of courtiers, nobles, and hangers-on that loitered in the audience room outside made her think of visitors at a menagerie. *Except that they are both the watchers and the caged animals at the same time.*

Chernovog, get me out of here.

But her prayer was not to be answered. A small man hastened over to block their path. Although he wore what was probably his best clothing, it was less fine than that of most of the other nobles she had seen loitering about.

“Lord RiDahn,” the man said, bowing hastily. The light from the chandeliers reflected from his balding head. “Please forgive my boldness. I am Jason RiGrath. Our estates border one another.”

A line sprang up briefly between Duncan’s brows, then smoothed away again. “Ah! I recall your father well, Lord RiGrath. It is a pleasure to see you again.”

“Oh indeed, indeed!” RiGrath effused. “I can’t tell you how happy and surprised we all were when we found out that you were still alive and had merely been abroad all those years! Imagine someone making a silly mistake like that!”

“A bureaucratic mishap, nothing more,” Duncan said dryly. “All me to introduce my wife, Wilhelmina, and my niece, Alexandrea.”

“A pleasure, a pleasure.” RiGrath bowed over both their hands, then waved over a young man who looked so much like him that Alex guessed their relationship before being told. “This is my son, Hubert.”

The starched collar of Hubert’s coat looked as if it were trying to strangle him. “Miss RiDahn,” he said, and took Alex’s hand.

Her heart clenched, and it was all she could do not to tear away from his slightly-damp fingers. She heard herself return some platitude, heard RiGrath babble something about a proposed outing somewhere. It all seemed very far away, however.

I know that look, she thought bleakly as Hubert beamed at her. Like a man sizing up a heifer in the market, wondering if she will give good milk or bear strong calves.

The walls were closing in on her; she couldn’t breathe. “I need some fresh air,” she mumbled.

Hubert seemed about to offer to accompany her, but Pook beat him to it. Catching her by the elbow, he escorted her through the nearest exit, a pair of glass-paned doors leading out into the garden.

Once outside, Alex took a deep breath and stared up at the sky. Her face felt hot, either from embarrassment or shame or fear, she didn’t know. Several other couples lingered near the doors, enjoying the night air, so she kept moving, desperate to get away from everyone.

They came upon a reflecting pool deep in the garden; swans slept on its still surface, their heads tucked beneath their great wings. Alex walked to the edge of the pool and stared in; only her shadow looked back, black against the blaze of stars.

“You all right?” Pook asked uncertainly. “Need me to do anything? Get you something to drink, maybe?”

She shook her head. “No. No, I’m not all right. I thought I was *done* with this nonsense, with being paraded about like some kind of brood mare, having to meet stupid boys who would marry me to make their fathers happy and go on tugging the maids in the back halls while I pretended not to notice...” She stopped, afraid that she might start to cry and make her humiliation complete.

“That Hubert poofter?” Pook asked after a moment. “I don’t get it. I mean, he and his dad just came up to say hello, didn’t they?”

“Nobility never just says hello, Pook,” she said bitterly. “They’re always looking for some angle. You heard Lord RiGrath—his estates border Duncan’s. It would make perfect sense to arrange a marriage between Hubert and I, so that the lands—and their incomes—could be merged. It would benefit both families. No one loses. Except me.”

He stepped closer; she could see his shadowy reflection in the pool, but it gave her no clues as to his expression. “You really thinking about marrying that fancy boy?”

“Chernovog, save me, of course not. But Duncan and Mina may be thinking it.”

“You really think so?” he asked doubtfully. “‘Cause I don’t see them doing that. It don’t seem like them.”

Stop this. She pressed her fingers briefly to her eyes, then dropped her hands. “No. I’m being irrational. I just...I can’t seem to help myself. I hate being here, Pook. I hate it. And now, thanks to your flirting with the queen, we have to come back again.”

“I wasn’t flirting!”

The hurt in her heart turned to anger. “Oh honestly, Pook! Smiling at her, offering to draw her portrait, flattering her with every breath— you’ve never done any of that with me!”

She could feel his eyes on her, but she refused to look at him. “That ain’t true,” he said at last, quietly. “You know it ain’t. I was just being nice to her—Duncan said don’t insult anybody, so I didn’t.”

Alex closed her eyes, feeling stupid and petty. She knew that she was lashing out at him for no good reason, other than being at court had brought up more bad memories than she had ever expected. “Just...forget it.”

“No.” He moved closer, then gently ran the backs of his fingers down her cheek. “I’m sorry, baby. I ain’t so good with words.”

She wasn’t sure what he meant by that, until he slid his arms around her waist, turned her to him, and kissed her.

She had thought that he had kissed her with passion before, but this...this was utterly different, as if he had held back every other time. His mouth was hot on hers, teasing her with lips and teeth and tongue, until suddenly taking absolute possession. One arm tightened around her waist, locking her against him, but his other hand roamed freely, first shaping her bottom, then sliding up to mold the contours of her breast.

Alex arched against him, her body consumed by a fierce yearning. Everything felt so good, too good, and she wanted more, her need an aching hollow that demanded to be filled. *We have to stop*, she thought, in whatever portion of her brain retained coherence. *This is too public...someone could come along at any moment...*

But the thought seemed unimportant compared to the desire that seared all her senses. Pook's mouth left hers, trailing kissing down her neck, and she bent her head back to give him access. His thumb brushed over her nipple through the layers of cloth that separated them, and she whimpered with need. Her hands explored his shoulders, the muscles hard underneath the softness of the velvet coat.

Pook broke off suddenly, his breathing ragged, the flecks in his eyes burning bloody red, hot and dark with desire. "Ain't done *this* with anyone else," he whispered hoarsely.

She started to say his name, torn between the desire to drag him down onto the grass and have her way with him, and the reasoning that said they should return to the palace now, before things got out of hand. But movement out of the corner of her eye caught her attention; with a startled gasp, she pulled away, her face starting to heat.

In the brief instant she had, she saw that the movement had not come from some unwelcome interloper. One of the swans had awakened and lifted up on its hind legs, its body impossibly far out of the water. The enormous white wings unfolded, then beat strongly: once, twice, thrice.

On the third beat, a wall of wind blasted out from the swan, striking them with enough force to hurl them to the ground. The hot wind seared Alex's skin, and she tasted the taint of seelie magic on her tongue, like dust and ground glass.

The other swans took to the sky, hissing in displeasure and fear. Pook cried out and flung out his hand; ice skimmed across the surface of the pool, but it was too late. The fae in the guise of a swan had already gained the air along with the rest of the flock. Even as Alex watched in befuddled horror, it wheeled sharply, coming back towards them. Its body blurred, transforming into that of a slender woman with feathers in place of hair, her eyes black and round as the bird's.

Wind blasted them again, and a swirling mixture of dust and gravel from the garden paths pelted their skin. Squinting against the stinging debris, Pook gained his feet and staggered towards the swan maiden. Both his hands were balled into fists, and Alex remembered in despair that he had been forced to leave his sword at home.

No! Alex tried desperately to think what to do. She had no weapons, and her magic was barely strong enough to perform simple glamours in the dead of winter. With the onset of the warmer months, nothing she could do would even give the seelie fae a moment's pause.

"There's nothing...except for..."

Pook staggered, driven to his knees by the fell wind. A dozen shallow cuts on his face and hands leaked blood across his dark skin, but so far he seemed largely unharmed.

"How delightful," said the fae in a voice like the rush of wings. She took a step towards him, her alabaster feet barely seeming to touch the soft grass. "I come to watch for the abomination who rules here, and find the very Prince of the Sluagh within my grasp. There will be much rejoicing in Faerie this night, when I bring your head with me before Queen Siubhan."

Alex tore one of the pins from her hair and lunged forwards. The point of the steel pin pierced the swan maiden's foot, driving through skin and scraping off bone. The fae screamed in startled agony; hot, golden blood sizzled out of the wound, stinging Alex's skin. Then the swan maiden jerked away, tearing the pin free from her burning flesh.

"Little worm!" she cried, and spread her arms like wings.

Pook tackled the fae from behind, knocking them both into the reflecting pool. For an instant, the ice he had created earlier held under their weight; then it shattered, dumping them into the dark water. The surface boiled with waves, making it impossible to tell what transpired beneath. Then Pook's head broke the surface, his black hair hanging in his eyes as he gasped and choked.

Alex thrust her hand out to him; he grabbed it, and hauled himself up out of the water. The swan maiden emerged after him, snatching at his ankle. Twisting around, Pook kicked her hard in the face with one of his boots. Her head snapped back, and she sank stunned beneath the water.

Even Alex could feel the surge of power from him, like a breath of ice on a summer's day. The entire pool froze solid in an instant, locking the fae's body in the cold depths.

Pook was sopping wet, but Alex didn't care. She flung her arms around him for a moment, then leaned back and frantically ran her hands over his skin, wiping blood away and searching for any worse damage. "Chernovog, Pook, are you all right?"

"I'm fine." He started to climb to his feet, then winced. "Think she gave my ankle a good twist, though."

"Here—lean on me." She slipped one arm around his slender waist, felt a little of his weight settle with his arm around her shoulders. Water from his coat instantly soaked through her dress.

"Thanks. That was some quick thinking you did there, with that pin and all. Real good."

The sound of running footsteps came through the ornate hedges surrounding the pool. A moment later, Mina appeared, holding up her skirts to keep her feet from tangling. Her dark eyes went to them, then to the frozen pool and the faint shadow of the fae trapped within. Her shoulders slumped in relief, and she wiped a wrist across her brow.

"Damn it, Pook," she said. "We can't take you anywhere."

Pook ached as he stripped off his court finery and pulled on his normal clothes. The kilt was muddy, and the coat had a rip in the sleeve, and the whole lot was soaking wet from his dip in the pond. He cringed at the thought of how

much it had all cost, and how much it might take to repair it. *If Duncan expects me to help pay for it, he's going to be disappointed.*

He carried the wet clothes out into the hall, where he ran into Mina, who told him to leave the lot in the bathroom where it could drip. His ankle still hurt a little, although he didn't think it was sprained.

Alex was staying there for the night, so that let him off guard duty. After saying his goodnights, he left and turned his footsteps down towards the Blackrush and the slums around the wharfs. Some of the buildings that had burned in the riots had been knocked down already, and he stared at the vacant lots, feeling an unease that he couldn't quite name stir in his stomach.

He put a glamour over himself, so that to anyone mortal he would appear to be a fair-skinned, middle-aged man with an iron collar around his neck. That way, if the members of any rival gang happened to spot him on his way down to Rat Soldier territory, they'd leave him alone instead of kicking the crap out of him for trespassing.

Only he hadn't seen anyone from the gangs. Nor had he seen much in the way of vagrants; even Mad Carla was gone from Whiffle Street, and she'd held court with the pigeons there since before he'd been born. The usual beggars were keeping a low profile, too.

The reason became clear soon enough. The streets were crawling with crushers. Uniformed members of the city police patrolled every alley and thoroughfare, their hands hovering near their revolvers, as if they couldn't wait for an excuse to shoot somebody.

They must still be all stirred up over the riots. The thought left him worried. How was Rose making her living now? Or Darcy? Or any of the others?

"What if they need me? What if they need me, and I ain't been there for them?"

They don't want me—said so themselves, didn't they? Wouldn't take my help even if I gave it to them.

Unless they've changed their minds. Maybe they've got over being mad. They might take me back. Might be glad to see old Pook for once.

It was pure fantasy, and he knew it, but the notion was hard to let go. *At least they got the river. Don't have to just make their living on the streets, right? Rat Soldiers always did good by the river, running stuff up and down it, like those damned guns. They'll be okay.*

The juxtaposition of the streets he had lived on for five years with his earlier visit to the palace made both seem a little unreal. *Who would've thought that somebody like me would get to meet the queen?*

Which world do I belong in? He was a prince now, wasn't he? Shouldn't he feel more comfortable at the palace than down here in the slums? *Then again, a real prince wouldn't get his feet dirty walking down here, would he?*

Dubh had, of course, but that was different, because he'd been looking for Pook and probably would have steered clear if he'd had a choice. Dubh had been raised a prince; he probably knew all the fancy manners.

I did all right, though. Dagmar didn't sneer at me, did she? Didn't kick me out, or tell the guards to have me tossed in the dungeon.

Just when he thought he wasn't going to have any luck that night, he spotted Rose hovering near the entrance to an alleyway, right at the edge of the light, as if ready to duck back into the shadows the second she saw a crusher. Relief surged through him, and Pook dropped his glamour and hurried across the street. "Rose! Hey, Rose!"

After the things she'd said to him the last time he'd seen her, he wasn't sure how well she would take his suddenly showing up again. Her eyes widened in shock, and for a minute he thought she was going to bolt the other way. Instead, she ran the last few steps and flung her arms around him. "Pook! Oh, God, Pook, I can't believe it's you!"

Startled but gratified, he returned the hug. She was even skinnier than usual, and it made him worry. "Hey, Rosie-o, you should've known I'd come around and check on you. Crushers been pretty bad for business, huh?"

Rose wiped her eyes and sniffled. "That ain't the half of it, Pook. God, you don't know how awful it's been!"

"Ain't had the best time of it myself," he said wryly. He dug a cigarette out of his pocket and lit it, then passed it to Rose before firing up another for himself. "Where are the rest of the Soldiers, then?"

Rose's hand shook as she took a long drag on the cigarette. "There ain't no Soldiers anymore, Pook."

It felt like a punch to the gut. He might not have been welcome in the gang anymore, but even so he'd thought they would have regrouped, maybe got some new b'hoys, and kept on. "What do you mean? What happened?"

Misery aged Rose's face into that of a much older woman. "Hal died, Pook. That crazy girl with the flamethrower set him on fire, when we...when we had you locked up. Meg disappeared in the riots—I don't know what happened to her. And Darcy...the crushers got her. They hung her in the prison yard for starting the riots."

Shock robbed him of breath. *Darcy, dead?* It didn't seem possible.

Most times, gang members lived hard and died young, a fate Pook had always figured he was headed for without question. But Darcy wasn't like everybody else. She was tough and mean as a snake, and even though he'd never liked her much, he'd always figured she'd be the last one standing.

He sank down onto the curb. Rose sat down by him, and they leaned on each other in silence. After a while, Pook dug into his pockets and brought out all the money he had. Sleeping in the alley to guard Alex had at least saved him some rent, although it sure as hell wasn't very comfortable, so he had more coin than he might have had otherwise. He pressed it into Rose's hand; she took it without qualm.

"Thanks, Pook. So...things going all right with you?"

"I guess." He stood up. "I ought to be going."

Pook walked back to his squat in the alley, his steps as slow as if he dragged weights on his legs. He felt adrift, lost, as if some important part of his own identity had been taken away. *It's really gone. There ain't no going back to*

the way things were. I got to forget about it. Forget about the Soldiers. Maybe...maybe forget about Pook, too.

Everybody wanted him to be this Tamnais b'hoy, that was damned clear. Wanted the prince of the unseelie fae, not some ragged dustbin kid. Wanted somebody like Dubh, maybe, with manners and fancy ways of talking, who wouldn't embarrass them in front of the queen.

If I had been with the Soldiers...with Darcy...could I have saved her? Or would they have hung me, too?

Feeling cold and tired, he crawled under the stairs and lay down. He wrapped his arms around himself; it was the only comfort he had.

Chapter Seven

Alex took a step back from her work, moving closer to the window in the vain hope of catching the slightest breeze. In the last few weeks, the weather had taken a sudden turn, apparently deciding that spring was over-rated and it was time to go directly to summer. The stifling air hung motionless and heavy over Dere; enormous flies buzzed and crawled, and hordes of mosquitoes emerged from the stagnant gutters. The stench of yard and street grew rank, but closing the windows against it was out of the question.

Svarog burns his fires high this year, Alex thought sourly. In all her life, she had never felt such heat. Mina assured her that it was unusual—for so early in the year, at least. In high summer, though, this was the norm for Dere, and Alex wondered how anyone could stand it.

A knock on the door pulled her out of the lethargy that the heat had lain over her. It was Sunday, and the shop was closed, so there was no one else to answer the door. With a weary sigh, she trudged down the stair and saw Pook peering in through the window.

I should get him a key, she thought, then smiled to herself. Most people would be hesitant to give a confirmed thief the key to their homes, especially if said home contained a store with a till.

Vagabond lifted her head and gave a half-hearted meow when Pook came in, then went back to sleep stretched out full-length on the counter. Pook's brown skin glistened with sweat, and his black hair stuck to his forehead. His startling gray eyes were watery and rimmed in red; the bright sunlight of summer bothered his vision, he had said, and gave him a perpetual squint whenever he went out in the day.

I may not have much in the way of magic, but at least that's something I can help with.

Alex silently handed him a small case. Startled, he opened it and removed the contents. "What's this?"

"A pair of spectacles with smoked lenses. I think I got them dark enough to block out the worst of the glare from the sun, but if not let me know, and I'll redo them for you."

Grinning in delight, he put them on, then laughed and flung his arms around her. "Thank you!"

"You're most welcome." She pulled back and waved a hand in front of her nose. "You need a bath."

"Sorry. I was over at Kuromori's, getting the crap kicked out of me as usual."

"I see." She smiled and hugged him to show that she didn't really mind that he was sweaty. "Has Bob displayed any magic powers yet?"

"Nah." Pook patted the sword's hilt. "Maybe he's shy. Or maybe he's just a lump of faery-metal that I'm stuck carrying around town for no good reason."

"You're improving in your swordsmanship, though. Kuromori said so."

Pook shrugged. "Maybe. Anyway, I thought I'd stop by, see what you was doing."

Alex sighed, remembering her project upstairs. "Nothing useful, I fear. That is, I had an idea, but I don't know that it's a terribly good one. Come on up for a bit and I'll show you."

Alex had tacked a map of Dere onto one wall of her sitting room; Pook gave it a puzzled look as he came up the stairs. "What are the pins for?"

That morning, Alex had carefully cut out small squares of red and yellow paper and begun pinning them onto the map. Feeling a little silly—she was going to look stupid if her idea turned out to be wrong—she said, "I was thinking about how badly Mina wanted to know where the seelie fae are, and what they might be doing right under our noses. Working the vision spell with Fox didn't help, but I thought that perhaps there might be another way, one that doesn't rely on magic. Do you remember what Dubh said the day of the riots? The seelie fae have been using mortal blood to mark the boundaries of the battlefield."

"I remember. So each pin is where somebody got killed, right?"

Gratified that he had seen it so quickly, she nodded. "So far I've marked every fatality that I know came from the influence of the seelie. Here are the riots. And here are the deaths you told me about, that occurred when your...gang...fought another."

"Yeah." His voice was flat, his eyes shadowed.

"It occurred to me that there might have been more murders that we don't know about," she went on, not wanting to give him the opportunity to think too long about the gang he had lived for, and that had betrayed him. "The seelie fae probably had other agents in the city. So I've been going back through the newspapers, looking for any mention of people dead by violence that seems to match the pattern. I'm marking those in yellow, to indicate that I'm not certain of them."

He nodded. "Makes sense. You need help?"

"No, I'm fine. It would be nice to have someone to talk to, though."

Unless you have something else you need to attend to, of course.”

He flashed her a grin that made her weak in the knees. “Nope. I’m all yours.”

While Alex sat on the floor amidst her stacks of papers, carefully sorting through the news columns and their tales of woe, Pook sprawled in a chair and sketched with a borrowed pencil and paper. They talked as they worked, not of things of import but only those little matters that make up a life. Pook told her about the time he and his friend Rose had vandalized a famous statue, an exploit that he seemed to hold in high regard as proof of his boldness and daring. In turn, Alex described some of Vagabond’s antics to him. They both complained about the heat.

This is comfortable, she thought, surprised to find it so. It seemed that they had reached a point where they could relax in one another’s company and simply enjoy spending time together.

Not that we’ve had many opportunities to relax. It seems half the time, something is trying to kill us.

“I think that’s all,” she said at last, putting a final pin into place and stepping back. “I went back six months in the papers—I don’t think I had to go that far, but I wanted to be certain.”

The map displayed a small concentration of red markers, and a much larger scattering of yellow ones. Pook put aside his pencil and paper and came over to look, a slight frown on his face. “Okay. So what is this supposed to tell us?”

“If these truly do mark the battlefield that the fae have set out for themselves, it should at least let us know where the confrontation will take place.” Alex chewed on her lower lip thoughtfully, then picked up a ruler. Careful not to disturb the markers, she laid it against the map and began to draw lines, connecting points. When she was done, she placed a single white marker on the spot where the lines intersected. “There. That’s it—the heart of the battlefield.”

“Damn—that’s smart,” Pook said, casting her an admiring glance.

She felt a blush touch her cheeks and silently cursed her fair complexion. “I might be wrong. Even if I’m right...what do we do about it?”

Pook grinned and slapped the hilt of his sword where it stuck through the sash about his waist. “We go take a look, that’s what.”

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“Ooh, a fair!” exclaimed Fox, clapping her hands together in excitement.

“You sure this is the right place?” Pook asked.

Alex felt her shoulders slump. Before going to locate the spot she had marked as the heart of the fae battleground, they had stopped by Duncan and Mina’s house. Fox had been there as well, and after a quick explanation, they had all set out together, following Alex’s direction to...here.

Wherever “here” is.

The Blackrush flowed past only feet away, its scummy surface flat beneath the harsh, cloudless sky. Although they were close to the wharves, the pier and boardwalk in front of them no longer served to dock ships, if indeed they ever had. Instead, colorful tents crowded the wooden planks, their cheerful pennants hanging limp in the heat. Shouts and the sounds of brass bands came from many, and the smell of cooking food and beer overwhelmed even the stink of the river.

It looked as if half the population of Dere had decided to join them. Hundreds—perhaps thousands—of people packed the tents and the boardwalk. Tradesmen rubbed shoulders with market girls and indentured workers—this was strictly a working-class affair, it seemed. Despite the oppressive heat, most of them appeared to be enjoying themselves; bursts of laughter and song floated out across the water.

“What is this place?” Alex asked, feeling as out of depth as she had the first day she’d stepped off the dock. *I’ll never get used to such crowds. Never.*

“The Crawl,” Pook said, as if that explained everything.

“Ballor Park is its less-colloquial name,” Duncan said, holding up one long hand to shade his eyes from the glare of sunlight off the river. “I believe it began as a small carnival, which gradually grew into something of an entertainment district. It shuts down during the winter months, for obvious reasons, but clearly it has reopened for the season.”

“Not the most likely place for a faery war,” Mina commented wryly. Then she shrugged and straightened the bowler hat that perched atop her short hair. “But we’re here, so we might as well look around.”

“Indeed. A bit of frivolity will not hurt any of us, and will be a welcome antidote to our recent trials.” Duncan propelled his wheelchair in the direction of the crowd, and Mina followed.

Feeling disappointed, Alex trailed after them. Pook had gone ahead, but came back when he noticed her. “Come on,” he said with a bright grin. “This will be fun!”

Grabbing her hand, he dragged her after him into the crowd. At first, all was confusion and noise. A brass band played to their left, making up in volume what it lacked in talent. A man in a gaudy red coat stood outside of a tent, loudly assuring passers-by that the wonders within were well worth the admittance fee. A sign in front of another tent promised that a play would be performed there within the hour by a “world renowned” acting troupe.

The crowds made it difficult to get Duncan’s wheelchair through; Mina cursed a group of young toughs loitering in the path, and they moved quickly out of her way. Fox stared about with her eyes wide and her mouth open, as if the color, noise, and motion had stunned her.

“Test your strength, young sir! Impress the ladies!” shouted a man indicating a device that seemed intended to measure the force delivered by swinging a mallet down onto a panel. Pook laughed and shook his head.

“Hope you ain’t impressed with that, ‘cause I ain’t exactly ready for the boxing ring,” he said to Alex.

She ran her hand lightly over the muscles of his arm; he was lean, but she had seen him unloading carts of books with relative ease. "Have I complained yet?"

"No. That's more my style, though." He gestured to a stall featuring a ring-toss game.

"Wager you I do better," Mina broke in with a wicked grin.

All three of Mina's rings ended up on the floor. Pook's first two throws missed, but the third neatly looped around one of the bottles. The prize was a scarlet ribbon, which he tied into Alex's hair.

"The games are all rigged," he said as they walked away. "The rings are made so they ain't even all the way around—gets the balance off, right? But if you're smart, and they're all made about the same, you can use the first couple of tosses to get the feel for it."

Mina snorted. "I should have known."

"A faeling could really clean up here. A little glamour, to make it look like the mark missed when he really didn't, and there you go. Wouldn't even have to worry about getting caught." Pook shook his head wistfully. Duncan looked mildly scandalized at the notion, but Mina burst out laughing.

They bought bottles of beer to drink as they walked; Alex was grateful for the coolness of glass and drink both. Pook draped his arm loosely around her shoulders, and she felt a flush of pleasure.

Fox had briefly disappeared into the crowds, but now wandered back. "You look like chocolate," she said to Pook. "All sweet and melty."

"Uh, thanks," he said, and cast a puzzled look at Alex. She only shrugged, although she thought that Fox was right. The sun had indeed ripened his skin to the color of the confection, and his white shirt made it look even darker.

I wonder if he tastes as sweet as he looks.

Feeling herself blush, she looked quickly for some distraction from her thoughts. The bright colors and flags of a fortuneteller's tent caught her eye, and she nodded at it. "Shall we get our future told?"

"Oh yeah, that would be a wonderful idea," Mina said dryly. She screwed her face into an ominous expression and dramatically raised her hands. "I see...I see...that you are going to die a horrible death!"

"Don't forget the part about being betrayed first," Pook added, although his grin lacked its usual exuberance.

"Of course—what kind of death would it be without any angst and mayhem first?" Mina dropped her arms and shook her head. "I've had enough of having my fortune told for a lifetime."

"I hardly think your encounters with the bean-nighe are comparable to having your fortune told by a charlatan at a carnival," Duncan pointed out. "Most likely, the woman will read your tea-leaves and tell you that you will meet a tall, dark, handsome stranger."

"Is he rich, too?"

"Naturally."

Mina laughed and reached out to brush a stray lock of hair from Duncan's face. "Oh, what the hell, I'll keep you anyway."

"Thank you. I was quite worried," he said placidly, and put a hand over her fingers.

The display of affection was unexpectedly disquieting to Alex. She looked away, uncertain what to think or feel. *I never saw Mama and Father behave towards each other with any fondness*, she realized. And of course Moira and Gosha had been unable to make any shows of affection...if they had even felt it.

But it is possible. Two people can be married to one another and remain in love. Not hate or resent one another. It was a revelation.

"What do you think, Fox?" Pook asked. "Maybe the fortuneteller will give you Mina's stranger, huh?"

Fox didn't answer. Alex looked around, thinking the mad faeling had slipped away again, only to find her standing a few feet away, staring transfixed at the building beside the fortuneteller's tent.

"Guess not," Pook said, bemused. "That leaves him for you, Alex."

She gave him a smile and squeezed his hand. "I already found my tall dark stranger, thank you."

"Fox?" Mina took a step towards the other woman, who was still not paying any attention to them. "Are you all right?"

The building Fox stared at was ramshackle at best, its once-bright paint now peeling from its boards. A massive sign hung over an entrance shielded by a tattered red curtain. "The Labyrinth—enter if you dare!" it declared. Beneath it was a barker dressed in a yellow coat and top hat, waving a cane to get the attention of passers-by.

"Try your luck within the convolutions of the Labyrinth!" he shouted at the top of his lungs. "Delve into its mysteries! Find the way through...or never come out at all! Only last week, a young gentleman went inside, never to be seen again! We are still searching for him to this day. Please, no one with a weak heart or a delicate constitution should go within!"

Alex snorted. "I hardly see how anyone could get lost inside a building less than twenty feet on a side."

"It's all part of the pitch," Pook said. He touched Fox lightly on the shoulder. "You want to go inside, Fox? We won't let you get lost, promise."

She shook her head slowly. Her fingers moved through the air, making patterns with no string. "Dark," she said; the word came out as half a moan. "Voices whispering. It's broken and it wants to be whole again."

Everyone instantly became still. "Pook?" Duncan asked quietly. "You said that you also saw a maze, when you went into visions with Fox. Is this it?"

Alex felt her heart trip. She had been so distracted by simply enjoying herself that she had forgotten their original purpose for coming here. A quick glance at Pook showed that he was frowning at the building in puzzlement, as if asking himself if it seemed familiar or not.

"Pook?" she prompted softly.

"I ain't sure," he admitted at last. "Maybe we ought to go inside?"

Fox shook her head. "Not today. It isn't the place today!"

"Maybe we should go inside anyway, just to be sure," Mina suggested.

Fox only shrugged and turned away, clearly impatient with them. "I'll stay outside with Fox," Duncan said, watching his mad student closely. "If there is anything inside, I hope you will show restraint and return instead of engaging in a battle, particularly with so many pure humans around."

Mina started for the Labyrinth, Pook on her heels. Alex followed them. "Maybe you ought to—" Pook began. Then he saw the look on her face and shut his mouth with a snap.

Mina paid the fee for the three of them and they went within. Mirrors hung just inside the entrance, their glass curved so that they distorted reflections into fantastic shapes. Pook took off the smoked lenses to get a better look, laughing and admiring their warping of his shape. The flecks in his eyes seemed to glow in the dimness, and Alex wondered if the ridiculous transformations of the funhouse mirrors appealed to his pooka nature in some basic way.

"Come on," Mina said impatiently. Pook reluctantly broke away from the mirrors and followed her.

The interior of the maze was unlit; groups of revelers bumped about in the darkness, hanging onto one another's arms to stay together. Pook took Alex's hand, and she realized that he could see perfectly well. They followed the rough wooden walls, taking various turns, until they came to a room lit by sunlight coming through a hole in the roof. A sign congratulated them on successfully reaching the center of the maze.

Mina scowled at the sign as if it had done her a personal wrong. "I don't feel anything here. You?"

Pook shook his head. "Nothing."

They made their way back out through the others who had dared the Labyrinth. Halfway out, Alex realized that the absolute darkness would give couples the perfect opportunity to kiss and cuddle without being seen, which no doubt explained its popularity. *Too bad Mina can see in the dark almost as well as Pook.*

Fox and Duncan awaited them near the exit, Duncan looking anxious and Fox bored. "Nothing," Mina said with a shrug.

Duncan's brow furrowed. "Perhaps it was not the maze of the vision, then."

"Not now," Fox broke in impatiently. "Told you. Now I want to see the horses!"

"She's been asking about horses since you went inside," Duncan said wearily. "I have tried to explain that I doubt there are any horses on the pier, but she refuses to listen."

Pook grinned, white teeth bright in his dark face. "You're wrong there. Come on!"

He grabbed Fox's hand and bolted into the crowd, dragging both her and Alex after him. "Pook!" Alex protested, trying to keep up.

"Come on! You'll love it! It's got steam power, and the organ plays itself!"

At first, his words were as puzzling as any of Fox's pronouncements. Then the crowds opened up before them, and his meaning became clear. "It's a carousel," she said, surprised. She had read about such things, but had never actually seen one, and her first glimpse stole her breath in amazement.

The carousel was enormous. Dozens of exquisitely-carved animals chased each other around in an endless circle, some of them fixed to the floor while others bobbed up and down on brass poles. Horses charged, their flared nostrils and flying manes seeming frozen in time, while gigantic hares with fanciful saddles fled before tigers and lions. Even a chicken the size of a man joined in the menagerie. Not all of the carved animals represented real creatures, however; a griffin pulled a stationary sleigh, and a hippocampus curled its scaled tail beneath its hooves.

After paying their fee, they raced each other to the carousel, laughing and ignoring the disapproving looks of those around them. Mina and Duncan finally caught up; Duncan stopped on the other side of the low fence that surrounded the carousel and kept people from sneaking on without paying. Mina, however, vaulted the fence, then threw her coin to the outraged attendant, who dropped it in his surprise.

"All the pretty animals! I hear them growling and purring. They're glad to see us," Fox said, stopping to caress a wooden tiger.

Pook chose a black horse with red nostrils and eyes. Mina mounted the hippocampus next to it, and they pretended to race, whooping and laughing as if they had both gone mad. Alex watched for a moment, smiling, then wove her way towards the center where she could get a better look at the workings. Unfortunately, they were mainly hidden from sight behind panels painted with pastoral scenes, but she could at least get glimpses and observe the action of the organ, which contented her for the moment.

They rode twice, then had to wait while Fox told all the animals that they would come back soon. Alex had no idea if Fox thought the wooden creatures were real, or if her befuddled mind was simply giving itself over to a bout of imagination.

The long spring day began to wind to a close, even though the oppressive heat remained. Duncan bought ice cream for everyone, and they strolled to the very end of the pier, where they could look out over the river. Pook lit a cigarette and rested his elbows on the railing.

"I'm sorry I was wrong about this place," Alex said at last. "Although I suppose if I had been right, we would have ended up in a battle rather than enjoying ourselves."

"I'm not certain that you were mistaken," Duncan said. A slight breeze had begun to stir; it caught his long strands of gray-brown hair and tossed them over his face. "I cannot believe that it is mere coincidence that there is a maze here. Even if it is not the one that Fox and Tamnais saw in their vision, it must mean something."

"I'm not sure that the maze had anything to do with the vision," Pook disagreed. "I still think Alex was right,

though. This is...it's one of those in-between places, ain't it?" He made a vague gesture with his hand, causing the ash to fall off the end of his cigarette. "The pier, the boardwalk—they ain't part of the river, but they ain't solid ground, neither. They're above both, but they ain't part of the sky."

Duncan's brows drew together in a thoughtful frown. "That is so. And we know the fae are drawn to such places."

"That ain't all." Pook hesitated a moment, then shrugged. "Maybe I'm crazy, right? But at the carousel, I kept thinking I felt...something. I don't know how to explain it...kind of like when you hear somebody talking, but they're in another room and you can't make out what they said, and maybe you're just hearing things and there ain't nobody there to start with."

He cast them all a hopeful look. Mina, however, shook her head. "I didn't feel anything."

"Neither did I," said Duncan.

Pook wilted. "Alex?"

"I'm sorry, Pooshka. But that doesn't mean there wasn't anything there to feel. I'm not as sensitive to magic as the rest of you."

"Either way, there's nothing here now," Mina said, running her hand back through her short, spiky hair. "Another dead end."

"Perhaps we should go find our dinner," Duncan suggested. "Alex, Tamnais, would you care to join us?"

"No. Thank you, though."

When Pook declined as well, the adults all left together. Alex went to stand at the rail beside Pook. The breeze blew his black hair about his face, making him look even more wild and fey than usual. "Can I ask you something?" he said.

"Of course, Pooshka."

"Why don't you use your magic?"

The question was so unexpected that for a moment she didn't know how to answer. "I don't have the same sort of power you do, Pook. You know that."

"That ain't what I asked." His black brows drew together in a look of concern. "It's just that I ain't never seen you use your magic. Not even once. Just wondered why. You ain't got to answer or nothing, if you don't want to."

Alex could feel her heart hammering in her chest. Taking in a deep breath, she forced herself to calm. *I could tell him. I could tell him what I did to Gosha.*

I could tell him that I'm a heartless bitch. That I'm a murderess.

"It's easier for me not to use it," she said at last. "I had to be very careful in Ruska. If I had been caught...it would not have gone well." *As it did not for Mama.* "You have to understand, Pook—it's easier for me to handle iron than it is to use magic. There's just too much human blood in my veins. I'm sorry."

"No. Don't be. I didn't mean it like that." He touched her face lightly with his fingertips, then bent to kiss her. "I was just curious, that's all."

Guilt for the partial lie cut through her. Pook believed her, trusted her, and from what she knew of his life she suspected that it wasn't a trust lightly given. *And if he learns the truth...?*

"Come," she said, putting on a smile that she hoped looked natural. "I'm hungry. Let's go find our dinner as well."

Chapter Eight

"Good evening, love. And how are ye being this fine spring day?"

Alex froze in the midst of pumping water from the cistern in the yard behind the bookstore. After returning from the more-or-less fruitless day at the Crawl and a subsequent dinner at the café with Pook, she had found herself longing to wash some of the sweat from her body. Hauling water in for a bath had seemed a small price to pay...except that she hadn't expected to encounter a fae in the yard, when she did so.

Padgett stood only a few feet away, dressed in the same gaudy coat as before. Her tattered wings stirred the warm air idly, creating a slight breeze that gently ruffled Alex's hair. Even though she didn't seem particularly threatening, Alex slowly eased back a few steps, unwilling to bet her life that Padgett was half as harmless as she tried to appear. "What are you doing here?"

Padgett grinned. "Well, I can't be going in the bookstore now, can I? Not without breaking the guarding spells and getting the dyana all riled up, that is. I'm not ignorant as to what happened to the last fae who went in there uninvited, and I'm not wanting to end up like her."

"What do you want from me?"

"Just a bit of conversation, love." Padgett took the whiskey flask from her coat pocket, sipped from it, then offered it to Alex. "No? Well, then, I'll get to me point. I thought I'd nip around tonight and see how things went for ye at the sceach."

"I met two unseelie fae who wanted to kill me." Alex tossed back her head, hoping to look defiant. *Chernovog, I wish Pook were here.* "I'd hardly say the encounter speaks much for your good intentions."

Padgett shook her head. Her carrot-orange hair sparked in the faint light leaking from the surrounding buildings. "Ye're missing the forest for the trees, love. Disappointed, I am—I thought ye were cleverer than that."

“Then why don’t you tell me what it is I was supposed to learn there?”

“Would ye believe me, if I did?” Padgett smiled, showing pointed teeth. “I’m thinking not. Ye’d figure I was out for me own gain. Which I am, but it’s yer gain as well.”

Alex had continued to back slowly towards the shop. Her heel bumped the lowest step leading up to the door, and she stopped, wondering if she could get inside before Padgett caught her, should the need arise. “You keep talking, but you haven’t said anything straight or to the point.”

Padgett chuckled. “I’m fae, me girl. Talking straight is against our nature. Ye’re not trusting me, and I can’t say as I blame ye, given all ye’ve been told. So I’ll offer ye proof that I’m not out to kill ye. My second gift is the gift of protection. If ye find yerself in a tight spot, call me name three times, and I’ll be coming to yer aid. Fair enough?”

Alex wondered if she could possibly trust the fae. *She seems so certain that I’ll need her help. What does she know that she isn’t telling me?* “Fair enough,” she agreed aloud.

Padgett smiled, put a hand to her heart, and bowed. A moment later, she was gone, as if she had never been there at all.

Relief flooded Alex, and she sank down to the step, wrapping her arms around her knees. “Chernovog, what a mess.”

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Pook stood on the riverbank and took a deep breath, hoping like hell he wasn’t about to do something stupid. His pockets were heavy with all the stuff he’d lifted from folks at the Crawl, and he wondered if it wouldn’t be smarter to hit the fences and then go out for a night of hard drinking and forget all about this craziness.

The Blackrush rolled past, lapping gently at the footing of nearest bridge. The air smelled of slime and rotting weed, and every ripple or current on the water made him jump, certain that it heralded the arrival of something he didn’t want to run into.

I could just say to hell with it and go back to my squat under the stairs.

But he needed answers—they all needed answers. And he’d run out of people to ask.

There’s always Dubh. Could find him, ask him what he knows.

He’s in disgrace, though. Said so himself. Said our mom and dad don’t want him no more, either. Guess they’re pretty damned disappointed to have popped out a couple of losers like us.

It hurt. Even though he’d spent his whole life knowing his mom had dumped him on a human family in exchange for a mortal baby, finding out who his folks really were had reopened every wound, every resentment. *To hell with them. And Dubh.*

Except I can’t say that, can I? Got to play the prince, got to pretend I’m this Tamnais b’hoy that everybody’s so keen on me being.

“Camhlaidh,” he said, before he could change his mind. “Hey, Camhlaidh! I’m calling you, like you said I could, so come on!”

“At your service, my prince.”

Pook started, even though he had been expecting the fae to show up. Camhlaidh bowed low; when he straightened, a stray stream of gaslight fell across his face, and Pook noticed how much he really did look like Mina. They both had the same blond hair, the same pointy chin and dark eyes.

‘Cept he ain’t Mina—he ain’t nice. Killed a friend of hers, just to try and cut her ties with her human half. Might kill me, too, if I ain’t careful.

The river sloshed loudly against the bridge footing. Startled, Pook spun, just in time to see the aughisky and the fideal emerge from the water. The fideal was naked except for the waterweeds that clung to her blue-black skin and hair, and her teeth were those of a carnivore.

“My prince. I see that you took my advice,” she said with a wicked smile.

Pook swallowed hard. They said the fideal lured randy guys into the water with her, then drowned them. Maybe ate them—her teeth sure looked like she was enjoying an all-meat diet, and he’d bet she wasn’t just getting by on fish. *Gives me the crawlies just looking at her.* He tried to imagine feeling any desire for her at all, let alone enough to risk hopping in the river, but all he felt was fear.

Fear’s smart, b’hoy. Keeps you alive. Just can’t show it, that’s all. They’re no different than the Rummies, or the Firestarters, or the Toffers, or anybody else you ever met on the streets. Got to show you’ve got stones, or fake it if you don’t, or else they won’t respect you.

“You could have been a little more damn specific, you know,” he said to the fideal. “But yeah, I got Bob.” He tapped the hilt to remind them that he wasn’t totally helpless.

Something flickered in the depths of Camhlaidh’s dark eyes, at odds with the smile on his lips. “How may we serve you this evening, my prince?”

“You said you’d answer questions for me.” Pook hoped he sounded at least a little commanding. How the hell was a prince supposed to talk, anyway? “Fine. I got questions. Got a whole bunch of them, really.”

“Ask. If it is in our power to answer them, we shall.”

“Let’s start with why one of the seelie fae is trying to make friends with my girl.”

The aughisky snarled, revealing teeth like knives. The fideal flexed her hands, and Pook noticed that her fingernails were long and sharp enough to flay skin from bone. Camhlaidh’s reaction was far more controlled, but even so the worry showed on his face. “One of the seelie has attacked your Consort?”

“Not attacked. Talked to. Told her you lot was lying to us, and then told her to go to the sceach over in Hurley

Park.”

Camhlaidh made no further attempts to smile. “And what did you find at the sceach, my prince?”

“A pair of unseelie who weren’t too damn happy to see us.” He thought about mentioning Dubh’s presence, then decided against it. “Said you’d had them banished from Faerie ‘cause they didn’t agree with you. You want to tell me the truth about that?”

“I fear that I do not know these two fae you speak of,” Camhlaidh said, looking concerned. “And I do not have the power to banish anyone. Only your father, Finn Bheara, does.”

“But he’s your friend, ain’t he? He’d get rid of anybody you said to.”

“You give me far too much credit, my prince. Did these fae say why they were banished?”

“Said they wouldn’t join the war.”

A sneer twisted Camhlaidh’s mouth. “Ah. It grieves me to say this, but there are traitors to every cause, and we fae are old hands at intrigue. It is a game that helps while away the centuries, and we play it as no others. There are those who are so blinded by their desire for power that they will betray their own kin to our enemies just to gain a small advantage. Your father justly banished many of these when they became a danger to the Sluagh. I suspect that these two are such traitors, who seek to put a better face on their own misdeeds by laying the blame on my shoulders. No doubt they hope to return to power by allying themselves with the seelie and betraying you through your Consort. I beg you, my prince, forbid the girl from speaking to the seelie ever again. Her life depends on it.”

Pook tried to imagine himself forbidding Alex to do anything, then imagined how much groveling he’d have to do just to make up for opening his damn fool mouth.

“Fine,” he said aloud. “Makes sense. Question two: we was at the palace, and got attacked by another seelie in the garden. She said she was there to watch Dagmar.”

Camhlaidh’s mouth thinned in displeasure. “Ah yes. The half-breed. I do not know the motives of the seelie as well as you seem to believe, my prince, but I can guess easily enough. They hope to recruit her to their side. She is part seelie, after all, and therefore not to be trusted.”

“All right.” Pook nodded. “Last question for tonight. What’s in the Maze over at the Crawl? You know, the pier and boardwalk with the carousel and everything?”

“I’m sure that I do not know. I have never heard of this ‘crawl,’ as you call it.”

“Oh well—I figured you hadn’t, but I thought I’d ask just in case.” Pook shrugged, as if it didn’t make any difference to him. “You been real helpful, Camhlaidh—I appreciate it.”

“Of course, my prince. We all live to serve you.” The fae bowed. “Is there anything else we may do?”

“Not right now. I’ll tell Alex what you said—make sure she stays the hell away from that seelie.”

“I’m relieved to hear you say that, my prince. But I fear she will not be safe until the city is rid of the seelie and all its kind.”

“Yeah. I figure you’re right.”

Camhlaidh smiled. “You are wiser than your brother. Prince Dubh does not know good advice when he hears it.”

“Yeah, well, he’s dumb as a box of rocks, ain’t he?” Pook took a step away from the river. “I’d better be getting along.”

“Call upon us whenever you wish, my prince.”

“Yeah. I will.”

Pook watched the three fae disappear, the fideal and the aughisky into the river and Camhlaidh into the shadows. Turning slowly away, he began to walk towards the light and noise of the streets.

“‘We all live to serve you,’” he muttered. “Yeah. More like: ‘We all live to serve you a pack of lies, ‘cause unlike Dubh, you’re just a poor rube who don’t know his head from a hole in the ground. ‘Cause it’s easier to fool some ignorant dupe from the mortal world who don’t know a damned thing, than a b’hoy raised in Faerie who maybe knows what’s what.’ Shit.”

Well, no matter what Camhlaidh and the rest thought, Pook wasn’t that dumb. If nothing else, he’d run too many con games himself to get taken in by a bunch of pretty lies. There might be some truth in what Camhlaidh had told him, but he’d bet Bob that it was damn thin.

He might not have learned anything useful about what the seelie wanted, or what was up with the unseelie under the sceach. But he’d learned a hell of a lot about Camhlaidh and the rest of the Gentry. Namely, that he couldn’t trust them for second.

Pook sighed and took out a cigarette. *Wish I had some gin.* Because like it or not, it was way past time he went to the one person who knew something about unseelie politics and who might actually tell him the truth for more than one word at a time.

Time to go find Dubh. And if he don’t want to answer my questions, at least I can stomp him until he changes his mind.

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The part of Dere down near the docks was crowded with the usual assortment of revelers, but the crushers were still all over the place, so Pook went under a glamour and kept his head down. He hoped to catch a glimpse of Rose at Hatboy’s saloon, which had always been the Rat Soldiers’ favorite groggery. But when he stepped inside, he saw that the place was almost deserted. A few newsboys and bootblacks sat around swilling bad gin, and a scattering of older folks, but the teens that had been the saloon’s main customers were few and far between.

As he made his way inside, his heart feeling oddly homesick for the bar, no matter that it was a dive, Pook saw

that the guess that had brought him here in the first place had been at least half-way right. Dubh sat hunched at the bar, glamour-disguised to look like an old man. Pook walked up and dropped down on the stool next to him.

"Give me a glass of gin," he told the bartender. "My brother here's paying."

Dubh gave him a sour look. "How did you find me?"

"You all but said you couldn't go back to Faerie, and I figured this is the only place in Dere you know," Pook said. The bartender slid a filthy glass across the counter. Pook drained the raw stuff in a single gulp, then set the glass down for a refill.

"So why are you plaguing me at all?" Dubh asked. His dark eyes were red-rimmed, as if he hadn't been sleeping too well. To his surprise, Pook found that the tired, defeated look on his brother's face bothered him. "Have you found more fools to torment? If so, leave me out of it."

Pook took a smaller drink of his gin this time. It wouldn't do any good to pass out on the floor before he could ask his questions, after all. "Camhlaidh said you was dumb."

Dubh stiffened, and some of the spark came back into his eyes. "When?"

Pook ignored the question. "Yeah. Said you didn't know good advice when you heard it. Said he lived to serve me, that I just had to ask and he'd do whatever I wanted."

"He's a liar. Don't trust him."

"I ain't stupid." Pook grinned. "Although I guess it don't hurt for him to think I am."

After a long moment, Dubh grinned a little himself. "That's an old fae trick, to play on your enemy's expectations."

"Is Camhlaidh my enemy?"

"You tell me."

Pook felt his temper rise, but he pushed it down hard. Maybe all those lessons with Kuromori were starting to pay off, because he didn't make a smart-ass comment or punch Dubh in the teeth, even though he thought about doing both. "That's why I'm here, ain't it? 'Cause I don't know Camhlaidh like you do. I don't know what the hell he's up to, or what he wants from me. All I know is that he's lying to me like I got air between my ears instead of brains. I figure that don't make him my friend, for damn sure."

Dubh frowned slightly, but more like he was thinking than like he was getting pissed. "Camhlaidh holds much power among the Sluagh," he said at last, carefully. "Do you know why?"

"No. Don't know a damn thing about the Sluagh. So tell me."

"Very well." Dubh emptied his glass and motioned for the bartender to fill it again. Pook didn't know how long he'd been there, but it looked like the b'hoy could at least hold his liquor, which raised him some in Pook's esteem. "Unseelie and seelie fae lived on this island long before the first mortal shipwright ever laid a keel. The first humans to set foot on Niune mistook us for gods, so far above them were we. They worshipped us and made sacrifices in blood upon their altars. It is said that every year they gave to us their most beautiful maiden and most handsome youth. One would be cast off a high cliff and the other drowned in the Blackrush, and we would devour their flesh."

Pook didn't like the look Dubh had in his eye, like he was dreaming of something grand. "So what happened?" he asked, hoping to drag his brother back to reality.

It worked. Dubh frowned, this time at him, and took another drink. "They drove us back, that's what happened. Humans cut down the wildwood where we had danced, they built bridges over the rivers where we had our dens, and they filled in the marshes where our palaces lay dreaming. We retreated from them, from the iron they brought, from their countless numbers that so overwhelmed our own. We spent more and more time in Faerie and less in the mortal world, until only those of us who needed human flesh or human desire ever came here at all.

"Then Grynnith invaded Niune, and everything changed. At the time, we did not see it. What did it matter to us which set of humans styled themselves kings and queens over the land that had once been ours?" Dubh shook his head. "Folly."

"Wait—I know this," Pook said, squinting as he tried to remember. He hadn't paid a lot of attention to the informal history lessons Duncan had tried to give—after all what difference could folks who'd been dead for years make in his life?

More than I thought, I guess.

"Grynnith invaded, and they killed King Somebody-or-Other," Pook said slowly. "And his daughter ran off to Hundslund—oh! Kind of like Alex's mom!"

"Danu's tits, get your mind off that near-mortal," said Dubh, sounding cross. "It was King Stephen who was beheaded, and his daughter Matilda who escaped. Matilda lived in exile, married a mortal duke...and then happened upon the seelie fae. Under what circumstances I don't know...perhaps a ganconer, or simply some wandering fae whose fancy she caught. Or...Camhlaidh believed that she had deliberately sought them out and struck a deal. More and more these days I think he may have been right.

"At any rate, it doesn't matter how it began. What happened is that Matilda's daughter Catherine was not the offspring of her mortal husband, but of a seelie fae. Catherine had a rare and great talent— she was a seelie dyana of great strength."

"Like Mina."

"Very much like." Dubh's eyes darkened for a moment, as if at some thought, then he shook his head. "She returned to Niune with an army, enslaved any seelie faelings she came across, and used their power and her own to drive the invaders from these shores. Once she was crowned Queen of Niune, she found herself in a difficult position. She could not let faelings, who would know the truth about her, run free. So she enslaved those of her

kin that she could find...and simply killed those of ours.

"I don't know if the seelie had foreseen that, or if it was simply fortuitous chance for them. Think of it, Pook: both unseelie and seelie had been in retreat, driven from our homes over the long centuries. Then suddenly the seelie found themselves with a foothold in the mortal world that we lacked. The tide of our eternal conflict turned in their favor for the first time."

"But Mina and Duncan put a stop to that, right?" Pook asked uncertainly. Until recently, he'd never even thought that the doings of the kings and queens could possibly have anything to do with his life. Now he felt adrift in a sea where everybody knew how to swim but him.

"After almost three mortal generations of persecution, yes." Dubh seemed kind of put out about the whole thing, like he thought somebody should have done something sooner. Not that the fae had lifted a hand to help, so far as Pook could tell. "Camhlaidh was one of the first who realized the implications for us, to see and feel the waning of our power. At first, everyone laughed at him and called him a madman. But as the seelie waxed in power and began to drive us from our strongholds in both Faerie and the mortal realm, the laughing stopped. He looked like a prophet instead. That's why Father and Mother listened to him when he spoke of the potential importance of faelings. Why they decided to leave one of us in the mortal world."

"To see what would happen," Pook said. The words were bitter as gall on his tongue, and he spat onto the sawdust-covered floor.

Dubh's eyes went to the sword at Pook's waist. "Camhlaidh was pleased when you won our...contest."

Pook snorted. "Sure he was. Figured he'd got himself a nice rube who'd listen to every damned word he'd say. But I'm a city b'hoy, not some bumpkin who just got to Dere on the back of the manure cart."

Dubh gave him a weird look for a moment...then unexpectedly started to smile. "No doubt. You are Camhlaidh's path to ever-greater power and influence, Tamnais. The tide is turning his way. So long as it continues to do so, he will be your friend. But make no mistake—if the day comes that stabbing you in the back will advance him farther than remaining true to you, there will be no choice. He would not hesitate to kill you."

Pook felt cold. Camhlaidh had strong magic; he'd known it from the moment he'd seen the fae. Not an enemy that Pook really wanted. *Not a friend I want, neither.*

"Figured as much," he said glumly. "But don't being a prince count for nothing? I guess Camhlaidh's one of the Gentry, but I'm the damned heir to the throne and all that nonsense. Don't that get me anywhere?"

Dubh's smile turned back into the familiar scowl. "Did it get you anywhere with the fae under the sceach?"

"No." Pook sighed. "What's the use of it, then?"

"To you, who are an outsider, who know nothing of the Faerie Realm and its intrigues? Very little use, at the moment." Dubh shook his head. "Be glad that the fae are long-lived and that our father is still young. If he died, the Sluagh would devour you. Perhaps not literally, although some might consider it, but they would fight amongst themselves to turn you into their pawn. They would make you a puppet king."

Pook frowned. "You seem damned sure that I would just roll over and let them."

"Of course you would. You allowed Darcy to rule you, did you not? All the grief that she gave you, and you simply accepted it as your lot in life. Darcy was but a petty tyrant with no real power—what hope would you have against the Gentry?"

Pook thought about pointing out that Dubh had been the one shagging Darcy, so maybe he shouldn't be insulting Pook about jumping to her every whim. "That was different," he said instead. "Was looking out for myself by joining her gang, wasn't I? Don't see how doing what any fae wants is going to be to my good."

The sneer never left Dubh's face, though. "You are weak," he said, leaning closer as if he meant to whisper the words. "Contemptible. You wear your mortal heart on the outside, where anyone can stab you in it. You pine for that near-human girl, as if she held the only key to your happiness." The sneer turned to a sly smile. "I could take her from you, you know. Unlike you, I was raised as a prince. I could whisper sweet words that would make her forget all about some filthy, half-coherent street tough."

Pook launched himself off his bar stool, hands going for Dubh's throat. Dubh flung his glass of gin into Pook's eyes; the raw alcohol burned so bad it made tears stream down his cheeks. But it still didn't make him let go of his brother.

Less than two minutes later, the barkeep and one of the tough guys he kept to help with rowdy customers shoved them both out the door and into the street. Pook fell, swearing and wiping at his eyes now that he didn't have Dubh's skin to occupy his hands. When his streaming vision cleared, he saw that Dubh hadn't come out much better; one eye was swelling shut, and his trousers had a big rip in them where he'd hit the cobblestones knees-first.

Pook staggered to his feet. "I even see you come near Alex, I'll make you sorry," he promised. "I'll—I'll kill you, hear me?"

Dubh made no reply, only glowered angrily, until Pook finally turned and walked away.

Chapter Nine

Pook was sweeping the floor of the bookstore when the messenger came the next day. At the jingle of the bell, he looked up, and saw a man standing just inside, like he didn't want to come in any farther than he had to. The man's clothes were the fanciest Pook had ever seen in this part of town, all stiff with brocade and lace. Guy held himself like

his drawers were starched, too.

“Can I help you?” Pook asked, since everyone else was in the back, going over the inventory.

The man looked down his nose at Pook. “I must speak with Lord RiDahn,” he said haughtily. “Fetch him for me at once.”

Pook bit his lip, reminded himself that anybody dressed that nice must have money and might be induced to part with it, and set his broom aside. “Hey, Duncan!” he yelled towards the back. “Got somebody out here who wants to talk to you.”

The man got a look on his face like he’d swallowed something nasty. When the sound of the wheelchair against the smooth wooden floor grew louder, his expression altered to something only marginally more pleasant. “I have a message for you from the queen, my lord,” he said, holding out a bit of rolled-up paper festooned with seals and ribbons.

Duncan took the scroll with a grave nod. “Thank you. Would you care for some tea?”

“No, my lord—my duties call,” said the messenger, as if Duncan had offered him sludge out of the Blackrush, and beat a hasty retreat out the door. Mystified, Pook watched him vault into a fancy carriage, which clattered away as quickly as traffic would allow.

“Oh dear,” murmured Duncan.

“What is it?” asked Mina, as she came from the back room, Alex trailing behind her. She leaned over Duncan’s shoulder to read the scroll. “Damn it all, what is Dagmar thinking?”

“I dare say she is not,” Duncan replied dryly, carefully rolling the scroll and retying one of the ribbons around it.

“What? What’s wrong?” Pook asked, figuring something bad had happened. “Is she okay?”

“You may recall that Queen Dagmar mentioned a masquerade ball on Triumph Day next month,” Duncan said. “I had rather hoped she had forgotten her invitation, or thought better of it, but it seems she has not. This is the formal invitation to attend. You are mentioned as well.”

“So? We went over there once before and everything went fine, didn’t it?”

“That was different, Tamnais. We had only to appear before the queen, who is a faeling herself. This time we will have a much larger audience, and will attend a formal dinner as well. Because Dagmar has invited us, our behavior will reflect on her, so it is important that we do nothing to embarrass her.”

Pook thought he saw where this was going. “I ain’t uncivilized, you know. What do you think I’m going to do, put my boots on the dinner table?”

Mina ran her hand through her short, spiky hair, then gave Pook a lopsided smile. “No—it isn’t that. Look, I’ve been to a couple of these things before with Duncan—not anything quite so grand, though, I’ll admit. I have a few rough edges, too, that wanted polished up before I went. It will be a good reminder for me if we go over court etiquette and that sort of thing.”

“I got manners!”

“We might work on your speech as well, as you will be expected to make conversation during dancing and dinner,” Duncan added, pretty much confirming that he thought Pook was some kind of barbarian.

“I can help,” Alex said tentatively. “That is, there are many rules that one must know, Pooshka. Which fork to use for what course of dinner, for example.”

There’s more than one fork? he wondered, but kept his yap shut this time. He was starting to get the idea that there was a lot more to this courtly stuff than he’d ever thought about.

Dubh’s words from the night before suddenly came back to him. His brother had claimed that a noble girl like Alex would be more impressed by somebody who walked and talked and acted like a real prince, instead of somebody like Pook who just got called one.

They want to teach me how to do that. How to be this Tamnais b’hoi. How to be somebody Alex might fall in love with.

“Okay,” he said at last. “Where do we start?”

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Poor Pook, Alex thought as she pulled her nightdress on over her head. He had looked so lost and confused this afternoon, when they had spoken of court manners and court language. Nothing in his life had prepared him for the unexpected burden of being Finn Bheara’s son.

He’ll do well, though. Pook was adaptable and clever; he’d had to be, given his hardscrabble life.

She let down her hair from its pins, the mousy brown locks falling almost to her waist. A few strokes of the brush gave it some order.

Putting out the candle, she lay down in her bed and stared unseeing at the ceiling. *I can help him—I will help him, if he wants me to. After all, I’m stuck going to the damned thing myself.*

She imagined Lord RiGrath and his vapid son Hubert. Would they be in attendance as well? Would Hubert offer himself as a suitor?

I ran halfway across the globe to escape such things, she thought bitterly. I paid for my freedom with blood. And yet here I am, preparing to return to them yet again. Curse it all.

She rolled over, punched her pillow, and tried to relax. *This is different. It is. You’re only starting at old ghosts. That’s all.*

Even so, her nerves would not entirely quiet, and when sleep did finally find her it came filled with dreams...

The cold of the taiga gripped her like steel talons, digging into her flesh and her heart alike. The exertion of

dragging her valise over miles of trackless forest made her gasp for breath, and the bitter air excoriated her lungs. Impenetrable stands of spruce, hemlock, and fir made it necessary to chart a wandering course, and she feared that she was not making nearly as good time as she needed to.

She paused for a moment, just long enough to check her compass and make certain that she was still going in the correct direction. The unfamiliar physical strain of walking and carrying the valise was taking its toll, and she longed to sit down and rest for a while. But in the dead of winter the days were desperately short, and she had to take advantage of every second that the sun stayed above the horizon.

Birds flitted from tree to tree, singing and shaking down snow. There had been no sign yet of the leshys that haunted the forest, but Alex doubted that would last. She was still too near human habitation, but as soon as she entered the deep wilderness that lay between her and the sea...then the danger would be great.

Danger? Of what? Death? Better a quick death at the claws of a beast or a leshy than what awaits me if I'm caught. Better to freeze or starve.

Putting away her compass, she began to walk again. The dense stands of conifers gradually gave way to a more open space. A line of leafless birches marked the track of a stream, and Alex gratefully turned her steps towards it, hoping for water that would soothe her parched throat.

The creek had carved a deep gully through the woods; the sides were slick with ice and snow, and Alex realized that she would have to find a less hazardous place to cross. Curse it! Not another delay! Chernovog, if ever you looked upon me with favor, help me now. Stop putting these obstacles in my path. Just let me get farther away, even if it is only to die in the wilderness.

As she turned dispiritedly away from the steep watercourse, Alex caught a glimpse of what she had dreaded since the moment she had fled her father's house. There was movement amidst the trees; a shadow that grew swiftly larger as it drew near, until at last it emerged into the thin sun that streamed between the bare birch branches. The light caressed the dappled hide of a familiar horse, and sparked gold from the hair of the rider, whose hat had fallen off in his haste.

Alex froze, uncertain whether or not she had been spotted in her white furs. Then the rider changed direction, making toward her, and she knew that she had been seen.

But of all the searchers who no doubt combed the woods for her, this was the one she would have most hoped would find her, should she be found. Gosha, her father's steward. Her mother's lover. A man who had been like a father to Alex—who, for all she knew, might truly be her father.

"Dreya!" he cried when he drew near. His face was red from the cold, but his expression was one of relief. "Praise Svarog I've found you!"

Hope kindled in her heart, thawing some of the ice that seemed to have formed around it. "Gosha! You've come to help me, then?"

"Of course." He seemed surprised she had ever thought otherwise.

Thank you, Chernovog. Thank you.

"I'm sorry I doubted you, Gosha. But...after what happened to Mama...I wasn't certain."

A shadow passed over his face. "What happened to Moira is...difficult for us all, Dreya. But it is no reason to throw your life away. Now come—my horse can bear us both. We'll be back at your father's house by midnight."

The sudden death of hope was savage; she felt as if a splinter of ice had pierced her heart. "No," she whispered, taking a step back. "No, Gosha, you said you'd help me!"

"And I will. Come, Dreya, be reasonable! Surely you cannot believe that you can simply run away and hope to survive. Where will you go? Who will take care of you?" A look of exasperation mixed with affection crossed his broad face. "Your father's wrath will be terrible, Dreya, but if you behave and accept whatever punishment he deems fit, it will pass. No one outside of the household knows that you've been so foolish as to run off, so your suitors need never find out. Aleksei can still make a good marriage for you."

"No," she whispered again, still backing away. Chernovog, surely this was a nightmare. "Gosha, please! They took Mama and locked her away in a madhouse, and you did nothing! Please, don't condemn me to the same fate."

Gosha's face hardened suddenly. "Your mother was a witch," he said coldly. "A sorceress who enchanted us all. Svarog only knows what evil you learned at her knee, but there is still a chance for you. Renounce Moira's foul ways and do your duty to your father. Because if you don't...then I fear Moira's fate will be yours as well."

Alex stopped. The steep bank of the creek was treacherously near her feet...and how could she hope to outrun a horse, even were it not? "How can you say that?" she asked, anguished. "How? You loved her!"

The look on his face belonged to a stranger. "Did I? Or was it all a spell?"

"Curse you, Gosha, she was no witch!" Alex's voice broke, and she could feel the burn of tears in her eyes. No. I can't cry, I can't, not now. Because if I give in to weakness, he will take me. "She had the blood of the fae in her veins, that's all! She wasn't evil!"

"So you say. But now I must wonder if you are the one trying to cast a spell." Gosha urged his horse forward, guiding it towards her. "You are going back to your father's house with me, Dreya, whether you will it or not."

"To be married off to some brute, or else locked in a madhouse until I die? Please, Gosha, if you will not help me then at least let me go! If you truly fear that I'm a witch too, then surely everyone would be better off if I were far away."

But he only shook his head. "No. I care about you, Dreya. I won't let you throw away your only chance at a good life. I won't leave you out here to die."

He leaned from the saddle, reaching for her arm. She tried to move away, but the horse blocked her from the

front, the gully and the stream from behind. There was nowhere left to run.

The panic that she had fought for so long finally burst loose. She heard herself scream a denial, but the sound seemed far away and unreal. In desperation she grasped at the thin thread of faelings magic that remained her only weapon.

There was strength in the snow, in the ice-choked stream and the burning cold of its black water. She siphoned power from all these things, from the frozen rock beneath her feet, from the long shadows of the trees, and flung it towards the horse. A form rose from the snow, glamour twisted into the shape of a wolverine that snarled and tore at Gosha's mount.

Gosha cried out, but the sound was almost lost beneath the panicked whinny of the horse. The steed reared, dancing back on its hind legs, its forelimbs churning the air in an attempt to keep away the perceived threat. Alex dropped to the snow, her arms protectively wrapped over her head, waiting to feel the kick of a hoof that would end her troubles along with her life. Gosha shouted again; something heavy fell nearby, and the winter-dead bracken of the gully cracked beneath its weight. Then the horse's churning hooves slammed into the snow only inches from Alex.

Barely able to believe that she was still alive, Alex chanced a look. The illusory wolverine had vanished the moment she had stopped concentrating on it, leaving the horse confused and skittish. The gelding pranced, blowing and looking about, its reins trailing the ground and its saddle empty.

"Gosha?" she called tentatively.

There came a moan from the direction of the ravine. Alex hurried as close to the edge as she dared and peered over. Gosha lay sprawled amidst the rocks of the stream. Broken bits of bracken clung to his clothing, and his trousers and shirt were soaked in water that remained unfrozen only because of the swiftness of the current.

His eyelids fluttered, and he focused on her. "Dreya," he gasped, sounding confused. Then he got his arms under himself and dragged his body free from the stream. One leg trailed uselessly behind him, and Alex realized blood as well as water seeped into his boot.

He stopped as soon as he was free from the stream and collapsed shivering against the side of the steep bank. "Dreya, you must help me," he said through chattering teeth. "My leg is broken. I can't go any farther without aid, and you aren't strong enough to pull me up." He paused as a bout of shivering took him. "You must take Sasha and ride him as fast as you may. Follow in the tracks we left coming—they will take you back the fastest route, and with luck you'll find some of the other searchers long before you reach the house."

Alex stood very still on the edge of the gully, keenly aware of the hard beat of her heart in her breast. Shivers wracked Gosha's body; his wet clothes were already sapping the heat and strength from his body. Unless she acted quickly, he would certainly die.

When she didn't move, Gosha looked up at her and frowned. "Hurry, Dreya! I don't have much time!" The frown changed to a look of worry. "Has Sasha run away?"

"No." The word felt like lead in her mouth. "Sasha's still here. He's a good horse—you trained him yourself."

"Then for Svarog's sake, take him and ride, Dreya!"

She swallowed hard, then took a step back, away from the stream, although she was unable to tear her eyes away from the sight of the helpless Gosha. "I will take him. But I will not ride him back to the house."

For a moment, Gosha merely seemed puzzled. Then horror slowly bloomed over his face. "No. Dreya, you cannot mean this! You cannot mean to leave me to die!"

"You left Mama to die, didn't you? You could have spoken for her. You could have slipped away and rescued her. But you didn't. You let her be locked away until she died. Or was she murdered, Gosha? Do you even know? Do you even care?"

Gosha's face had gone white with terror. "For the love of Svarog, Dreya, please, help me!"

Numbness had set in, as if the cold of the stream had somehow gotten inside of her, chilling every emotion. "Svarog doesn't love me, though. I am nothing to the god of the waxing year. As I am nothing to you."

"You know that isn't true! By all that is holy, I beg you, help me!"

She reached out blindly and caught Sasha's reins in her hand. "If I go back to save you, I'll never have another chance. Never."

The look of raw fear in Gosha's eyes wrung what was left of her heart. "Dreya, please. The cold will kill me—I'll never last the night. Help me, Dreya! Don't leave me here to die!"

Turning away, she stumbled blindly to the horse's side. The stirrup was almost too high for her short legs, but she somehow managed to drag herself into the saddle. Gosha's pleas grew in volume, turning into screams and curses, but she stopped her ears to them until they were lost in the distance.

The sun set shortly thereafter. The moon had already risen, though, fat and full. The snow and ice that cloaked the world reflected its light, turning night to day anywhere that there was a break in the trees, and so Alex kept the horse moving. She had to put as much distance between herself and Gosha as she could, just in case one of her father's men found his body.

Is he dead yet? she wondered dully. Or is he still huddled there, freezing in agony, his tears turning to ice on his cheeks...

The horse bore her into a clearing along the margin of a wide lake. Only then did she become aware of the dark shadow trailing them. For a moment, she thought it was a wolverine, and she reached for the rifle strapped to the saddle. But then the smell of burning came to her, drawing her thoughts out of the past and back to the present.

Pook. Chernovog, no, he saw it, he saw everything!

Alex bolted upright in her bed with a wild cry of denial. For a moment, she didn't know where she was; then, she saw Vagabond's single eye gleaming from the shadows. *Oh no. Pook saw everything. He knows.*

Maybe not. Maybe he just came in at the very end of the dream. Maybe...

Alex's entire body was shaking from reaction, and tears had made wet tracks on her face even in her sleep. *No. It was shared dream—it was too real from the very beginning to have been anything else. Chernovog, it was like reliving it all over again.*

She flung off the covers and stumbled to the stairs, pausing only long enough to fumble on her glasses so that she didn't end up missing her footing and breaking her neck. Perhaps some tea would calm her nerves, help her think rationally once again, help her decide what she could possibly say to Pook...

Someone started pounding on the door just as she reached the bottom. "Alex! It's me, Pook—open up!" he shouted, then went back to hammering on the door.

Alex froze for a moment, wondering what would happen if she didn't open it, if she just hid and pretended she hadn't heard him. *He knows, he knows; he's come here to...what?* There was no scenario of rejection that her mind couldn't invent, and all of them flashed through it now. Dreading the worst, she forced herself to go to the door and unbolt it.

The instant the door opened, Pook stepped across the threshold and flung both arms around her. For a moment, left breathless by the tightness of his embrace, she didn't understand what he was doing. There was meaning in the way he held her, though, tight and close, as if he never intended to let her go, and she realized in a sudden flash what he was trying to tell her in his own wordless way.

To her dismay, the tears welled up again. Grief for Gosha, for Moira, for herself, constricted her throat. She pressed her face into Pook's chest, crying until the front of his shirt was wet from tears. Throughout the storm of weeping, he said nothing, only held her against him so that she knew he was there. That she was safe.

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"So now you know why I never use my magic," Alex said quietly. Her eyes and nose were still red and swollen, but the tears had dried for the moment. She sat at the table in the back room, wearing nothing but her nightgown, and Pook did his best not to take advantage and stare openly. It wasn't easy, though.

"It saved your life, though," he pointed out. The tea he had made was done steeping, so he carefully poured it into two cups and carried them to the table. The smell of bergamot filled the air, rising with the steam from the hot liquid, and Alex gave him a grateful smile.

"Perhaps." Vagabond hopped up on the table to investigate, and Alex stroked her absently. "But it took his. Gosha was good to us, or he tried to be. But...when Mama was caught using her faeling powers...he didn't lift a finger to defend her."

Pook wondered if he ought to ask any questions, or if he would end up upsetting her more if he did. "I don't understand. Why did they...I mean, they put her...away. I don't understand why."

Darkness lurked in the depths of Alex's blue-gray eyes, and he longed to soothe it away somehow. "Because no matter how benighted Ruska may be, in this day and age a boyar cannot simply accuse his wife of witchcraft. It would have made him sound like an ignorant peasant—even though, of course, that's exactly what most of the boyars really are. He used to get so angry because the men in the capitol looked down on the country lords as a bunch of uneducated, almostbrigands." She shrugged. "I never understood why he cared, truthfully. He *was* uneducated, as were his friends; most of them sneered at books. And yet, at the same time, he wanted the Knyaz and the city boyars to hold him in high regard.

"So killing her as a witch was out of the question. But he felt that he had to get rid of her somehow, so he...sent her to the sanitarium and told anyone who asked that she'd had a...a nervous episode." Alex bit her lip, and Pook saw the sheen of tears in her eyes again. "He-he said that it would hurt his ability to marry me off well, but not as badly as having a known witch for a mother."

"I'm sorry." Pook put his hand over hers, hoping to give her some comfort. "You did the right thing, though. I mean with Gosha."

Her expression became withdrawn, unreadable. "By becoming a murderess? By cold-bloodedly leaving him to die, when I could have saved him?"

"Saved him—and ended up like your mom," Pook said indignantly. "For God's sake, Alex, he was going to take you back, and to hell with what happened to you after that. He was willing to sacrifice you quick enough, wasn't he? Way I see it, it was him or you, and damned if I wouldn't pick you any day."

She smiled, just a little. "Thank you."

"Besides, the fact that it bothers you so bad shows that you ain't cold-blooded about it. He was the one who wouldn't listen, who was going to take you back even if it was the worst thing for you. And then he had the balls to want you to give up everything to save him, when his own damned choices put him where he was!" Pook ground his teeth together, thinking a few murderous thoughts of his own. If he'd been there, he would've shown Gosha what was what. "Don't go around beating yourself down 'cause of him, baby. He ain't worth it."

"I suppose." Alex stared into her teacup, as if reading the leaves, and he wondered if any of his words had helped at all. "It would have been easier if he had been cruel to us. But he wasn't—he kept our secrets. If not for him, Mama would never have been able to educate me as she did."

Privately, Pook thought that Gosha hadn't exactly been selfless about that, anymore than he had about anything else. Gosha wouldn't have been the first guy to have done favors that didn't cost him nothing, just to get a little bit of

leg, then pretend like nothing had happened when things went bad. But that didn't seem like something he ought to be saying about Alex's mom, so he kept his mouth shut.

And they think I ain't got no manners.

"I figure your mom was a smart woman," he said instead. And he meant it. "Got to have been, don't she, to have made you? She knew what the score was, what she had get done to do right by you. This Gosha was just a weathercock, pointing however the wind was blowing and screwing over everybody else to get whatever he wanted. Known that type of b'hoy myself, and I figure your mom would've steered clear of him if she'd had a choice. She's the one to be thanking, not him."

"Maybe." Alex reached across the table and squeezed his hand gently. "I've been reading her diary, a bit at a time. She...From the moment I was born a girl, she kept wishing that there was more she could do for me. She wanted for me to find someone who would truly care about me, who would leave me free to be myself. I wish...I wish that we had left together, before things went bad. I wish that she could have met you."

He wrapped both hands around hers and brought her fingers to his lips. "I wish that, too," he said, even though he couldn't imagine Moira would've approved of an ignorant dustbin b'hoy like him.

"Thank you," Alex went on, giving him a smile that made him feel warm all over. "I do feel better, strangely enough. I'm sorry that I didn't tell you everything before."

"I know why you didn't. That's private stuff." He hesitated, trying to put together the words to tell her what he felt. "I hope I'm your friend, Alex. I hope you feel like you can tell me things."

"Says the boy who didn't bother to mention that he was in a gang. Or that he was a wanted fugitive. Or that he had fae telling him to look for a sword."

Pook grinned and shrugged. "So, maybe I ain't the sharpest knife in the drawer. Learned my lesson, though."

"I certainly hope so."

"So what happened to the horse you took?"

A sad look passed over her face, and he wished he hadn't asked. "I lost him a few days later. Whenever I could find a tree with enough branches to support me, I would sleep in it instead of on the ground. The taiga is a dangerous place. There are threats such as bears and other animals, which will sometimes attack humans. And there are other things: leshys and shape-shifters and nameless beings who stalk the winter woods. I hoped that by sleeping off the ground I might escape detection, should one of them chance by." She shivered. "I suppose I was correct. Not long after sundown one night, I heard...I'm still not certain what. It sounded like the growling of beasts...but also like speech, in a strange way. I froze in my hiding-spot, terrified. Sasha started neighing...then screaming. I have never heard such a sound from a horse in all my life. I swear I didn't move a muscle until the sun came up, and the nights are very, very long. All that remained was a little bit of blood on the snow and some tracks that I couldn't account for."

Pook felt the hair on the back of his neck trying to stand up. "Scary." It began to dawn on him just how brave Alex had been, to take off across the countryside like that. "Hate to think how quick a city b'hoy like me would've gotten ate by something."

The faint sound of bells came from outside, tolling the hour. "It's dawn," said Alex, rising to her feet. "If you'd like, I'll go change, and we'll get breakfast at the café."

"Sure."

Pook sat at the table, listening to the sounds of her moving around upstairs. He tried not to think about what she was doing up there, but it was hard. At least there was no practical way to sneak a peek while she changed, because that wasn't a temptation he wanted to have to try to overcome right now. After a while, he went out and splashed cold water on himself from the pump out back, to freshen up a bit and to give himself something else to think about. When he was done, he searched his pockets and came up with a cigarette but no matches.

Alex was waiting for him when he went back inside, her long hair neatly pinned into its usual bun. "You got any matches?" he asked, displaying the cigarette.

"Of course." She went behind the counter and came out with a matchbox.

He couldn't light up inside—that was one thing Duncan was strict about—so he left them in her hand as they stepped out the door together. The slanting rays of the early sun blinded Pook momentarily; he stared to raise his hand to shade his eyes—then froze when he heard the unmistakable sound of a gun being cocked.

"Hold it right there," said a gruff voice.

Three figures stepped forward, passing into the shadow of the awning so that he could see them. The first was a crusher, who had his gun trained on both Pook and Alex, so that there was no way he could try to do anything without risking her. The other two were men he didn't recognize. Both of them were well dressed, but the clothing of one had a foreign cut to it that he couldn't identify.

All the color drained from Alex's face, and she swayed where she stood. Worried, Pook started to move to support her, but the crusher took care of that by waving his gun threateningly. "Stay where you are!" He barked. "This them?"

The two men conferred in a language Pook didn't know. Then the one who was dressed more like an ordinary gentleman said, "Yes. That is my client's daughter."

Alex looked like someone had kicked her in the stomach. Suddenly scared, Pook darted a glance at the foreign man. He was short and stocky, and mostly bald—not somebody you'd think was all that bad just to look at.

"Listen," he said, wondering how the hell he was going to talk their way out of this, "you got the wrong g'hal. This is my cousin, see, and—"

"Shut up, scum," said the crusher, and shoved the gun in Pook's face. "You're under arrest for kidnapping, rape,

ruination of the morals of a female not of age, and instigating riots.” The cold, smooth iron of manacles snapped into place around Pook’s left wrist, then his right. “You’re going to jail, street trash, and with any luck you’ll be dancing on the end of a noose by this time tomorrow.”

Chapter Ten

Alex felt as if the solid earth beneath her had suddenly shifted, leaving a hollow in the pit of her stomach that slowly filled with fear. Dimly, she was aware of her heart galloping in her chest, of the burn of adrenaline in her veins that screamed at her to run.

But she couldn’t. Her feet remained rooted to the ground, held in place by the gun that threatened Pook.

Her first coherent thought was that Aleksei looked older than she remembered. The lines on her father’s face were more deeply graven; he had less hair than before, and what remained seemed to contain more gray. His brown eyes were narrow with anger and contempt.

“Have you nothing to say for yourself?” he demanded imperiously.

Alex swallowed hard. “H-how did you find me?” she whispered in Russian.

Aleksei’s lip curled slightly, but he didn’t answer. Instead, he glanced at Pook. “What is this policeman waiting for? Is he not taking the scoundrel to jail?”

Although Pook couldn’t understand Aleksei’s words, he must have understood the tone. His gray eyes, wide with fear, met Alex’s. *Run*, he mouthed at her, even though there was a gun pointed at his head and iron around his wrists.

Aleksei’s pudgy hand closed hard on her arm; like Pook, he didn’t need to understand a word to guess at its sentiment. “Come on, girl. I have a carriage waiting.”

He pulled on her, careless of any pain, dragging her towards the black bulk of a brougham. Realization set in, snapping Alex out of her paralysis, and she dug in her heels desperately. “No! Father, please! Pook has done nothing wrong—tell the policeman to let him go, please!”

Aleksei jerked her roughly, so that she almost fell. “Be silent, girl,” he snapped, his face going purple with suppressed rage. “I will tolerate no more humiliation from you!”

The door opened from the inside, and Aleksei thrust her before him. Hands reached out, pulling her up and in before she could so much as protest, and she found herself sprawled across one of the two seats.

No! No, they’re taking me back, I won’t go, I won’t—

She looked up into the face of the man who had waited inside the carriage, and all the breath left her in shock.

To her right eye, he appeared an ordinary gentleman, with an honest if somewhat bland face. But to her left, the one that could pierce glamour, there was nothing human about him at all. Hair lank and green as waterweeds hung about a cadaverous face; his enormous, slanted eyes were utterly black, reflecting nothing. The long hands that rested on his knees had too many joints, and were webbed like a duck’s feet. A continuous stream of water ran from his tattered clothing, soaking into the upholstery of the carriage.

A fae. An unseelie fae.

God of the waning year, have mercy upon me. How am I to escape now?

rs

When Alex’s dad dragged her towards the waiting carriage, Pook’s precarious hold on panic broke. With a wild cry, he snatched Bob from the sash at his waist, breaking the glamour that had kept the sword hidden. He heard the crusher give an alarmed shout, but he didn’t care—he had to get to Alex, had to save her—

Something impacted with the side of Pook’s skull, sending blinding pain through his head. For a moment, he thought the crusher had shot him, before realizing that he would have already been dead had that been the case. The cobblestones tore open his knees; he couldn’t remember falling.

Rough hands wrenched Bob out of his grasp. Dazed, he blinked and tried to stand back up, but the crusher brought the butt of his gun down on Pook’s skull a second time. Although he didn’t remember passing out, all the sudden he was being dragged towards a police wagon, the doors of which stood open to receive him.

“No!” he tried to shout, but it came out more of a croak. “You don’t understand—Alex’s dad, he killed her mom, or all but did it, and he’ll do the same thing to her. You got to let me go.”

The crusher driving the wagon gave Pook a glance that was only mildly curious. “What’s that you’ve got, then?” he asked, nodding towards the sword his partner was holding.

“Damned if I know—something he stole, I guess. Missed it at first, until all the sudden he was swinging it and trying to run. Almost cut my head off.”

“I didn’t!”

The one holding Pook by the collar gave him a rough shake that made his teeth rattle and almost had him passed out again. “Lying scum here took advantage of a girl of quality, he did. Seems her mum was from Niune, and she wanted to meet her kin here. Her dad sent companions, of course, but they all died on the sea voyage, so she was alone when she got here. This pimp here met her on the docks, took advantage of her being alone and not knowing anyone, raped her, and led her into a life of vice. Must have stolen this pig-sticker, while he was at it.”

That accusation made him feel sick inside in a way that had nothing to do with the knock he’d taken to his skull.

"I didn't—that's all a lie, all of it! I wouldn't do nothing like that!"

"Shut up." The driver flicked his whip at Pook, catching him on the face, just below the eye. "Scum like you make me sick. I think they ought to cut off your balls before they string you up."

The first crusher hefted Pook into the back of the wagon. Pook tried to struggle, but he was so dizzy and aching by now that he couldn't put up much of a fight, and the doors closed and locked with him still on the inside.

Damn it. He bowed his head, wondering if he was going to throw up, and thinking it would serve the crushers right if they had to clean up after him. *I've got to get out of these cuffs—got to get to Alex.*

But exactly how he was going to do that, he had no idea.

rs

"I'm eighteen—of age," Alex said coldly. She had still been holding the matchbox that she had fetched for Pook when they tossed her into the carriage; now she shoved it into her pocket, where she clung to it like a talisman against evil. "You can't force me to return with you. There are laws in Niune."

"You're however old I say you are, girl," Aleksei said. He sat beside her, while the fae and his translator sat facing them. "If I say you're still seventeen, then that is what counts."

The carriage came to a halt. "I still don't see why we can't leave right away," Aleksei complained with a glance at the fae.

His translator repeated the statement to the fae, who looked annoyed by it. "There are arrangements that must be made," he said, sounding as if he struggled to be civil. "And better we wait for cover of darkness—it will make it easier to slip away without being seen."

Alex doubted either excuse held much truth. More like, the fae's plans—whatever they were—would not be in place until then.

Aleksei didn't seem happy with the explanation, but said nothing. Instead, he threw open the carriage door, grabbed Alex's wrist once again, and dragged her out after him.

Once again, her eyes beheld two markedly different things. Through the right, she saw a grand manor house close by the river, with neatly-trimmed gardens and a high brick wall. Through the left, the truth was revealed: an abandoned house going to ruin, whose gardens were choked with weeds and whose surrounding wall had crumbled in places.

Aleksei pulled her towards the rotting oak door. Desperate to buy time, Alex tried to dig in her heels. "Wait! What is this place? Why are we here?"

The look Aleksei gave her was cold. "Lord Crannog has been kind enough to allow me to stay with him while I searched for you." He pulled her down a short hall, then thrust her inside a small room. Despite the shabby state of the house, even a quick glance showed her that the chamber would make an effective prison. Iron bars covered the only window, and a stout door with a heavy iron lock on it prevented escape back the way they had come.

Aleksei finally let go of her. She stumbled across the room, rubbing her bruised wrist even as she sought to put as much distance between them as possible. Now that they were in private, the look on his face became thunderous with rage.

"You have no idea what trouble you have put me through," her father said through clenched teeth. Both hands shook, as if he could barely restrain the impulse to beat her. "I had it put about that you had left to visit your mother's kin, but by Svarog there is enough doubt now that it will be hard to make any suitable marriage for you."

"For you, you mean," Alex said bitterly. She drew herself up to her full height and stared him in the eye, telling herself to be brave. "I won't do it. I won't go along with it."

He crossed the room in a single stride and slapped her. Agony bloomed in her cheek, and she fell against the wall, shocked by the sudden violence.

"You will do what I tell you," he snarled, grabbing her hair and forcing her to look at him. "You have cost me enough time and trouble, and I swear I will not tolerate any defiance from you. Where is Gosha? Did he help you escape?"

So they never found his body. "He's dead."

"The better for him, then." His hold tightened on her hair until tears sprang to her eyes. "I will not have any further insolence from you, girl. You will do as you're told. And if your mother taught you any of her witchy ways, you had best forget them, or I will make you regret it. Do you understand me?"

Had things not been so grim, Alex might have laughed. "You have no idea what Lord Crannog is, do you? Find a four-leaf clover or a self-bored stone, father, and see what sort of *thing* you've allied yourself with! If you were afraid of mother, you—"

Aleksei slapped her again. "That's enough. You will not speak again. You will not do anything other than what I tell you." He stood up and started to turn away, then stopped. "And you had best not be pregnant, girl. If you bring forth some black bastard, I swear I will drown it in the river."

The door closed behind him, the click of its lock loud as a knell of doom to Alex's ears. Wiping away her tears, she carefully stood up and took stock of her surroundings. Her exploration of the room was quick—it couldn't be otherwise, given the chamber's tiny size—and depressing. Mina could easily have escaped by simply walking through a wall. Unfortunately, Alex had no such option.

She was trapped. And Pook...

Alex remembered the look in his eyes. *Chernovog, please protect him. They were taking him to jail, they said—god of the waning year, let them have been exaggerating when they said they would hang him.*

The thought of Pook dying froze her blood and made her feel as if her heart was being torn apart by thousands of tiny claws. *There has to be some way to help him. There has to.*

But I'm trapped here. The iron bars are set too firmly to pull loose, and I have no tools to cut them free. Mina and Duncan might be able to save him, but they have to find out what happened first. By the time they do, it might be too late.

She had almost run out of options—but not quite. There was still one thing she might do, one promise—no matter how untrustworthy—she might collect on.

Going to the window, she leaned close so that she could speak between the iron bars. “Padgett,” she whispered. “Padgett. Padgett.”

rs

The wheels of the police wagon threw up sinister echoes as it passed through the wall leading into the prison. Through the tiny window in the back, Pook could just see the portcullis fall into place behind them, sealing him away from the outside world.

Despite his life on the streets, Pook had never before been caught by the crushers. Until now, a mixture of quickness and glamour had kept him out of their clutches. *But I've heard the stories. They ain't going to go easy on me, for damn sure. Especially not now, with the mayor and everybody all upset about the riots.*

So maybe no way to escape. No way to help Alex.

Pook had never been one for praying—he couldn't afford the rent on a pew, for starters, and it wasn't like God was going to be worrying Herself about the likes of him anyway. But maybe God would look a little more kindly of somebody like Alex, even if Alex was a heathen and all. Feeling utterly helpless, he bowed his head. *Please, God, don't let nothing bad happen to Alex. Just get her away from her old man. Please.*

The wagon's doors opened, revealing the two crushers who had brought him in. Not wanting to get his head knocked around any more than he already had, Pook did nothing to resist when they dragged him out.

The high walls of the prison surrounded him on all sides, blocking out a glimpse of anything but the sky. The place had once been a fortress, he'd heard, and parts of it did look pretty old. Newer wings had been added on, though, their featureless brick broken up by only the occasional narrow window. Even outside, the smell was terrible.

Pook swallowed, telling himself to be brave. He just had to keep his eyes open, that was all, and wait for his chance. They'd take the cuffs off him eventually, and the second they did, he'd put on his fur face, scare them all half to death, and take off before they could do a damned thing about it.

They hauled him across the courtyard and through a narrow door. Inside was a hall with a window set in one wall. The guards stopped at the window, and Pook saw that it looked into a tiny room, where a man sat behind a desk, a ledger in front of him.

“Brought another one in,” said one of the crushers.

The clerk didn't seem impressed. “Name,” he said dully, picking up his quill pen and dipping it in the inkwell.

“Tamnais,” Pook said defiantly.

“Family name?”

Pook shrugged. One of the crushers laughed. “Street rat like this probably doesn't know who his dad is. Hey, scum, I hear your mom used to do it with dogs in the street. Maybe one of them is your dad.”

If the crusher had figured on making Pook mad by insulting his mother, he had another think coming. “Probably did.” The crusher scowled and cuffed him upside the head for being too agreeable.

The clerk paid them no attention. “Age?”

“Seventeen.”

“Place of residence?”

“The fucking palace, what do you think?”

The crushers smacked him around a little more for that, but they'd reached the end of his damn patience, and fear was starting to give over to pure bad temper. He glowered silently while the clerk listed the charges against him. One of the crushers passed Bob through the window. “Evidence,” he said in response the clerk's surprised look. The clerk only shrugged, made another note, and stuck Bob on a shelf behind him that was crowded with a wide variety of objects that were all probably considered evidence as well.

The crushers hustled Pook down a series of stifling halls, many of which were lined with cells. Shadowy shapes moved in the unlit cells; he heard a child crying, saw the thin, bruised faces of whores and the hard eyes of killers. At least it wasn't winter; he'd heard that prisoners sometimes froze to death in the unheated cells, particularly the little kids.

Five of the corridors came together in a round room, situated so that the guards could keep an eye on all of them from one location. The guard there nodded to the crushers and started to reach for the keys on his belt, but one of them shook his head. “We had a tip that this bit of offal is a violent sort. Said we should keep his cuffs on him, or else he might start fighting with the other prisoners.”

“You can't do that!” protested Pook. *Shit, no, there goes whatever hope I had of getting the hell out of here!*

“Behave yourself, and maybe they'll come off after your trial and before you go to the gallows,” the guard said, like he was doing Pook some kind of favor.

They hauled him to a cell. Pook dug in his heels, just to be obstinate, which got him a good kick in the balls. While he was busy trying not to fall down into a heap, they unlocked the door and flung him face-first into the floor.

Pook picked himself up, cursing the crushers, Alex's dad, and everybody else in Dere just for good measure.

There were several other prisoners in the cell with him. Three of them seemed to be dead-drunk, lying on the floor in their own piss, while the other two just stared at Pook with hard eyes. None of them said anything to him.

Because the two conscious guys were sitting on the straw that made up the only bedding in the cell, Pook went to one corner, sat down, and leaned up against the wall. *What am I going to do?* The cuffs felt as if they had been dipped in acid, eating slowly but inexorably into his skin. He knew it wasn't true—he'd touched enough iron in his day to learn it didn't physically harm him—but that didn't make it any more comfortable.

I got to get out of here. I got to just think harder, that's all.

But hours later, he was still no closer to a solution than he had been in the first few minutes.

rs

As the hours passed, Alex gave up hope that Padgett would be true to her promise. Bereft of anything else to do, she sat down with her back against the wall—there was no furniture in the room—and tried to plan her escape. There would come a moment sometime, somewhere, when she would have an opportunity. *If nothing else, we will have to cross the sea to get back to Ruska. It will only take a few seconds to throw myself over the railing, if I must.*

The thought of having come so far only to drown in the icy waters of the sea depressed her, but it was a last resort that she couldn't entirely dismiss. *Chernovog willing, there will be an opportunity before then. I must simply be vigilant and prepared to act the moment it presents itself.*

"Psst! Alex, me girl, are ye in there?"

Startled, Alex looked up, wondering if she had simply imagined the voice. The room was empty save for her; surely even the fae couldn't hide themselves so utterly from her sight.

"Alex!" called Padgett—from the direction of window.

Alex scrambled to her feet and ran to the window. The fae sat outside, perched in the high branches of a great oak that had once formed the centerpiece of the formal garden. Padgett's face seemed paler than usual, the freckles standing out like spots of blood.

Relief warred with anger. "It took you long enough to come! What good is a promise to help me when you don't bother answering my summons for hours? I could be dead by now!"

Padgett's wings stirred in agitation. "Aye, that ye could, love, and I'd be sorry for it. But yer hosts are not so eager for the likes of me to come calling. They've put protections about this place—strong ones, which makes me wonder who they're trying to hide ye from. I managed to get this far by being quiet and careful, which is what took me so blighted long. But how I'm to get ye out of the house itself, I'm not yet knowing."

Alex felt ashamed for her outburst. "I'm sorry. I should have realized that the fae would protect their lair. Thank you for coming."

"I gave me word, didn't I? Just give me awhile to think on how I'm to get ye out of there."

"Don't bother," Alex said. "I didn't summon you to rescue me."

Padgett's brows arched. "Ye didn't?"

"No. I'm calling in the favor you promised, but it isn't me I want you to save. It's Pook." Briefly, she detailed what little she knew about Pook's arrest. "I don't know where they've taken him, but wherever it was, you have to get him out," she finished.

Padgett tipped her head to one side, peering at Alex thoughtfully. "And what of ye, love?"

Alex's heart clenched, but she forced herself to take a deep breath against the tightness. "I'll be all right," she lied, hoping her voice didn't shake too badly. "Just save Pook."

rs

Mina leaned against the doorframe of the bookstore, watching the sun go down. Her head ached, and she realized that she hadn't had anything to eat since breakfast. "One of them would have sent us word by now, if they could," she said with quiet conviction.

She and Duncan had arrived at the store that morning to find the front door standing open. Vagabond had been wandering about, mewing in distress and refusing to be comforted when Duncan had tried to take her into his lap for petting. Other than the faeling cat, there had been no other living thing in the bookstore.

At first, Mina had thought that Alex had stepped across the street to the bakery and not pulled the door all the way to, so that it had swung open on its own accord. But opening time had come and gone, and Alex had never returned. Nor had Pook shown up for work.

"All of the protections on the store are still in place," Duncan pointed out quietly.

"I know." Mina shifted. "But that only means that no one with malicious intent crossed the threshold. It doesn't mean that trouble wasn't waiting for them on the street."

"No." Duncan folded his long-fingered hands before him, looking deeply troubled. "Pook is...flighty, one might say. I can well see him coming here, talking Alex into a pleasant day at the park, and departing without leaving a note or checking that the door was secured. I doubt that the charms of this musty store would be able to compete with those of Alex, should he get such a notion into his head."

"I agree. But Alex isn't flighty, as you say. No matter what Pook was promising—himself on a silver platter, for all I know—she would at least have left a note."

"Yes." Duncan sighed. "Yes, she would."

Mina bit her lip, uncertain how he would receive her next words. "I'm going to use my power to find them, Duncan. I know they're both wearing amulets, but I should at least be able to locate them."

The lines on Duncan's forehead grew deeper. "I dislike the thought that you might have to," he said at last. "It will mean reaching out across the city for them, and such a wave of magic will attract the attention of the fae."

"They already know where I am if they want to find me."

"True. But there is a difference between sitting quietly in the corner of a crowded room, and standing in the middle of the throng screaming at the top of your lungs. Even those who might have ignored you before will at least look your way."

"I know. But I just don't see any choice."

Duncan sighed. "Neither do I, my dear. Neither do I."

rs

Pook slumped against the cell wall, its cold stone pressed to his forehead, and stared out between the iron bars. Around noon, a guard had brought a paltry meal and a jug of water. His two cellmates who were awake and moving had fought over the food, one giving the other a bloody lip in the process. Both had muttered threats at Pook, who had no real interest in fighting them for anything. A while later, two of the drunks had come to and started moaning and throwing up, so that the cell stank of bile. The third still hadn't moved; Pook wondered if he was dead.

For the first few hours, he'd tried to keep his hopes up, but eventually the misery of the situation had overcome him. *By the time they take the cuffs off, Alex will be gone. Her dad will take her back to Ruska, and how am I going to find her then?* His knowledge of geography was vague at best. *She never even said what town she was from. If it was a town—there was a lot of woods in her dreams. How am I going to find her again?*

The dreams. I'll see her then, ask her where she is. Tell her I'm coming.

If it ain't already too late.

The sound of footsteps made him glance listlessly up. A single guard still stood in the central room, keeping an eye on the halls and making sure that nobody was trying to escape. A figure approached him, coming from the direction of the prison entrance. Through Pook's right eye, it appeared to be another guard. Through his left, it was clearly a fae.

Startled, Pook sat up straighter. The fae was a woman, and her red hair and patchwork coat made him think she might be the seelie that had been hanging around bugging Alex. As he watched, wondering what the hell was going on, Padgett walked up to the guard.

"I've an order to fetch one of the prisoners," she said in a gruff male voice. "The magistrate is wanting to talk to him—something about a murder he might have witnessed." She held out what looked to Pook like nothing more than a leaf, but the guard obviously thought it was a proper order, because he nodded and drew the keys from his belt. As they approached the cell, Padgett met Pook's gaze and winked at him.

What the...?

To hell with it—she's getting me out. Plenty of time to ask questions later.

The guard drew his revolver and kept it trained on the inmates as he unlocked the door. "You," he said, nodding at Pook. Pook wasted no time standing up and hurrying out.

As the guard relocked the cell door, Padgett mouthed *get the key* to Pook.

And how the hell am I supposed to do that?

"Here now—what's that?" Padgett exclaimed indignantly, pointing down the corridor. Pook caught a glimpse of a glamour that looked like the ugliest and biggest rat he'd ever seen.

"Faugh! Damn beasts!" the guard exclaimed, pointing his gun at it. The prisoners in the cell behind it scrambled wildly out of the way.

Pook had spent years picking pockets on the street. This was just like the scams he'd run with Rose, where one of them would distract the mark while the other was robbing him blind. It was only a moment's work to neatly slip the ring of keys from the guard's belt and slide them into his own pocket. His body and that of the guard blocked any of the prisoners from spotting the theft.

"Fast bugger," Padgett said cheerfully.

"Vermin get bigger all the time," the guard complained, lowering his gun but not putting it away altogether. "Soon I won't be able to tell the rats apart from the prisoners, eh?"

Padgett laughed. "True enough." Pook saw her steal a glance at the guard's belt, as if she thought he wasn't good enough to have pulled off a simple lift like that. A moment later, a glamour of the keys appeared where the real ones had been. "Ah well, I must be going. Come on, ye slug, there's a magistrate waiting for a word with ye."

Pook put on a surly expression and followed her down the hall. "I need Bob—my sword," he murmured as soon as he dared.

The fae nodded. Her face was set in a grim expression, and he could feel the heat pouring off her tattered wings. "Where is it, then, do ye know?"

"Evidence room. Near the door."

The clerk showed no interest whatsoever when Padgett told him that she would need the sword handed over to her. Either her enchanted leaf had convinced him that she had absolute authority, or he simply didn't care. From the bored expression on his face, Pook guessed the latter.

He took a deep breath of air as soon as they were in the courtyard outside. The sun was setting, and the high walls ensured that most of the yard was already in shadow. Padgett slipped to one side and put a glamour over herself, vanishing from mortal sight. Pook stepped into the deepest shadow he could find, hurriedly unlocked the cuffs from around his wrists, and dropped them. A moment later, he felt the touch of Padgett's glamour close over him as well,

like a warm breeze against his skin. Unseen, they walked to the postern gate, waited a few moments until one of the endless stream of crushers went out, and followed on his heels.

As soon as they drew abreast of an alley, they ducked into it, and Padgett let the glamour drop. Pook put his back against the wall and faced her. “Thanks. I appreciate the rescue. Want to tell me how you knew I needed it?”

Padgett studied him with eyes the color of a cloudless summer sky. “Aye. I’m guessing Alex told ye about me, then?”

“Yeah. She did.”

“Then ye’ll not be surprised to hear that she was calling in the favor I promised her. But instead of asking me to help her, she sent me here to ye.”

“What! Why?” *Alex had the chance to escape—what the hell was she thinking?* “Is she safe?”

Padgett shook her head gravely. “Nay, love, I’m not thinking she is, not by a long shot. But it was ye she was worried about.”

For some reason, it made him want to cry, to think that she had been so concerned for him. Swallowing against tears, he asked, “Can you tell me where she is, then?”

Padgett hissed and drew further back into the alley. Startled by the reaction, Pook started to ask her what her problem was, when he realized that she was staring at the prison gate, not at him. Following her gaze, he saw that Camhlaidh was standing in the street, studying the prison with a bemused look on his face. After a moment, he walked towards it and simply vanished through the wall.

“What the—was he coming to rescue me, too?” Pook asked, surprised. *Maybe this being a prince is good for something after all.*

“If ye want me guess, then yes. Which raises some interesting questions, seeing as it’s the unseelie fae who are holding yer girl captive.”

Pook felt as if he had missed a step walking downstairs. “It was her dad that came after her, not the fae.”

Padgett shook her head. “I’m not knowing about that, me boy. But when yer lady-love called in her favor, I had a hell of a time getting to her with all the unseelie magic guarding the place.”

“That doesn’t make any damned sense!”

“Nay, it’s doesn’t. I’m asking meself why they’re wanting yer girl— and how it was that Camhlaidh found out ye were here in prison.”

“Shit.” None of it made any damned sense, so Pook thrust it from him. There would be plenty of time to worry about it after he got Alex back.

A sly smile touched Padgett’s narrow face. “Would ye like me to keep Camhlaidh distracted, then? He’ll find out yer gone sooner or later, but mayhap ye might want it to be later.”

“Yeah.” Pook didn’t know what Camhlaidh was up to, but his gut told him it wasn’t anything good. “Thanks.”

It was then that the wave hit. Pook felt it coming only seconds before it reached him; a ripple of magic, like rings on the surface of a dark pond. Something big and powerful brushed against him, making him think of the day he’d fallen in the river and the aughisky had passed by on its way to devour George. It hesitated when it reached him, and he felt it *push* just a little, like an unseen companion giving his arm a squeeze. Then it was gone.

“Mina,” he said, feeling more than a little awed.

“Aye.” Padgett’s look grew even more solemn. “Every fae and faeling in the city will have felt that. Mina will know where Alex is, now—and more to the point, the unseelie fae who’ve got Alex will know that Mina knows. They may try to move her before Mina gets there.”

“Oh hell,” Pook whispered, and started to run.

Chapter Eleven

At the sound of quick footsteps coming down the hall, Alex scrambled to her feet and turned to face the door. A moment later, a key turned in the lock, and the door was flung open. Aleksei stood there, his translator behind him.

“Come,” he said harshly, with no word of explanation.

For a moment, she considered resisting. *If I dig my heels in now, when I have no chance of escape, it will only put him on his guard. If I pretend to cooperate, it may buy me a moment of inattention later.*

It wasn’t much of a plan, but it was the only one she could come up with at the moment. “Yes, Father,” she murmured, lowering her eyes submissively. If her sudden defeat seemed odd to him, he gave no sign, only grabbed her by the arm and dragged her down the hall at a trot. His fingers dug hard into the muscle, and she knew that she would have bruises there later.

When they reached the courtyard, Alex was surprised to see that a stagecoach awaited them. *Then we aren’t leaving by ship? But why ever not?*

The imposing coach was black with gold trim. Luggage that she supposed belonged to Aleksei was lashed to the top. The driver sat hunched over, a broad-brimmed hat pulled low over his face, but when he turned towards her she saw that he was yet another unseelie fae beneath his glamour. Like Pook, he was dark-skinned; his enormous eyes were the color of autumn leaves, and his smile revealed rows of pointed teeth.

The cover over the boot was slightly askew; as they drew near, Alex noticed that it was heavily laden, not with luggage, but with barrels. Curious, she pretended to stumble on a rock and grabbed the edge of the boot to steady

herself, that she might get a closer look. Stamped on the side of the nearest barrel was a single word: kerosene.

Kerosene? Had this been an ordinary stagecoach, she would have assumed that it was simply transporting goods from Dere to somewhere in the countryside. *But this is a private conveyance. Even if the fae stole it, it wouldn't have been carrying goods.*

So what in the name of Chernovog do unseelie fae want with kerosene?

"I'm afraid that I must stay in Dere, at the embassy," Aleksei's translator was saying when she returned her attention to the others around her. "Will you be all right?"

Aleksei glared at Alex. "My daughter will translate everything I ask. And do it accurately." There was no need to state the threat she heard in his voice.

She bowed her head, still playing the docile girl. "Yes, Father."

He snorted, and she wondered if he believed she'd accepted her defeat, or if he guessed it was all an act. "Get in."

She climbed inside the coach. Crannog was already waiting impatiently within; he barely gave Aleksei enough time to sit down before rapping sharply on the roof. The coach immediately lurched forwards, passing out through the ruined gates and into the streets at a speed that bordered on reckless.

I wonder where we're going. And why are the fae in such a hurry to get us there?

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Pook ran through the streets, heedless of traffic, other pedestrians, and crushers. A stitch developed in his side, and his lungs burned with effort, but he pushed himself past what he would have thought was the limit of his endurance.

He was almost to the bookstore when the familiar double-brougham hove into view. To Pook's surprise, Duncan was lashed upright to the driver's seat, the reins in his long hands. The brougham came to a precipitous halt in front of him, causing a snarl in the traffic behind it, and the door was hurled open to reveal Mina inside. "Get in!"

He flung himself into the seat, and Mina slammed the door shut even as the brougham lurched into motion. "I didn't know Duncan could drive this thing," he said between gasps for breath.

"He's practiced, just in case," Mina said, but she looked a little worried, and Pook wondered how much practice there had really been. "Where have you been? What's happened?"

"Are we going to get Alex?" Pook asked.

"Yes. Now tell me what happened!"

Pook told her everything he knew, which was mostly just that Alex's dad had showed up in front of the bookstore, had Pook arrested, and dragged Alex off to God knew where. When he got to the part about unseelie fae being involved, Mina's expression went from worried to straight-out pissed.

"What the hell is going on here?" she muttered when he was done.

"I don't know. Don't care, neither, so long as we get Alex back from them." *Shouldn't have trusted any of the fae, not even for a second. Turn your back on them, and first thing you know there's a knife in it.*

A few minutes later, the brougham pulled up in front of a crumbling mansion, its wheels bumping over the curb. The courtyard beyond the ruined gates was empty except for a very confused-looking man, who stood and stared about him as if he had never seen an abandoned house before.

Mina leapt out of the carriage before it had come to a halt and stalked across the weed-choked drive towards the man. "Where are they? Where have they taken Alex?" she demanded.

The man turned towards her slowly. "I say...what's happened to the house? It—it was all perfectly fine...and then suddenly it was falling apart. I don't understand how that can be, do you?"

Mina snarled, revealing small, sharp teeth. "I don't have time for this, human," she hissed. Both hands locked onto the lapels of his coat, jerking him forward. "Where the hell are they?!"

What little color remained in the man's face vanished in an instant. "Th-th-they left!" he stammered frantically.

"I know that, you idiot! Now tell me where they're going, or by God I'll put ice in your bones!"

"A stagecoach! They took a stagecoach—black with gold trim! Boyar Tabanov dismissed me to return to the Ruskan embassy, where he hired me. But I forgot my hat, and when I returned to fetch it, the house was all wrong!"

Mina gave him a shake that rattled his teeth. "A stagecoach—so they didn't head for the docks, then? That doesn't make any sense."

"It was on Lord Crannog's advice! The man who-who owned this house! They were to take the Dryden Way out of Dere, then go east along the byways. I don't know exactly where, you must believe me! Have mercy!"

Mina shoved him from her in disgust. The man collapsed into the drive, tears of fear and confusion streaming down his face. Pook thought about going over and giving him a good kick, just to pay him back for his part in kidnapping Alex, but there wasn't enough time.

"Did you recognize that name? Crannog?" Mina asked Duncan as she returned to the carriage.

"No. Crannog is the name of no lord of Niune. No human one, anyway," Duncan replied grimly. "Dryden Way it is, then."

The brougham set off with a jerk, narrowly missing a mussel-seller pushing her cart down the road. She screamed a curse, and Pook reflected that Duncan's driving was likely to bring the crushers down on them if they didn't get the hell out of the city soon.

Pook slid to the edge of his seat and peered anxiously out the nearest window, desperate for a glimpse of the

stagecoach the translator had described. Duncan didn't waste any time, or slow down for much of anything, either, and so it was only a few minutes before they were passing out through the gates and onto the high road.

It was the first time Pook had left the city since he arrived five years before. Even with the sun almost totally below the horizon, there was still a fair amount of traffic on the wide road. Carriages, mail coaches, and produce carts all vied for space, along with herds of sheep and geese being driven to the city for slaughter.

"This is too crowded," Mina said abruptly. "Whatever they're up to, they won't want to stay on this road for long."

Pook struggled to remember the byways he had wandered down on his way into the city. "I think the big roads steer clear of the Blackrush—don't want to get bogged down in the marshes and stuff, right? But if unseelie fae have Alex, they'll want to stay near the water."

"You're right. Duncan—take any side road that goes off towards the river!"

Duncan complied only seconds later, cutting across traffic in front of a herd of panicked sheep, which nearly trampled their shepherd in their attempt to get away from the careening brougham. The carriage tilted precariously, then righted itself.

It was immediately apparent that this side road wasn't kept up as well as the main thoroughfare. The wheels jounced in and out of ruts and potholes, knocking Pook's head against the roof and bruising his backside.

The last rays of the sun disappeared, and the only light came from the carriage's lanterns. They illuminated the rutted dirt of the roadbed, briefly caressed the thick vegetation leaning in from either side, and sparked off the eyes of animals in the brush. Swarms of fireflies appeared, and Pook shivered, hoping like hell that there weren't any sprites hidden in their midst.

"There they are!" shouted Duncan.

Pook stuck his head recklessly out the window and saw the dark bulk of the stagecoach in front of them. It seemed to be going a little slower; maybe its driver actually worried about things like broken bones. For a moment, he wondered if he could put ice in the axle and burst it, or do the same thing to a wheel, but then realized that would make the coach overturn with Alex inside of it.

"Go up alongside the coach!" he yelled at Duncan, hoping he could be heard over the rush of the wind.

Either Duncan heard him or had the same idea himself, because the horses put on a sudden burst of speed. The driver of the stagecoach cast a startled look at them as they came up alongside, and Pook saw that he was a fae all right. A moment later, another fae face appeared at the near window, glaring out at them.

Praying they didn't hit a deep pothole and go over, Pook hoisted himself out the window and clung to the side of the carriage. Mina yelled something at him that he couldn't hear. "You take care of the driver!" he yelled back at her and prepared to jump.

Even as he flung himself at the stagecoach, it swerved suddenly towards them. The side of the coach slammed into him, and he found himself scrabbling wildly at the luggage rail to keep from ending up under the wheels. He caught it in his left hand and missed with his right; a moment later, his whole weight ended up swinging free, pivoting out on his left hand and making his shoulder feel like it was about to come out of the socket.

Mina had climbed out onto the drivers seat by Duncan. Pook could feel her power, although he couldn't spare enough attention to see just what she was doing. Whatever it was, it distracted the driver enough so that he didn't try to squash Pook in between the two carriages, which would have been damned easy given how narrow the road was.

Better hope we don't meet anybody going the other way.

Somehow, he managed to hook one foot onto the door handle, taking some of the weight off his arm. He caught a confused glimpse of Alex lunging towards the window, then being torn back by someone else. The fae sitting across from her hissed something in her direction, then turned towards Pook with a murderous look.

Rage jolted through Pook, driving away all the pain and the fear. This bastard had helped grab Alex, taken her away from everybody who loved her, and probably scared her to death in the process.

Well you just pissed off the wrong b'hoy. Bob was still bumping along in the sash at his waist, so with his free hand he drew the sword. Shadows wreathed the blade, which itself gleamed white as ice in the moonlight. It startled Pook for a moment, because the sword had never looked that way before. Then the fae pulled down the window and lunged out at him, the talons on his hands hooked to rend, and Pook forgot to wonder what was up with Bob. The training Kuromori had pounded into him took over, and he swept the blade down onto the fae's wrist.

Flesh and bone parted like water before the keen edge of the blade. Even so, it felt as if the tip had snagged in something invisible, something that tore like a thousand cobwebs all rolled up together. The glamour on the fae vanished, its spell rent apart as surely as its flesh.

Pook heard a man's cry of fear and horror, but it was drowned out by the howl of the fae. Greenish-black blood pumped from the stump of its arm, and it jerked back into the coach. Hoping to kill it before it could hurt Alex, Pook kicked off from the doorhandle, swinging out on one arm with the intention of hooking his legs over the windowsill and dragging himself inside.

But even as he did so, the stagecoach slammed into a deep pothole, swerved—and then dropped a wheel off the road and into the ditch.

Time seemed to slow to a crawl. Feeling the sickening lurch of the coach as it started to go over, Pook blindly kicked out, letting go of his hold on the rail at the same time. He hit the dirt road hard enough to knock the wind from his lungs, and for a moment he expected to feel the brougham run him over. But the wheels were already past, leaving him lying unscathed in the dirt.

For a moment, he couldn't move at all. He heard the screaming of horses, heard the brougham come to a halt,

heard Mina yelling something, while all he could do was lie there and try to get a breath. Then his lungs got to working again, and he gasped in a great heave of air.

Alex!

Despite the fact that every inch of his body felt bruised, Pook rolled over and staggered to his feet. The stagecoach lay on its side, the horses thrashing in their traces. The driver was gone, either under the coach or kited off into the marsh. The door on the upper side of the coach had been flung open, and he saw the wounded fae crawl out and collapse onto the roadbed. The sharp smell of kerosene filled the air.

What the hell?

Two more figures emerged from the wrecked stagecoach, and Pook felt his heart twist at the sight of Alex as she took a few stumbling steps away. Her hair had come down from its bun and straggled into her face, and her dress was ripped at the shoulder. One cheek was bruised, and she moved stiffly, like she'd taken a hit when the carriage went over. Even so, at that moment he thought she was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

Then, abruptly, she came to a halt for no reason he could figure. The lamps on the brougham reflected on the lenses of her spectacles, hiding her eyes so that he couldn't read her expression. Very slowly, she turned and faced the ruined coach.

The fae had managed to get to its knees. The front of its tattered clothing was soaked in something Pook thought for a moment was blood. Then he realized that the kerosene he smelled was leaking from barrels strapped to the coach, which had broken open and spilled onto the roadway. The puddle was still spreading, around the fae...and around the man crouched like a frightened rabbit beside the ruined coach.

Alex didn't even spare her father a glance. Keeping her eyes fixed on the fae, she reached very deliberately into her pocket, and drew something out. It wasn't until she struck the match off the side of the box that he realized what it was.

"Alex!" he shouted; Aleksei screamed something in Ruskan, but they were both too late. Without any sign of hesitation, Alex tossed the match into the pooling kerosene.

Pook ripped rain and ice and snow from the surrounding marshes, flinging everything he could grab at the conflagration even as he saw the fae go up in a screaming pyre. Mina did the same, maybe a tad quicker, and the flames died under darkness and cold, snuffed out before they could spread.

Alex swayed a little where she stood. Pook ran to her, almost colliding with Mina, who was trying to do the same thing. He flung his arms around Alex, but she was stiff and unyielding, staring blankly at the burned thing that had been a fae.

"I fear that she is in shock," Duncan called from the brougham. "We need to get her warm and safe as quickly as possible."

"Come on, Alex," Mina coaxed, tugging gently on her arm. "We're going to take you home, all right?"

For a moment, Alex resisted. Then, moving like a woman in a dream, she turned to the lone person there who had nothing but human blood in his veins. He had staggered away from the coach and seemed to be thinking about running. She said something to him, her voice flat and dreadfully calm. Pook didn't understand the words, but Aleksei blanched and stumbled into the ditch, crashing through the bracken and vines in the direction of the river.

Alex closed her eyes, and Pook felt her starting to tremble, as if she'd used up her last reserve telling her dad off. He started to pull her to the brougham, but Mina put a hand to his arm to stop him. "Wait. Your work isn't done." She nodded in the direction of the burned fae. "He's still alive."

No...

Pook took a deep breath, telling himself not to look. But it was impossible as he crossed the road to where the burned creature lay. The stink of its roasted flesh wasn't the same as Collin's had been, but the lipless moaning mouth and the white-filmed, cooked eyes were all too similar. Pook took Bob in both hands and brought the blade down on the cracked flesh of the fae's neck, severing the head in a single stroke. Then he turned, ran a few steps to get away from the sight, and fell to his hands and knees while he threw up.

God. The taste of bile filled his mouth, and he wiped his face with a shaking hand. He felt like the day had lasted a thousand years, and every damned one of them bad.

Alex and Mina were still standing by the brougham when he walked back. Alex was watching him, and the faint light of the lanterns glittered in the tears slowly tracking down her cheeks. He didn't say anything, only stopped and opened his arms to her. With a soft cry, she ran the few steps between them, latching her arms around his waist so tight he could barely catch his breath.

They clung to one another in silence for a few minutes. Pook pressed his face against her hair, breathing deeply of her scent. The terrible fear that had ridden him all day, making him scared that he would never see or hold her again, ebbed away, leaving his heart raw and his hands shaking. Peripherally, he was aware of Mina untangling the stagecoach horses and letting them go free.

"Alex? Are you going to be all right?" Mina asked when she was done. Her face looked worn and haggard.

Alex loosed her death-grip on Pook to face her aunt. "Y-yes. I will be."

Mina nodded and clapped her on the shoulder. "Then let's get out of here before something else goes wrong."

Chapter Twelve

Mina carried a tea tray into the study. After rescuing Alex, they had come home, although at a somewhat more sedate pace than they had left, if only because the horses were tired. As she set the tray down, she glanced at the girl in question, trying to judge what her mental state might be after being kidnapped and threatened.

But if I had to guess, it isn't fear of the fae that's eating her up inside—it's her father. That's what has got her so unbalanced.

And hell, why wouldn't it? Alex had fled over half the world to get away from the man, only to find him standing on her very doorstep.

Bastard. I hope the aughisky eats him.

Alex sat on the divan, wrapped in a blanket and Pook's arms, both. Her hair straggled down around her in snarls, giving her a fey look that Mina had never seen before. Dark circles showed under both eyes, and there was an ugly bruise on one cheek that Mina suspected hadn't come from the stagecoach accident. Dirt smudged her face, and her dress was torn, exposing one pale shoulder. Still, it seemed as if she might be slowly recovering her composure. At least she had stopped crying, which was something, given that she'd sobbed into Pook's shoulder the whole way back here.

As for Pook, the boy looked like five miles of bad road himself. But there was a defiant gleam in his eye, as if he'd challenge God if Her plans for Alex weren't to his liking.

He probably would, too.

"Here we are," Mina said, picking up a cup and handing it to Alex.

The girl took it with a shaky smile. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." Overcome with an unexpected surge of affection, Mina brushed a lock of hair out of Alex's face, then kissed her on the forehead. "You scared the shit out of us."

"I do not believe that Alex's father will consider returning to Dere," Duncan said when Mina handed him his cup. "But it would not hurt to go to Queen Dagmar and obtain a decree stating what should be obvious: that Alex is a Niunish citizen now, with all the rights attendant therein, and is not to be manhandled. A pardon for Pook would not be a bad idea, either."

"I didn't do nothing!" Pook protested, as if being unjustly accused of criminal behavior was far worse than all the law breaking he had never been caught for.

"If Dagmar suggests they drop the charges, they will," Mina assured him tiredly. She sank down onto an ottoman and sipped her own tea, wishing that she had thought to put a dollop of something stronger in it. "We've got other problems. I want to know why the unseelie fae were helping Aleksei. I thought they were at least nominally on our side—not allies, as such, but not actively trying to kill us either."

Alex shook her head. "I don't know. They didn't say anything in my hearing that would explain it. Of course, Father thought that they were human." She shivered, and Pook tightened his hold on her.

Duncan sighed and rubbed tiredly at his eyes. "This makes no sense. Must we now fear being hunted by every fae in Niune?"

"I think I might know why they did it," Pook said in a subdued voice so unlike his normal tones that Mina looked twice to be sure it was indeed him.

"Then by all means, please share," Duncan prompted.

Pook's full mouth turned down at the corners, and shadows lurked in his ash-colored eyes. "I ain't sure that I'm right...but here's what I think. After we went to the Crawl, I started thinking we needed some answers, right? And old Camhlaidh had been hanging around, offering to help me out, so I figured he'd be one to ask."

Mina felt cold. "Pook, I told you Camhlaidh is dangerous. Don't you ever listen to a damn thing anyone says?"

The silver flecks in his eyes flared momentarily. "Hell, yeah, I do! I wasn't real thrilled with the prospect myself, but what else was I going to do?"

"So what did he tell you?" Duncan asked, heading off an argument.

Pook shrugged. "Mostly a lot of flimflam about how loyal he is and how he's looking out for my interests. Stuff that wouldn't have fooled me when I was ten and straight off the turnip cart. But that ain't the point. The problem ain't what he said to me, but what I said to him."

Mina didn't like the sound of that. "I'm afraid to ask."

"I asked him about Padgett, what he thought she might be up to. Camhlaidh said about what you'd figure—that Padgett was trouble, that she'd kill Alex, and we better steer clear of her. Said Dagmar ain't with us, neither, 'cause she's part seelie.

"None of that was much of a surprise to hear him say, so I didn't think no more about it. But now I'm asking myself if Camhlaidh didn't start planning this then. He sure don't want us talking to no seelie, hearing their side of things, and so he asks himself how can he make sure we don't?"

Alex frowned. She looked a little better, as if giving her a problem to worry at had revived her spirits a bit. "I'm sorry, Pook, but I don't see the connection."

"What's going to make me hate the seelie forever, make me want to do anything to hurt them? Make me say 'that Camhlaidh is an all-right guy, and if he's going to help me kill as many seelie as I can, then by God I'll do any damned thing he tells me'?" He looked at them all for some sign of comprehension, then sighed. "Look—here's what happened. Aleksei shows up with the crushers. Aleksei takes Alex, and I get hauled off to jail—I never see the unseelie in the carriage, never know that they got anything to do with it. If Padgett hadn't come along, I would've still been cooling my heels in that cell by the time Camhlaidh showed up and rescued me. I'd be all grateful to him, and he'd be all concerned about me...but I'm betting he wouldn't have gotten me out until it was too late to do anything.

"While I'm stuck in the cell, the two unseelie wait until the sun's far enough down that they can stand to go out in it, then take Alex out of Dere to a road where there ain't going to be no witnesses. Then they break out the kerosene, soak down the carriage, and burn up Alex and her dad inside."

"Bloody hell," Mina muttered with a shiver.

"So I get there too late, and see the carriage all burned up, and what am I going to think? I'm going to figure the seelie done it, ain't I?"

"Damn it!" Mina jumped to her feet, wanting action. But there was none to be had, not now, so she paced restlessly to the cold fireplace and back.

Pook looked troubled. "You think I'm right, then?"

"Hell, yes. He's done it before." Mina closed her eyes, remembering the terrified look on the dead face of her friend Abby. "He murdered Abby to get me angry, to cut my ties to the human world and push me into declaring all-out war on the Seelie Court. If his plan had succeeded tonight, none of us would have thought to question that Alex had been murdered by the seelie fae."

Alex shuddered. Pook stroked her arm, then kissed the little patch of bare skin on her shoulder where her dress had been ripped. "It's okay, baby. I won't let nothing happen to you."

"None of us will." Duncan's face might have been carved from stone, but Mina knew him well enough to guess that he was grappling with his own inner demons.

"So what do we do now?" Alex asked tentatively after a few minutes.

Mina ran her hand back through her hair. "For now...we get what sleep we can. None of us is thinking clearly right now. But tomorrow...tomorrow, Camhlaidh had better hope I don't catch up with him, because I've let his debt go unpaid for too damn long. It's time to collect."

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It was strange, Duncan thought, how some memories could retain such clarity that it seemed they had been made only yesterday rather than a lifetime ago. He could still recall the day he had left for university almost forty years before, could remember the crisp hint of autumn in the air as summer began to wane. He had been sheltered all his life from the harsh realities of the world, and at seventeen he had believed himself immortal. It had never occurred to him that the parting with his family would be the very last. His father had been too sick to see him off, but his mother and his sisters had come out to the carriage with him. His mother's face had faded with time, but he could still envision Fenella, the elder of the girls, with her haughty beauty and cold ways, as well as little Moira. The five-year old had been the child of their parents' age, doted on by all. She had given him a flower she had picked from beside the drive, but he had been in a hurry and had dropped it before climbing into the carriage.

The world outside the study window was dark and still, and the only light came from a single lamp in hall. Mina had gone upstairs to get Pook settled in one of the spare bedrooms, and he thought that Alex had left as well, until he heard footsteps in the hall and saw her ghostly reflection in the window.

"Is there anything I can do for you, my dear?" he asked. His heart ached for her. Surely it was not fair that such a young woman should have faced so many trials.

"No. I didn't think I'd be able to sleep. Am I disturbing you?"

"Not at all." He held out his hand, and she came over and took it. "I am deeply grateful that you're alive and still with us, Alexandreya."

"Thank you. For everything...uncle." It was the first time she had ever used the term in his hearing, and he hoped that it was a sign of good things.

"May I ask...what did you say to your father, there at the end?"

He couldn't make out her expression in the darkened room, but her voice was surprisingly firm. "I told him that I finally saw him for what he was. That I had faced things far more powerful than he could ever hope to be, and that he was nothing but a petty tyrant. I told him to leave and never come back to trouble me again."

"I daresay he will not return. He did not seem pleased to learn that his allies were other than human."

"He wouldn't have been." Alex took in a sharp breath, like a patient bracing herself against the pain she knows must follow. "Mama hid her faelings nature from him. Up until the last year of her life, he never knew that he had married a woman who was anything other than human. She taught me in secret, when we were alone in her room."

"But she was found out in the end?" Duncan guessed gently.

"Yes. In many ways, Father had complete control over both our lives. The only thing that made it bearable was that he spent the summer at court. Mother had some decisions when it came to the household, but any of them could be overturned at a single word from him. And of course he would be the one to choose my future husband and arrange a marriage that would benefit him. I don't think that Mama ever totally accepted that she had no real power in her life. She acknowledged the fact, but she hated it, and in the end...she rebelled.

"Father returned from court with a marriage proposal from an old man who had outlived his other wives. I doubt that he would have accepted it ultimately, if only because there were children from the previous marriages who would stand to inherit before any offspring of mine. But, for whatever reason, this was the one thing that pushed Mama too far. She stood up to him and told him that she would not have me wedded to a man four times my age, nor to any brutish boyar's son that he chose for me.

"Her defiance surprised him, I think. She had never been so outspoken before. So he struck her...and she struck back with magic.

"Father knew nothing of faelings, and even if he had I doubt it would have changed things. He accused her of witchcraft. Somehow, perhaps from one of the herbwomen among the serfs, he learned about the effect iron has on us.

So he had her bound in chains and taken away to a sanitarium.”

Alex’s voice faltered, and Duncan could hear her tears even if he could not see them. He took her hand in both of his own and held it, wondering what sort of comfort he could possibly offer.

“I didn’t know what to do,” Alex said eventually. “It was all so sudden...I couldn’t think, couldn’t act. Father thought that Mama might have taught me witchcraft as well, so he decided to make certain that I would renounce any magic I had learned. He took me to the sanitarium to see her a few months after she was confined.” Alex’s voice cracked on the words. “They had locked her in a basement, Duncan. Chained to the floor by iron, with nothing but straw for a bed. And the other inmates...there were people screaming all the time, sobbing, howling in their madness. Excrement smeared on the walls, and fleas and lice and Chernovog only knows what else.

“My mother had been sent to hell on earth, and she looked it. She was so thin, so dirty! I tried to go to her, but they wouldn’t let me. They made me stand and look. I think she was ashamed...she wouldn’t meet my eyes, but she begged Father to have mercy on me. And then they took me away, and I never saw her again.

“A few months later, word came that she had died. I don’t know how. I thought that perhaps Father had arranged for her death, hoping to remarry. Maybe he didn’t have to, though—sickness was rampant amongst the inmates. Maybe she died from that. I don’t know.”

Tears streamed freely down her face. Duncan felt wetness on his own cheeks. “My dearest Alex...I cannot say how sorry I am.”

She pressed on, as if she had to get the words out now, before her courage failed. “I waited until winter, until I had as much power as I would ever be able to draw upon. And then I left...just walked out one night under a glamour and took to the forest with everything I could carry. I didn’t know if I would make it to a port, or if I would starve or freeze or be eaten by wild animals, but it didn’t matter. Anything was better than spending even one more day in that house.”

Duncan could feel her shaking, so he put an arm around her. Ever since Alex had come to Dere, he had dreaded learning the truth of what had happened to little Moira. *And yet the truth still managed to be worse than my most terrible imaginings.*

At least justice was served. The few things Alex had said up until this point had made him certain that her father had been in some way responsible for Moira’s death. And so, during the moments when everyone else had been distracted by the fire and the burning fae, he had turned all his attention onto Aleksei. Duncan did not possess great power such as Mina and Pook had, but he did have two things: an aptitude for cold, and knowledge of anatomy.

Sharpening all of his power to a fine point, he had reached out and concentrated on freezing a small patch of cells on Aleksei’s aorta. Not enough to slay him instantly...but enough to kill the cells and ensure that the great artery would burst shortly thereafter.

Alex had been brutalized enough this day; he would not tell her that her father was either dead or doomed, no matter how evil the man’s actions had been. Perhaps someday, if it seemed that she lived in fear of Aleksei’s return, but not this night.

“You have shown extraordinary courage,” Duncan said quietly. “I am truly proud that you are my niece. If only I had known that Moira still lived, I would have written, and perhaps you both would be sitting here with me tonight.”

“I know.” He thought that her tears had ceased, at least for a while. Had Alex given herself any opportunity to grieve before now? Or had her own perilous escape forced her to put grieving aside, merely to stay alive?

“Was there any funeral for your mother?” he asked.

Alex shook her head. She took off her spectacles, cleaned them on her handkerchief, then put them back on. “No. Everyone else wanted her forgotten.”

“Then perhaps tomorrow we shall do something to honor her life and her courage. Would you like that?”

The idea seemed to surprise her. “Yes. Yes I would.”

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Pook stood in the center of the drive in front of Duncan and Mina’s house. He’d slept later than he’d meant to, and when he got up and went downstairs, he’d seen Alex and Duncan out in the garden. After watching in puzzlement for a few minutes, he realized they were making some of kind of memorial to Alex’s mom. Figuring that was family stuff that didn’t include him, he went out the front instead.

It had been a couple of days since he’d been able to go by Kuromori’s, and he thought he’d better practice, or else he’d be in major trouble when he went back. Centering himself like Kuromori had taught him, he drew the sword from its sheath and looked at it.

The sun reflected brightly off the blade, but other than that there was nothing odd about it at all. Whatever Bob had been up to last night, it wasn’t interested in doing it this morning, it seemed.

Mina came out of the stables, where she must have been taking care of the horses. Crossing the gravel-lined drive to him, she eyed the sword curiously. “So, did you finally figure out what that thing does?”

“Sort of. I don’t know why it looked all weird, though.”

“Are you sure you didn’t do anything?”

“Pretty sure.” Pook scowled, remembering. “I was hanging off the side of the coach, and that damned fae was coming at me through the window, and I saw Alex in there and—”

Shadows flickered to life around the blade, far weaker than they had been the night before, but definitely there. “What the hell?” he asked, glancing at Mina in confusion.

She shook her head slowly. “I don’t know. But it seems like it responded to you. To your need, maybe?”

He wondered if the magic seemed weaker because he wasn't in real danger, or because the sun was up. "I got something I want to try. Throw some magic at me."

Mina frowned. "What do you want me to do?"

"It don't matter—just don't make it anything too bad, in case I'm wrong."

While Mina mulled that over, he fell into a fighting stance. Centering himself, he concentrated on all his faeling senses, determined not to let her slip anything by him. Her wards were good, but at this range he could still feel it when she pulled strength from the earth and hurled it at him like a stone.

The sword sliced the air between them, but Pook felt the moment it intersected with the magic Mina had built. The power dispersed before it ever touched him.

Mina's eyes widened. "It cuts through magic as well as flesh."

"Yeah. I guess it does."

"That ought to put you on level ground with just about any fae, no matter how powerful."

"Huh." Pook inspected the blade, but it had gone back to being an ordinary-looking piece of metal as far as he could tell. "Who would've thought the fae would have given me something useful after all?"

Chapter Thirteen

Pook stayed on his guard in the days after Alex's kidnapping. The incident had shown him just how vulnerable they really were. If there had been an army of seelie fae waiting on the doorstep that morning instead of a bunch of humans, they might have both ended up dead. So he vowed to be more careful, and got in the habit of never going out a door or around a corner without checking things out first. Given that Bob had turned out to be pretty handy, Pook also threw himself into learning how to use the sword with an enthusiasm he hadn't had before.

Kuromori seemed pleased by Pook's new dedication. As summer came on, the heat in the flat on Crescent Street got to the point where Pook didn't think he could even breathe, let alone wave a sword around, so they moved their sessions up to the roof of the building where they could at least catch a breeze. Sometimes, other easterners would show up and just watch from the sidelines. Although Kuromori never acknowledged them, Pook figured that they must be okay, or else his sensei would have sent them packing.

Alex was a frequent spectator, too. She'd bring along whatever gadget she was working on at the time, and sit over to the side, tinkering with it while Kuromori and Pook whacked at each other. Although she didn't say it out loud, Pook got the feeling that she didn't like being at the bookstore by herself anymore. After what she'd told him had happened to her mom, he could understand her being concerned that her dad might decide to turn back up.

Once or twice, though, she went home with Duncan and Mina, which kept Pook from having to worry about her. One night, when it was just him and Kuromori, Pook finally got around asking his sensei a question that had been bothering him for a long time.

They'd finished their lesson for the day, and gone back down to the flat to inspect and oil the blades. When they were done, Pook went onto the balcony and started to pull his boots back on. Kuromori followed him out and started puttering around with the funny-looking little trees he grew in pots.

"So why'd you come to Niune, anyway?" Pook asked as he tied his boots. "I'm glad you're here and all—hell of a break for me, wasn't it?"

Kuromori's dark eyes hardened, and Pook figured he'd stepped over the line with his question. "It is a long and sad tale, Tamnaissan," Kuromori said at length.

"Sorry, sensei. Just tell me to mind my own damn business, okay?"

"No. It is a fair question. Given your natural curiosity, I am surprised that politeness has restrained you from asking before now."

Pook frowned. Kuromori still thought he was barbarian, then, who couldn't act civilized if his life depended on it. He thought about protesting, but then realized that he might blow his only chance to find out if he started yapping, so he kept his mouth shut.

"My father was a respected man, but not a wealthy one," Kuromori said. His hands moved ceaselessly as he spoke, gently pruning his trees. "I was but one of several sons, and so it fell to me to seek my own fortune, for there would be little for me to inherit. Like my father, I took up the way of the warrior and left my home to enter the service of a daimyo. I did my utmost to serve with honor. Alas, I had no way of knowing what was to come next.

"The daimyo had a daughter—his only child, and the most beautiful of women. I fear that I lost my heart to her in the first moment I saw her. She was walking in a garden, with her women around her, and I believed I had been granted a vision of a goddess, so lovely was she." Kuromori fell silent, staring into nothing, his hands still.

"So what happened?" Pook prompted, when it looked like his sensei wasn't going to say anything else. "Was she in love with somebody else or something?"

"It did not matter where her affections lay, Tamnais-san," Kuromori said gravely. "Have you not been listening? She was the daughter of a great lord, whereas I was the son of a poor man. She was far above my station; to even contemplate a courtship would have been madness. Her father would have struck off my head, had he known I had such thoughts in it, and been right to do so. But my heart did not understand these things, and so to preserve my honor and avoid further grief, I left my homeland and came here, where nothing would remind me of her."

"Oh." Pook didn't know how Kuromori could have just given up his girl without a fight. Wasn't there something

he could have done? "I'm sorry."

"It is of no matter, Tamnais-san. Perhaps in the end it was for the best, for otherwise I would not have been here when needed."

They bowed to each other, then Pook headed off. He put his sensei's story out of his mind for a while, but it wasn't long before he had cause to think of it again.

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"What are you going to do again?" Pook asked, certain that he'd misheard what Alex had said.

She was leading the way down the street towards the café, a covered basket in her hand that rattled and clanked ominously with every jostle. Most of the shops were in the process of closing for the night, and the street was packed with workers on their way home or to dinner. Alex wove through them with a light step, her skirts swaying as she avoiding a gaggle of local newsboys chasing away an interloper. When they came to a deserted table on the sidewalk in front of the café, she carefully set down her basket.

"It's only a week until the queen's ball," Alex said. "I'm going to teach you how to dine."

Pook scratched his head, wondering which of them had missed something important. "In case you hadn't noticed, I can eat just fine."

Alex opened her basket and began to unpack a series of plates, bowls, forks, spoons, and knives. By the time she was done, he figured there was enough silverware there for eight more people. "It isn't as simple as that, Pooshka. There is a certain set of manners that will be expected. Queen Dagmar was kind enough to invite us to her masquerade. Since we cannot refuse such an invitation, we have to do our best to behave appropriately."

In other words, they got to make sure I don't act like a b'hoy in a saloon.

One of the waiters came by, and Alex chose several small courses for them, requesting that the food be brought out at intervals, and ensuring compliance with a healthy tip. Staring in dismay at the silverware in front of him—Pook had decided that it must all be for him, since nobody else had shown up—he reached for his wine glass as soon as it was filled.

"Not yet!"

He froze, hand suspended in mid-air. "What?"

"Don't drink your wine yet. It's impolite to drink before the toast is made. That will most likely be at the start of dinner, and again before the dessert course. Also, it's more polite to say 'your pardon' instead of 'what'."

Pook blinked, nonplussed. "Sorry. No, hold on, that probably ain't right either."

Is not right, either.

God! "Fine. Is not right. Better?"

"Yes." Alex reached for her glass. "Let's pretend that I made a toast and that it's safe for you to drink. Elbows off the table, Pook."

He winced and took a healthy swallow of the wine. The waiters brought the first course, and Alex pointed out which of the forks he was supposed to use. The whole thing made his head hurt—who the hell owned more than one fork?

Alex seemed to have no trouble remembering which fork was which, and when you were supposed to drink, and what you were meant to do with your elbows. He watched her covertly, and the realization slowly dawned on him that all this stuff was second nature to her.

She's noble, remember? Her dad was some kind of lord, and her mom's from Duncan's family, so she had it on both sides.

"You will be expected to engage in interesting conversation with your dinner or dancing partners," Alex went on while they were waiting for the soup. "You shouldn't call a woman by her first name, unless she invites you to do so. It might be better not to call a man by his first name, either—some might take offence at being addressed familiarly by one so young."

He nodded awkwardly. "Got it, uh, Miss RiDahn."

Her smile rewarded his attempt. "A fine night, isn't it, Mr. RiFae?"

That was the fake name Dagmar had addressed the invitation to. According to Duncan, he was supposed to be the son of some obscure clan up in the highlands, which was true enough as far as it went, he supposed. Alex asked him some questions about his fake home, nothing personal, but the kinds of things that might trip him up at dinner. He did his best to answer her, correcting his grammar as best he could, but the whole time he could feel his stomach sinking like he'd eaten a lead weight.

Until that evening, he had never truly realized the differences between them, he thought glumly as they made their way through the dessert course. Alex was used to guys who did things different, who had manners and airs and all that. Who knew the difference between a damned dessert fork and a salad fork, and didn't cuss in front of ladies, and God only knew what else.

I'm never going to remember all those stupid rules. Don't put your elbows on the table. Don't tear the bread apart with your fingers. Don't put a dead fly in the soup of the obnoxious guy at the next table when he ain't looking.

"Don't worry," Alex said when he walked her back to her door. "We still have several more days to practice. And Duncan has already said that he will help you as well."

Great. Just what I needed.

“Really, you’re doing very well,” she went on, oblivious to his dark thoughts. “I’m very proud of the progress you made tonight.”

He glanced down at her and saw how happy she looked, and it suddenly occurred to him that she might have been worried that he would embarrass her. That maybe she didn’t want to be seen with a guy who acted like he was raised in the gutter, even if that were true.

She don’t want Pook. She wants Prince Tamnais.

“I could take her from you,” Dubh had said that night at Hatboy’s. Even then, Pook had been scared that Dubh was right. Maybe he’d known deep down that his brother was talking true, even though he hadn’t wanted to hear it.

Pook didn’t know much about moving with royalty, but he did know Dubh. Dubh could pretend to be a b’hooy himself, but once the truth was out he’d put on his princely airs fast enough.

Pook might not have been raised as a prince...but Dubh had. So maybe Dubh could teach him something after all.

When they stopped in front of the bookstore, he tried to imagine how Dubh would act and take it from there. “Good night, Miss RiDahn,” he said, careful not to be too “familiar,” as Alex had put it. He wanted to put his arms around her and give her a kiss, but he couldn’t imagine Dubh doing that, so he contented himself with a brief bow before he turned and left her for the night.

He wandered for a while, until he found himself standing high atop a bridge overlooking the Blackrush. Bits of trash floated downstream, making ripples in the peat-laden water. No fae appeared, at least, which was something.

There ain’t no Rat Soldiers anymore. Alex and Duncan and the rest all want me to be Tamnais now. That pretty much leaves Pook out in the cold, don’t it?

It was time to forget about being Pook. Time to bury that boy alone and unmourned, just like he’d always figured would happen. Past time, maybe, to figure out who Tamnais was and start acting like him.

Ain’t this what I wanted, though? I always wished that there were something more to life than boozing and brawling. Here’s my big chance to be somebody.

So why didn’t anybody tell me it would feel so damned bad?

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“One, two, three, *one*, two, three—oops! Dammit!”

“Calm down, my dear,” Duncan said, never losing the beat of the waltz he played on his violin.

Mina cursed him silently. After all, he wasn’t the one who had to dance *and* wear skirts. Although if she thought that she was suffering, Pook was being a downright martyr. She had managed to step on his toes three times so far, and the ways things were going, she didn’t hope for improvement.

Duncan’s suggestion had seemed like a good one at the time. Mina needed to brush up on the dancing skills that she’d learned shortly after they were married, and Pook needed to learn them in the first place. A few hours twirling around in the study had sounded almost pleasant.

“Sorry, Pook,” she said ruefully. “At least I’m not wearing my boots, though, right?”

Pook frowned a little at her apology, but didn’t say anything. He’d been uncharacteristically quiet all day—really, for the last few days, now that Mina thought about it. From the equinox celebration, she knew that he loved to dance, and she’d expected him to be bouncing around and laughing throughout the lesson. Instead, he had been solemn and withdrawn.

They returned to their positions and tried again. At least Pook had picked up the simple dance quickly; he glided easily through the forms while Mina counted and muttered to herself. At last, when she felt she had it down well enough not to totally embarrass herself at the ball, she called a halt.

“Looks like you’ve got it, Pook,” Mina said, wiping sweat from her brow. The windows to the garden stood open, and she welcomed the breeze. “And I imagine Alex will be a better partner than me.”

The look he gave her was...not cold, exactly, but distant. “Yes, Lady RiDahn,” he said coolly.

She arched a brow at him, but he gave back no hint that he knew anything was odd. Instead, he simply bowed slightly and took his leave.

Now seriously worried, she followed him to the front door. “Is everything all right?”

“Of course.”

“I know you’re nervous—”

The flecks in his ash-colored eyes seemed to flare. “I’m not scared,” he said, the words bordering on a snarl.

His vehemence started her. “Pook—”

“Prince Tamnais, Lady RiDahn.”

It shocked her—she’d thought he wanted to be known by the name he had lived his life under. “Fine. Tamnais. Don’t get pissed with me—I’m trying to help you here.”

His long fingers curled into fists. “I don’t need your help.”

He turned abruptly, flung open the door, and stalked out into the evening. Mina stopped in the doorway, wondering if she ought to yell at him, call him back, or follow him out and knock some damned sense into his head.

The sound of wheels on wood came to her, and a moment later Duncan stopped just behind her. “Is everything all right?”

“No.” Mina scowled and ran a hand through her short hair. “I don’t know how, but we ended up in an argument. I tried to tell him not to worry so damned much about this stupid ball, and he practically bit me for my trouble. I don’t like it.”

Duncan's look was troubled. "Neither do I, my dear. It has seemed to me that Tamnais has been acting out of character for some days, now."

"Same here. The old Pook might have cursed and said what was on his mind, no matter who he was insulting, but the new one is an insufferable prick." Sudden fear touched her. "You don't think the fae have done something to him, do you? Given him faery food, maybe?"

Duncan shook his head. "I don't know. But we should all be on our guard, just in case."

Chapter Fourteen

Bright light poured out of the windows of the palace as the carriage pulled up in front of it. As before, Dagmar had sent one of her own coaches to gather them up, so all four faelings sat together in the seats facing one another. Of them all, only Duncan seemed even remotely comfortable. Mina—dressed in a blue gown that she complained had far too much lace—looked as if she wished the horses would run off or the carriage would fall into the river before they reached their destination. Her small domino mask, blue with lace to match her dress, was half-crushed in one fist.

Alex held her own mask more carefully. It was a half-mask crowned with white feathers, the whole shaped to look like an owl's face, and it gave her something to look at other than the boy at her side.

Pook sat beside Alex, but his presence only brought an ache to her heart tonight. Ever since the evening when she had tried to teach him proper table manners, he had behaved distantly to her. Although for the most part cordial, he had been cold, no longer giving her the effusive hugs and kisses she had grown used to. It was as if the boisterous, loud pooka-boy she had fallen in love with had been replaced by a stranger.

He doesn't love me anymore.

From the beginning of their relationship, she had tried to tell herself that it was inevitable that his interest in her would fade in time. The only sensible course was to enjoy it while it lasted and not to be surprised when it ended. But her heart had never been half as sensible as her head, and when she realized that the distance between them could only mean that his affection had waned, it had still felt as if he had stabbed her in the chest.

A footman opened the door, and Pook climbed out. The saffron light of the lanterns turned his skin to caramel and gleamed from his black hair. His sword he wore thrust through a sash at his waist; after the attack last time, Dagmar had given him special dispensation to come armed, although the sword had to be hidden under glamour to prevent comment. In his ruffled shirt, formal coat, and kilt, he looked utterly devastating, and Alex remembered the moment of passion they

had shared in the garden. *If only I had known that would be my last chance.*

Coldly polite, he held out his hand to help her from the carriage. When their fingers touched, she thought she saw something flicker through his ash-colored eyes. Desperation? Grief? The moment had been too brief; it was impossible to say.

Couples and families dressed in their extravagant best wandered the grounds, passing in and out through the great, glass-paned doors that had been left open to catch any breeze. The air was heavy with the smell of flowers from the gardens, mingling with the more exotic perfumes used by the courtiers. Musicians hidden discreetly behind screens played sweet airs, and a few of the younger guests danced upon the lawn.

Chernovog, let this be the last time I ever have to come here.

They entered the palace, headed towards the throne room that had replaced the one destroyed in the fall of the Seelie Court. Courtiers lined the halls, chattering gaily amongst themselves, but Alex didn't miss the sideways glances and whispers behind fans. By the end of the night, she guessed, there would be great speculation on the fortunes of clan RiDahn. Why had the queen invited such an obscure noble house? Didn't she know they were grubby shopkeepers? And more importantly, did their presence signal an unexpected rise in favor?

If only they knew the truth—that Dagmar's favor is because Mina and Duncan killed her parents. That her interest in us is simply because we are none of us entirely human.

It would be enough to cause a revolt.

Dagmar looked like a doll set upon her throne, almost unable to move in her layers of gold-embroidered brocades and lace so stiff with starch that it could have sliced flesh. The crown of Niune sat on her parti-colored hair this night, but its weight did not yet bow down her young shoulders. The faelings got into line with others come to pay their respects. When Dagmar saw Pook, a brilliant smile bloomed across her face.

There's no reason to feel jealous, Alex told herself even as she felt her heart squeezed in a vice. I had my chance with Pook. Now it's ending. I never expected it to last long anyway.

It's been generations since the last time a Niunish queen actually bore a child belonging to her legal husband. Will Dagmar seek out a dark-skinned husband, then ask Pook to father her child, in order to keep the fae blood strong?

"Miss RiDahn! Is that you? How wonderful!"

Startled from her gloomy thoughts, Alex turned and saw none other than Hubert RiGrath making his way across the crowded room towards her. His round face beamed, as if he were genuinely glad to see her, and she wondered if perhaps he was not a bit slow.

"Good evening," she said, letting him take her hand and kiss it.

"I'm so pleased to see you here again," Hubert babbled happily. His stiff collar looked as if it might be strangling

him, and his waistcoat strained over his stocky build. Accustomed from long practice at her father's parties, Alex ignored the rest of what he said, simply smiling and nodding in the appropriate places.

Pook came up to them, and Alex noticed a displeased look on his face. To be fair, she had come with him, and it would be discourteous to spend too much time in the company of another boy. But then he gave them both a look down his nose, turning away sharply and leaving them alone.

He doesn't want me anymore.

A gong sounded, indicating that dinner would shortly be served. "I hope you will let me escort you to the table, Miss RiDahn," Hubert said, holding out his arm. Alex took the offered elbow with a forced smile.

"How very kind of you, Mr. RiGrath," she said.

Dagmar led the procession to the enormous dining room. The guests began to sort themselves according to rank; neither the RiDahns nor the RiGraths had enough prestige or wealth to claim a table anywhere near the queen. Alex found herself seated with Hubert, his father and mother, his younger sister, Mina, Duncan, Pook, and four others she didn't know. Pook was several spaces down from her, partnered with a pretty young girl who immediately tried to engage him in conversation. Too upset to watch, Alex immersed herself in small talk with Hubert, who seemed surprised but flattered at such attention.

Streams of servants moved about the tables, laying out sumptuous foods on fine dishes. Although Alex was far from an expert on wines, even she could tell that the vintage served was truly superior. Under any other circumstances, this would have been a night to remember, but as it was she found herself without much appetite.

Halfway through dinner, she glanced down the table at Pook, unable to contain herself any longer. She found him watching her; his dinner companion looked utterly put out. For a moment, she stared into his beautiful eyes, and wished with all her soul that he could have been hers forever. From the first moment she had seen him on the dock, she had wanted him with an irrational longing that had never lessened, and she wondered bleakly if the ache would ever fade. Fifty years from now, would she sit at her fire and dream of the boy who had come into her life so briefly? Would she still love him, or would her feelings fade with time to become no more than bittersweet memories?

Once the dishes were cleared away, the doors were opened onto the grand ballroom. The call went out for everyone to don their masks. Because of her spectacles, Alex was unable to wear a mask that actually tied to her face; instead, hers was a stick mask that had to be held up in front of her. Hubert put on a simple, black-and-white domino, smiling with pleasure all the while. "May I escort you, Miss RiDahn?"

Alex cast an involuntary glance in Pook's direction. He had donned a rather sinister half-mask with a long, raven-like beak over the nose. Unsurprisingly, he already had another girl attached to his arm.

"That would be lovely," she said hollowly.

Although she had been forced to attend many parties given by either her father or his neighbors, one look at the ballroom caused Alex to realize just how provincial they had been. The ballroom was large enough to hold a good portion of her father's house. Gilded mirrors hung on the inner wall, making it appear even more spacious, while tall, glass-paned doors opened along the outer wall to lead to terrace and garden. A huge, golden chandelier hung over the center of the room.

The courtiers filling the room looked like a jewel box that had been spilled onto the floor. Most of them were brightly dressed in velvets and brocades, and some had gotten into the masquerade spirit enough to costume themselves in harlequin, or in the sumptuous styles of bygone eras. Gems flashed at fingers and throats, or winked from amidst carefully-styled tresses or wigs. Their masks lent a touch of the exotic to the gathering, and Alex found herself staring at the faces of cherubs, cats, birds, and even more fantastic creatures.

Masked musicians played from an enclosed loft, and servants swirled through the crowd, delivering glasses of cool wine. The body heat from so many dancers quickly brought up the temperature in the room, and Alex wondered if it would be possible to discreetly slip out onto the terrace.

"Would you give me the pleasure of a dance, Miss RiDahn?" Hubert asked, cutting off that avenue of escape.

Alex kept her sigh of resignation purely mental, and pasted on a false smile. "Of course, Mr. RiGrath."

"Please, call me Hubert."

She nodded, but didn't encourage him by giving him permission to return the familiarity. It didn't seem to dampen his spirits at all. He led her to the dance floor and they settled into a waltz. His hand on hers was damp, and she could feel the heat of his fingers on her back even through the gown. *God of the waning year, if only...*

She glanced about, saw Pook standing at the edge of the dance floor, staring fixedly at her. The mask obscured his expression, but she thought there was something desperately unhappy in his stance. It startled her so badly that she missed a step and had to murmur an apology to Hubert.

What's wrong with him? She would have sworn that Pook wasn't the sort of boy to manipulate a girl's heart for his own amusement. *Perhaps that isn't it. Perhaps he no longer wants me, but does not wish for me to have anyone else, either.*

"Forgive me, Miss RiDahn, but is everything all right?" Hubert asked.

Startled back to reality, she glanced up at him and saw concern on his flushed face. "It's nothing," she murmured. "I only..."

A flash of...something...out of the corner of her eye disrupted her thoughts. She cast a glance in that direction, trying to sort out what had struck her subconscious as wrong, but the dancer was gone.

"I'm just a bit distracted," she finished lamely. One of the servants moved past her, and she started to call for a glass of wine, until she noticed that the mouth beneath his mask was filled with sharply pointed teeth.

She stumbled to a halt, her heart beating hard. *Chernovog, no. Not now.*

A waltzing couple spun past; the man was dressed all in darkest black, including the lace on his cuffs and collar. A black mask hid his face, but the sly smile he gave Alex was as familiar as his brown eyes.

Camhlaidh.

A woman brushed by; her skin had a distinct greenish tint to it, and her eyes were obsidian. Another reveler lifted his—its—full mask to take a sip of wine, giving a glimpse of something furred and inhuman beneath. The music floating from the balcony changed, becoming wilder and more chaotic, and she realized that the human musicians were no longer in attendance.

“Hubert,” she said urgently, turning to her dancing partner. She meant to warn him, to beg him to get away...but he simply kept dancing without her, his glazed eyes focused on nothing.

The music!

She spun, trying to shove her way through the enchanted humans who were caught helplessly in the faery reel. Her short height made it hard to even see where she was going, and the oblivious dancers knocked into her without even seeming to realize she was there. She fell to her knees, ripping her gown, hemmed in on all sides.

A hand thrust towards her, and she grabbed it blindly. A moment later, she found herself pulled to her feet. Long nails pricked her skin, and eyes like those of a cat stared gleaming into her own, seeming to demand that she fall beneath their spell.

A dark shape came in between them, shoving the fae back. Pook thrust Alex behind him, his sword in his hand and a look of mixed fear and rage on his face. “Show yourselves, God damn you!” he shouted.

Mina’s voice cut through the music and the noises of the crowd. “Pook! Alex!”

The fae was gone. Pook grabbed Alex’s arm, pulling her behind him through the crowd. When they broke through, Alex saw that Mina stood near one end of the hall, next to Dagmar. Duncan’s wheelchair wasn’t far away.

“Go to Duncan,” Pook ordered. Alex started to ask him what he meant to do, but he was already gone, striding towards Mina and Dagmar with his sword in his hand and his coat flaring behind him.

Dagmar stood alone, surrounded by catatonic guards who clearly had no awareness of the danger. She looked pale and frightened, but she held her head high. “Reveal yourselves!” she commanded, echoing Pook’s earlier demand.

The light of the chandelier and the candles faded, leaving most of the room in darkness. The temperature in the room plummeted, and frost covered the mirrors. The bluish glow of corpse candles appeared, flickering and dodging through the ballroom, leading enchanted humans who stumbled mindlessly behind them, hands outstretched as if they beheld some wonder. The mortals seemed to fade, to be hidden behind a veil, while the fae took on a terrible clarity.

They came from within the crowd, walking or crawling or slithering across the cold marble. Their eyes were those of owls, or cats; or were the color of obsidian, or glowed sickly green, or burned a dull, bloody red. They wore tattered silks, or gowns spun from cobwebs; rotting shrouds or sumptuous brocades.

Two figures emerged from the swirl, going before all the rest. The woman was pale as snow, with golden eyes and a small, cruel mouth. Her dark hair streamed down her back, and a gown of black and red velvet clung to her curves. Her hand rested lightly on the wrist of the man who led her, white against his mocha skin.

His eyes were the color of a night without moon or star. A crown of web and shadow held back hair like midnight silk, revealing a beautiful face with full lips and a broad nose. Looking at him, Alex thought that she had never seen any man quite so exquisite...but his mouth was set in a cruel sneer, and his nails were long and sharp enough to draw blood.

Dagmar faced them squarely, and Alex felt the slow build of power in the room. “What is the meaning of this?” the queen demanded coldly.

Camhlaidh appeared from the crowd; even with the black mask, there was no mistaking his identity. He gave Dagmar a mocking bow and gestured grandly to the couple who waited like statues of ice. “Allow me to present their majesties, Finn Bheara, Lord of the Sluagh, and Oonagh, his consort.”

Utter silence followed his pronouncement. Alex cast a desperate glance at Pook and saw that he had lowered his sword and stared at the couple. The expression on his face bordered on despair.

“We are not pleased with this rude appearance, nor the mistreatment of our guests,” Dagmar said bravely. “Remove yourself from my kingdom at once.”

“Silence, abomination,” said Camhlaidh idly.

“You have nerve, Camhlaidh,” Mina snarled, stalking slowly forward. Her father glanced at her and laughed.

“My dear Mina, you are so excitable! Surely you can’t mean to take us all on at once, can you?”

“Shut up!” Pook shouted suddenly. There was a wild look in his eye, and the light skittered off his blade as his hands shook.

Finn Bheara and Oonagh both looked at him. Then the unseelie king spoke for the first time; his voice was warm and soft, but it seemed that there was the howling of wolves behind it.

“Come here, Tamnais.”

For a moment, Alex thought that Pook would defy his father. Then very slowly, Pook pulled off his mask, let it fall to the ground, and walked towards them, until he was within a few feet of his parents. So close, the resemblance to both of them was obvious.

Oonagh stepped forward and reached out with one white hand, caressing Pook’s cheek so that he flinched. “How well he has grown, my brollachan,” she said, but the praise seemed less that of a mother for her child, and more that of a gardener for her roses. “Straight and tall and brave.”

“As I assured you, my lady,” Camhlaidh simpered with a bow.

Finn Bheara's obsidian eyes were fixed on Pook's face. "You have done well, Tamnais," he judged. "You will return to Knockma with us this night and take up your proper place among the Sluagh." The fae spoke as if there were no choice, as if all decisions for Pook's life had already been made.

Pook swallowed visibly. "What...what will I do there?" he asked in a trembling voice.

Alex's heart clenched. Surely he couldn't mean to go with them, could he? To leave the human world, to leave her...

"You will learn the ways of lordship, of course, and all will fight for your favor, my pretty one," said Oonagh with a predatory smile that revealed sharp teeth. "There is but a small matter we must attend to first, before going back to Faerie."

Pook's nostrils were flared, like a horse run too hard. "What's that?"

Finn Bheara gave him an indulgent smile. "We must destroy the abomination, naturally," he said.

And raised his hand towards Dagmar.

Several things happened at once. Alex felt the dark tides of magic surge in the hall, overwhelming the brief, hot spark Dagmar brought to bear. Mina let out a shriek of rage and sprang towards the Sluagh. Her voluminous skirts tangled her legs, sending her sprawling across the marble floor, and her shriek became a curse of impotent rage.

Pook was not so hampered, however. He lunged, putting himself between Dagmar and his parents. His sword was a thing of ice and shadow; he swept it in a glittering arc, tearing asunder the magic that would have killed Dagmar.

The look on Finn Bheara's face was terrifying. "What is this?" he demanded in a voice like thunder. Several of the fae nearest him cowered back, and a wave of cold washed through the room. Wine glasses shattered as the liquid in them froze.

Pook didn't flinch. He held his sword before him, his black brows drawn together in an expression of utter determination. "You ain't going to hurt Dagmar," he growled. His eyes had gone completely black, except for the flecks that glowed bloody red.

A mixture of outrage and disbelief crossed Finn Bheara's face; it might have almost been comic, Alex reflected, had the situation been less likely to end with them all dead. "Be warned, Tamnais; you are my favored son, but I will not tolerate disobedience!"

Pook's eyes widened slightly, and he let out a bark of bitter laughter. "Favored son? Favored how? You fucking dumped me on a human family the day I was born! You ain't never laid eyes on me since, and now you turn up and expect me to do what you say? To go off, and *live* with a pair of assholes like you? Go to hell!"

Finn Bheara's expression grew murderous. "Camhlaidh, explain this immediately."

Camhlaidh looked like a man who has suddenly realized he made a wrong turn some miles back. "You are favored because you won the sword, my prince," he warned Pook. "But your parents' grace only extends so far."

"Get stuffed. I ain't half as dumb as you think. I know what you did—tried to kill Alex and blame it on the seelie! Come over here, and I'll show you how sharp this damned sword is!"

Camhlaidh's lips drew back; he no longer looked even remotely human. "Don't be a fool, Tamnais. You have the chance to come into your birthright, to take your place amongst the lords of Faerie. Yet you would throw it away over a slight to a creature who barely has enough of our blood left in her veins to call herself faeling?"

Pook shifted the sword slightly in his grasp. "Get anywhere near her ever again, and I'll cut your lying head off myself."

"Foolish, spoiled child!" Oonagh hissed, taking a step towards Pook. He spun, waving the sword threateningly, so that she hastily moved back again.

"Shut up! I hate you! Get the hell out of here!"

Finn Bheara cast him a condescending look. "Remember your folly when you come crawling to us."

And then he and the host all seemed to turn and walk through a hole in the world, and were gone.

The lights flickered and grew strong. Dagmar sank slowly down into her chair, while the guards around her chatted amongst themselves, oblivious as to what had happened. Mina picked herself up off the floor, cursing her skirts, even as Duncan wheeled himself hurriedly to her side.

Alex started towards Pook, then stopped. He hadn't moved since the unseelie host had disappeared, but now tears streamed silently down his brown cheeks.

"Are...are you all right?" she asked uncertainly.

Seeming to awaken from a spell, he thrust his sword back into its sheath, then wiped his face angrily with the back of hand. "No. No, I ain't all right." Grabbing the lapels of his formal coat, he ripped it off and flung it on the ground. "I can't do this. I won't do this!"

The nearest dancers came to a halt and exchanged glances and murmurs over his outrageous behavior.

Alex ignored them. "Do what?"

He backed away from her, and she saw that his lower lip trembled. "I can't be this Tamnais b'hoy you want," he whispered. "I can't."

"Pook—"

"But it ain't Pook you want, is it? None of you!" He raised his eyes to Mina and Duncan as well, despair written clearly across his features. "None of you want *me*, none of you give a damn about *me*. You're no different from them. You all want me to be somebody else, to be Tamnais, to be a prince, and to hell with Pook! But I can't! I tried to, I swear, but I just can't."

Silence had fallen all around them now, as curious courtiers gawked openly. Mina glanced at the spectators, winced, and held out a hand to Pook. "We can talk about this somewhere in private, all right?"

“No! Just...just leave me alone, all of you!”

A sob interrupted his last words. With an angry cry, he spun on his heel and broke into a run, disappearing through one of the doors into the garden, leaving them all behind.

Stunned, Alex stared out into the night after him. How had he so misunderstood everything?

And why didn't I see it earlier? Oh, Pooshka, can you truly not know how I feel?

“Miss RiDahn!” Hubert called from behind her. “I say, where on earth did you disappear to?”

Chapter Fifteen

To Alex's dismay, it was some time before they were able to leave the palace. None of the human revelers were aware of what had happened, so there were excuses to be made and goodbyes to be said. Their carriage was sent for, but there were other, more important, guests who were also leaving and who had to be accommodated first.

Damn them! she fumed silently as a flock of over-dressed women took far too long to climb into their conveyance. *Chernovog only knows where Pook has gone by now.*

I have to find him, have to tell him that he misunderstood; that I wasn't trying to make him into something he's not. Curse him, why couldn't he have said something earlier?

“Miss RiDahn?”

Biting back a snappish reply, Alex turned and watched Hubert make his way towards her. She heartily wished that he would leave her alone; she had no patience left this night. *If he says anything stupid, I swear I won't hold my tongue for the sake of politeness. To hell with this place and these people.*

“I'm glad I caught up with you before you left,” Hubert said with a slight bow. He sounded out of breath, as if he had walked very fast to get there, and his round face was flushed. “I wanted to make certain that I hadn't done something to offend you.”

She shook her head impatiently. “Not at all.”

“Is everything well, then?”

“Yes, yes. Fine.”

He looked as if he suspected that she might not be telling the truth. “I hope so, Miss RiDahn. Not to imply that you would lie, of course, but that there might be things you can't say to me. I hope that your friend is all right, too.”

Pook's dramatic departure was the talk of the court. Chernovog only knew what they were saying about him—or about them all. *I don't care, either. I don't care about any of these people. I just care about him.*

“I'm sure he's fine,” she began, but Hubert held up one hand and she fell silent.

“I'd never force a lady to lie,” he said with a sad smile. “I don't think I mentioned it, Miss RiDahn, but my mother is from the Highlands. The locals there believe that some families have a special gift—the sight, they call it. The ability to see the truth under illusions.”

Even in her distracted state, she immediately realized what he implied. *He knows. He knows about Dagmar. About Pook. Maybe he even guesses what happened here tonight.*

“I hope that you will let me know if there's anything I can do,” Hubert added. He took her limp hand and bowed over it, before disappearing back into the crowd.

Alex stared after him, confused and uncertain, until she heard Mina calling for her. Shaking herself from her reverie, she hurried to the waiting carriage.

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Although Alex thought it a futile effort, Mina and Duncan insisted on checking first at the bookstore, then at their home to make certain that Pook hadn't chosen either place as a refuge. “We must be thorough,” Duncan said when he noticed Alex's impatience.

“Can't Mina simply do...whatever it was that she did before?” Alex asked as the carriage rumbled down the road leading to the mansion. As she had predicted, there had been no sign of Pook at Blackthorn Books.

Light from the streetlamps flickered across Mina's white face. Her dark eyes were lost in shadow, but her brows were drawn together in a worried frown. “Only if we think he's in trouble,” she said. “The reason that the fae who kidnapped you suddenly got in a big hurry to get you out of the city was because they knew I would be coming. I'm not sure I want to tell every fae in Dere that something is wrong tonight, especially not given what might be lurking about after the fiasco at the palace.” She pounded her fist into her lace-covered skirts in frustration. “Damn that boy, anyway! What was he thinking?”

“I dare say that he was not,” Duncan said as the carriage halted in front of the gates to their house. “Seeing his parents upset him greatly. And I fear that his emotional state may not have been the best to begin with, given how oddly he has behaved over the last few days.”

He thought we didn't want him.

Pook had not returned to the house, either; the spells warding the doors and windows were all intact. Mina cursed as she unlocked the door. “Anyone have any idea where he might have gone?”

Alex shook her head miserably. She stood just outside the door, feeling alone and desperate. “I don't know. I don't know where he might go, or what he might do.”

“The mind shudders to contemplate,” Duncan said wryly. “However, I do have a suggestion. From his words to

us, it is not difficult to deduce that Tamnais was feeling, er, *pressured* into a mold for which he was not suited. It would not therefore be entirely out of character for him to return to what he feels are his roots.”

Mina kicked off her delicate shoes. “To his gang’s turf, you mean?”

“Indeed. What do you think, Alex?”

A faint flicker of hope touched her. “It would make sense.”

“All right, then.” Mina headed towards the lift, already untying the laces on her gown. “I’m changing out of this stupid dress—we’ll never get far with me in it. Duncan, you stay here on the off-hand chance that we’re wrong and Pook just wanted a break from us before coming back. Alex and I will go look for him in the slums. God help us if he’s decided to do something crazy.”

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It began to rain just as a hansom cab let Mina and Alex off on Pennywhistle Lane. Thunder rumbled ominously in the distance, and fingers of lightning stroked the sky. The smell of the garbage strewn on the street intensified as the rain percolated into it, and Alex wished that she had not been too impatient to change out of her satin-covered shoes. Mina took Alex’s spectacles from her and touched the lenses briefly; when she handed them back, Alex found that the rainwater refused to cling to the glass, allowing her to see clearly.

Midnight had come and gone. Although a few shadowy figures huddled beneath awnings or in doorways, most had retreated inside at the first threat of rain, leaving the streets nearly empty. The lack of movement and noise made the area seem abandoned, empty of all save ghosts.

Now what? There was no way of knowing where Pook might have gone, if he had ever even come here at all. He could be less than twenty feet away from her, inside one of the decaying buildings that lined the street, and she would never even know it.

Mina walked as if she had a destination in mind, however, and within a few minutes they came to a building whose grimy windows were still lit. A crude sign hanging over the front read “Hatboy’s,” which gave Alex no clue as to what sort of establishment it might be.

The interior was narrow, poorly-lit, and hot. The air reeked of raw gin and whiskey, mingled with the stench of blood. Most of the patrons clustered at one end of the room, yelling at something Alex couldn’t see. A moment later, half of them let out triumphant cries while the other half groaned. One of the men left the crowd, carrying a badly-wounded rat terrier in his arms, an angry scowl on his face.

Mina’s mouth was set in a tight line of disgust. “Rat pit,” she said shortly in response to Alex’s unspoken question.

A girl sat at one end of the long bar that spanned one wall, drinking something from a filthy glass. When Mina approached, the girl glanced their way—then stood up sharply, as if ready for a fight. “You! What’re you doing here?”

Recognition finally put a name to the girl’s face. *Rose. Pook’s friend, the one who turned on him after the riots, who wouldn’t have anything to do with him.*

Alex bit back the surge of cold anger that filled her. If Pook had been here, then likely this Rose would know about it. *Unless he came under a glamour, in which case he could have sat beside her and she wouldn’t have realized.*

“We’re looking for Pook,” Mina said without preamble. “Have you seen him?”

Rose’s thin face was as unreadable as a book in a foreign language. Her hard eyes could have belonged to a woman three times her age. “Why should I tell you anything? That girl with you killed Hal.”

“Because you were going to kill Pook,” Alex said angrily. That was one death over which she felt no remorse at all.

“Because your kind done something to our brains!” Rose retorted, but she kept her voice low.

Alex shrugged, not caring to argue. “That would not have made Pook any less dead.”

“We’re not here to fight with you,” Mina said, giving Alex a quelling look. “Pook might be in trouble. We don’t know for sure, but we need to find him. Do you know where he might have gone?”

Rose hesitated, and for a moment Alex was certain that the other girl wasn’t going to help them. Then she shrugged. “What sort of trouble? Crushers? Or personal?”

“Personal.”

“Back when we was in the Rat Soldiers, he used to go out to the river behind the Trap whenever he needed to do some thinking. He’d get a little strange sometimes, all unhappy about things, and go up on the dock, or under it, and smoke and drink until he passed out. Then he’d be back to normal the next day. He might’ve gone there.”

“Thanks.” Mina passed Rose some coins, which quickly vanished into the girl’s pocket.

“Do you believe her?” Alex asked when they emerged back into the rainy night. The gaslights cast reflections in the greasy puddles accumulating in the uneven roadway, and she stepped carefully.

“What she said makes sense.” Mina shrugged. “Most of us unseelie faelings find comfort in being near water. I know I used to go down to the riverside whenever I needed to do some thinking, even before I found out that I was part fae.”

They navigated the streets until they came to the tenement building where Pook had been bound, beaten, and nearly killed by the seelie faeling Nigel and the humans he had enslaved through magic. Squaring her shoulders, Mina ducked down a narrow alley between buildings that would let them out onto the riverbank.

There were others in the alley, mostly men, huddled under overhangs and nursing bottles to keep warm. Their eyes were bright and feral as those of dogs, and Alex felt a flutter of fear as she walked close behind Mina. *Maybe we shouldn't have cut through here.*

One of the men stepped into Mina's path; the faint light from an oil lantern skittered off the knife in his hand. "Hello, lovelies," he said with a wicked leer.

Mina let out a sigh of exasperation. "Get out of my way. I don't have time for any Goddamned games tonight."

"Oh, it's no game we'll be—ahh!"

Swarms of roaches appeared on the man's arms, swirling in and out of his coat sleeves. The man began to shriek, dropping his knife so that he could bat frantically at the illusory insects that Mina's glamour had made. Those around him either ran to look or else shrank back in horror, leaving the two women to pass through unmolested. In the faint light, Alex caught a glimpse of a shark-like smile of satisfaction on Mina's face.

A short swatch of land separated the back of the row of buildings from the river. For the most part, it was nothing but an overgrown tangle of weeds cut through with footpaths leading back and forth to the river. A rotting dock extended a short distance out into the water; Alex caught a glimpse of a shadow at the farther end, saw the brief glow of a cigarette coal as it was lifted to lips.

Relief smote her so hard she felt it like a physical blow. *Chernovog, god of the waning year, thank you.*

Mina stopped. "Want me to walk down with you?"

Startled and grateful for Mina's perception, Alex shook her head. "No. Thank you for coming with me."

"I'll wait here, just in case things don't go well. I don't want to leave you here without an escort back if Pook digs in his heels and decides to be an idiot."

Alex couldn't imagine that Pook would leave her to make her way home alone through such a dangerous neighborhood, no matter how upset he might be, but she nodded anyway. Gathering her wet skirts in her hands, she carefully picked her way through the weeds and trash until she reached the dock.

At the sound of her step, Pook turned. A light from one of the nearby buildings touched his face, illuminating his expression of surprise. "Alex?"

"Of course." He was sitting on the end of the dock, his legs dangling out over the water, so she carefully lowered herself down by him. The rain had soaked through her skirts, making them cling unpleasantly to her skin, and she could feel her hair coming down from its ruined coiffure.

Pook looked no better, of course. The rain had turned his fine white shirt nearly transparent, and his hair stuck to his face in ringlets. He must have been sheltering his cigarette from the rain with his own body; now, he seemed to forget it, and the coal began to die. A bottle of gin sat by his thigh, but he didn't seem to have lowered the level of its contents by too much.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, bewildered.

"Looking for you, naturally. What are *you* doing here?"

Grief passed over his expressive face, before he turned away and stared out across the river. "This is where I belong. This is what I am." He discovered that his cigarette had become waterlogged, and with a sigh flicked it out into the river.

Sorrow for him ate at her heart. "That isn't so, Pooshka. No one belongs here. Certainly you don't."

"You're wrong. I'm sorry, baby, but you are. I ain't no noble. I ain't no prince. I wanted to be—I did. So I tried to pretend that I was the kind of guy you deserve, that you want." He shook his head. "But it was a lie. This is who I am, and I guess it's too late to change that."

She wasn't certain if she wanted to cry or to beat his thick skull against the planks of the dock. "Pook, why on earth would you think I wanted you to be something—someone—other than you are?"

He offered her the bottle; when she shook her head, he took a swig from it. "'Cause you're noble, Alex. You was raised with all them fancy manners and fancy ways, and you got a right to be with a guy who's got them too. Somebody refined, who talks right and treats you like you deserve. And I tried to do that, but I was miserable the whole time, and I guess you knew I was just faking it anyway, since you went off with that Hubert poofter tonight."

She heard the raw edge of pain in his words. "I thought your...interest...in me had waned. You've been so distant, so unlike your normal self."

"I was trying to do what you wanted!"

"That wasn't what I wanted! That wasn't what anyone wanted! Chernovog, Pook, Mina's been asking me what was wrong with you for days now. I'm sorry if we pushed you too hard. If we did, it was because we wanted things to go well tonight for all of us, including you. That's all." She clenched her hands in her skirts, desperate for the words to make him understand. "You say that I want you to be—to be Tamnais instead of Pook, but Tamnais isn't the boy I fell in love with."

He turned towards, and his eyes grew large. "What did you say?" he asked, barely above a whisper.

What now? "I said I didn't even know that you and Tamnais were the same person at the time we began our relationship."

"No. The rest of it."

She swallowed, feeling suddenly nervous. "I said that I love you because of who you are. Not because of who it is you think I want you to change into."

Pook looked away, and for a moment she didn't know why, until she saw the slight shake of his shoulders that betrayed the tears the rain had disguised. "Pooshka?" she asked softly, uncertain what she had done wrong.

He shook his head and wiped his eyes roughly. "Sorry. It's just...nobody ever said that to me before."

It made her heart hurt. “Then...then I’m sorry I didn’t say it earlier. I suppose that I was afraid, although that doesn’t excuse it.” She put a hand gently to his shoulder, feeling the heat of his body through the rain-soaked cloth of his shirt. “I love you, Pooshka, because of your strength of will, and your personality, and...and because you make me laugh. You’re kind and sweet and funny, and that’s something that all the airs and pretentious manners in the world can’t begin to measure up against.”

His lips tasted like rain and tears. She held him tightly against her, remembering the times he had held her, when she had been the one hurting. For the first time she was acutely aware that love meant sharing another’s grief as if it were one’s own.

After a while, they loosened their death-grip on one another. “Guess it was kind of dumb to sit out here in the rain,” Pook said with a lopsided smile at his own expense.

“That’s my Pooka-boy,” she replied, and kissed his forehead. “Come on then. Let’s go back to the bookstore and dry off, all right?”

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They walked all the way to the bookstore, even though they could have hired a cab. The rain had already soaked them both to the skin, Alex reflected, so it wasn’t as if they could possibly get any wetter. The few other people on the streets gave them strange looks: a boy and a girl, holding hands and talking quietly, both of them dressed in finery and looking as if they had gone swimming in the river fully clothed.

The bookstore was dark and quiet. Alex went in first and turned on the gaslights, trailing water as she went. Vagabond ran up, then shook her paw in displeasure when she stepped in some the rain pooling the floor around them. Pook sat down on the nearest stool, took off his boots, and poured the water in them out the still-open door.

“Wish I had something dry to change into,” he said wryly. His clothes were still at Mina and Duncan’s, where they had gotten ready for the ball earlier that night.

Alex winced. “I’m sorry. Perhaps I should have suggested we go there instead.”

“Nah. It’ll be okay.” He stripped off his sodden shirt and leaned out the door, wringing it out beneath the awning.

Alex watched him in silence. Water beaded and ran over the brown skin of his shoulders and back, and she could count every rib in the soft light from the lamps. There was a small scar on his side, just above the edge of his kilt, where the tiny hand of some sprite had burned him. On impulse, she reached out and touched it.

He stilled, as if she had robbed him of the power of movement. His skin was warm and tight under her fingers, and she slid her hand slowly up, across the lattice of his belly, savoring the feel. She heard the hitch of his breath, saw the way his hands trembled as he let his shirt fall to the floor.

When he turned towards her, she expected that he would kiss her, but instead he carefully, carefully brushed her wet hair from her face. “Alex,” he whispered.

“Yes.” She slid her arms around him, molding their bodies together. He pulled her to him suddenly, kissing her passionately; she could feel his heartbeat through the wet fabric of her gown. She arched against him, and his lips left hers, trailing a hot line of kisses down her neck to her shoulder.

Greatly daring, she let her hand drop below the waistband of his kilt. He gasped softly, and she marveled that she could make someone so beautiful feel that way. There was a power in it, something apart from magic but perhaps akin to it.

He pulled back to look at her; the silver flecks in his eyes shaded towards red and his breathing was ragged. “What do you want?”

It made her smile. “What I’ve wanted since the first moment I saw you on the docks,” she said wryly.

“Really?”

She laughed at his surprise. “Of course, my beautiful pooka. My love.” She kissed him softly. “Stay with me tonight.”

Pook’s eyes widened slightly—then he smiled, a hot, wicked grin that made her ache down to her toes. “Whatever you want, baby,” he murmured, and sealed the bargain with another kiss.

Chapter Sixteen

The next morning, Alex and Pook walked to the café for breakfast. Pook had nothing except the clothes he’d worn last night, so he was still dressed in the fancy silk shirt, kilt, and boots, which turned more than a few heads. One of the baker sisters was sweeping the stoop when they came out of the bookstore; a moment later, all five of them were crowded in the doorway, staring. Alex wondered if they had noticed that Pook was leaving without having arrived that morning.

The thought made her grin and blush, both, and she slipped her arm around his waist and snuggled closer. She’d had moments of self-doubt the night before, worried about what he would think when he saw her naked, without anything to hide her imperfections. The sheer enthusiasm of his response had quickly made her forget her worries—forget all rational thought, really. And after the first tentative, exploratory round of love-making, she had worried about whether he thought her adequate, been afraid that she might have disappointed him somehow. When she had shyly suggested they enjoy themselves again, however, he had been so pleased that it was impossible to think his reaction

anything other than genuine.

“You’re in a good mood,” Pook remarked, seeing her grin.

“You make me feel good.” She hesitated, then forged ahead. “You make me feel...beautiful, I suppose.”

Oddly enough, she felt as if she had a new sense of herself. Ever since she had grown old enough to worry about such things, she had felt awkward about her body, acutely aware that she was too short, too chubby, too plain. Now...she felt as if she had settled into it at last, as if she could be comfortable with her physical self as well as her intellectual self.

It wasn’t a gift she had expected, but she welcomed it. It made her feel bold, and perhaps just a little wicked. Or even very wicked.

“You are beautiful,” Pook said, looking puzzled.

“Perhaps. But I’m not the reason the baker sisters are staring at us.”

He snorted. “Everybody’s staring because I look like a damned freak in this getup. Mina better remember to bring my clothes.”

“We could go to your place and get spares, if you like,” she suggested, although she didn’t relish the thought of a long walk to the slums this morning.

“Nah. I don’t have none. I just been sleeping in the alley across the way, anyway.”

Alex froze, forcing him to stop as well. “The alley? What about that Sevens place, where you took me when we were hiding from Nigel?” Although his accommodations there had horrified her, at least he’d had a roof over his head.

Pook shrugged, suddenly looking anywhere but at her. “Too far away. Ever since that fae came around here and messed with the bakers and nearly killed you, I figured no way was I going to leave you here with no help around. So I found me a real nice squat under the stairs back there.” He waved vaguely in the direction of the alley. “It’s out of sight, so nobody bothers me, and it’s dry unless it rains real hard. You, uh, don’t mind, do you?”

“Of course I mind! You shouldn’t have had to sleep on the streets because of me!”

“I done it before,” he objected, as if that excused it. “And I was worried about you. But I was kind of afraid that you’d be mad if you knew I was hanging around like that. Figured you might tell me to mind my own business.”

It made her heart ache. Pook had sacrificed for her, and she hadn’t even known it to thank him. “I appreciate your concern, Pooshka. I only wish that you had better accommodations. Thank you for looking out for me.”

He glanced up, read her expression, and allowed himself a grin. “No problem. I don’t mind, really.”

“Well, it’s ridiculous for you to continue to do so, when I have a perfectly serviceable set of rooms.” Alex hesitated, uncertain how he might take her invitation. “I wouldn’t...expect anything.”

Pook’s dark eyes flashed, and he winked at her. “Rather you did.”

Feeling that life couldn’t get any better, Alex returned his grin. “Well, then. We’d better get something to eat before Mina and Duncan arrive, or else we won’t have any breakfast. I’ll collect your rent later.”

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Mina arrived at the bookstore fully expecting to be met by doom and gloom.

She had lingered at the dock on the Blackrush last night just long enough to see that Alex and Pook had reconciled, then left them to talk it out on their own. Whether he was prepared to reconcile with Duncan and her as easily as with Alex, she didn’t know. At the very least, his disastrous meeting with his parents ought to have him in a bad mood, looking for any excuse for an argument.

Both of the younger faelings had set out to defy her expectations, however. Alex was in a spectacularly good mood, humming and sashaying through even her routine tasks. Pook had seemingly reverted to his usual boisterous self, as if the angry young man of the night before had been an entirely different person. Although mystified, Mina decided to be grateful.

Duncan disappeared into the back to consult some of their books on faery lore. The morning brought a surge in business, so it was lunchtime before Mina had the chance to ask him what he was looking for. Her husband sat at the table in the back, pouring over a scroll so old that its edges were beginning to crumble into dust. Several thick books sat in a pile at his elbow, certain pages carefully marked with slips of paper.

Mina turned one of the chairs around backwards and straddled it, propping her chin on the back. “Are you hungry? I was going to send someone out for lunch, but I seem to have misplaced Pook and Alex.”

Duncan smiled slightly without looking up. “I think I heard them go upstairs a few minutes ago. No doubt they are testing the structural integrity of Alex’s work table.”

“Duncan! I’m shocked.”

“Then I fear you no longer recall what it was like to be so young and energetic.”

Mina laughed and stuck out her tongue at him. “I was referring to you, not them.”

Duncan finally looked up and arched one aquiline brow. “Really? My dear, surely I have not neglected my husband’s duties that badly.”

“You’re impossible. So what are you looking for?”

The playful look vanished from Duncan’s face. “Accounts of faelings who have sought out their fae parent.”

Unease flickered through Mina. “Why?”

“Because, my dear, I fear that our enemies grow too numerous.” Duncan took his spectacles off and rubbed tiredly at the bridge of his nose. “That the seelie are set against us we already knew. Now it would seem that we have utterly alienated the unseelie as well.”

“Camhlaidh tried to kill Alex!”

"I know—don't think I've forgotten that." Duncan's mouth tightened into a grim line, reminding her sharply of the steel that lay beneath his scholarly exterior. "But, no matter how devious Camhlaidh's motives may have been, at least all the Sluagh were not our enemies. Now...I am not so sure. Nor am I sure that Camhlaidh will not try something else, now that he has lost face in front of his lord."

"So what do you hope to find here?" Mina asked, gesturing at the books.

"I want to finish my research before I suggest anything to Tamnais—to Pook, I suppose I should say, lest I wish to receive yet another outburst of temper as he showed the court last night." A faint smile ghosted over his lips and was gone. "But I recalled a number of stories in which a faeling borne by a mortal mother presented himself at the home of his father—at one of the entrances into Faerie where even mortals may occasionally pass from one realm to the next. In the stories, the child was entitled to a boon or a gift. Or at least, all the accounts I've found so far feature some kind of gift being given, although I've found nothing that explicitly confirms that it is required. My suspicion, however, is that it is one of the inviolate rules by which the fae are bound."

"I didn't notice Finn Bheara exactly handing out any presents last night."

"No. But if you recall, he asked Pook to return to Knockma with him."

"More like ordered than asked."

"Indeed. Which goes to show that neither Finn Bheara nor Oonagh know anything of Pook's temperament," Duncan said with wry affection. "I suspect that, had he returned with them, he would have been given gifts then."

"So what does this have to do with anything?"

"Pook's outburst of last night may not have invalidated his rights. If he should travel to Knockma by more ordinary means and present himself there, he might be able to demand a gift from Finn Bheara."

"I can't imagine he would even consider that," Mina said. "He might be distracted at the moment by our Alex's, er, charms, but deep down it's still eating him up. I don't think anything would convince him to accept a present from his father, let alone go ask for one."

"No," Duncan said softly. "Unless that gift was a pledge to command all unseelie fae to leave us alone. Including—perhaps even especially—Camhlaidh."

Mina frowned uncertainly, turning over the suggestion in her mind. "Do you think we could trust any promises?"

"If it was carefully worded, yes, I do. The fae are bound by strict rules, Mina. Yes, they will seek any loophole to get out of a situation they do not care for, but if we do not give them one, they may have no choice but to do as we ask."

"Damn." Mina chewed on her lower lip. "I'm not sure about this."

"Neither am I. Give me a few more hours, at least, to finish my reading before I present my suggestion."

"I will." Mina stood up and stretched the kinks out of her back. "In the meantime, I'll go get some lunch from the café and bring it back. From the way Alex was acting this morning, I'm guessing Pook will need all the energy he can get."

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As the day wound down to a close, Mina found Pook on the window seat at the front of the shop, petting Vagabond. When she sat down by him, he seemed surprised, but scooted over to give her more room.

"We okay?" Mina asked bluntly.

Pook grinned ruefully. "Yeah. Sorry about all that last night. I just...the whole situation's made me crazy, you know?"

"Yeah, I know." Mina sighed and ran her hand through her short, spiky hair. "When I first found out that I wasn't entirely human...I thought about it all the time. I wondered if that was why I'd never fit in, why I'd had trouble making friends. I kept wishing that I were human so that I wouldn't have to worry about things like the Seelie Court trying to kill me. And when I realized that Camhlaidh was my father—that he had lied to me, used me, from the start—that he had killed my best friend..." She trailed off and shook her head. "That ate at me for a long time. Still does, I guess. So yeah, I know."

"Guess you do at that." He hesitated, as if he wasn't certain how to phrase his next question. "Camhlaidh seems pretty tight with my—with Finn Bheara and Oonagh. You don't think we're related or anything, do you?"

"No idea. Although it would explain why people have trouble telling us apart."

Pook snickered. "All right, all right. We don't look nothing alike. It could be distant—twelfth cousin twenty times removed or whatever."

"Maybe." Mina thought about all the faelings she had known, about the community that Duncan had built in Dere—and that she had singlehandedly destroyed. She remembered her friend Abby, and the faeling Bryan who had died accidentally while under the influence of faery food.

Bryan had always been ready for a joke or a laugh; he would have gotten along fabulously with Pook from day one. *I wish he'd been here. He would have treated Pook like a younger brother.*

"Something I figured out a long time ago is that it doesn't matter what family you were born to," Mina said at last. "What matters is the family you make. I didn't ask to have a soulless killer for a father, and you didn't ask to be abandoned in the human world by parents who can't figure out why you're so pissed at them now. Alex didn't ask to get stuck with a father who would lock her mother away for witchcraft."

"I once told Duncan that we were winter's orphans, abandoned before we even knew what to make of the world."

But we aren't orphans any more if we choose to have each other. If we choose to make the family that fate didn't give us to start with." She shrugged awkwardly. "What I'm saying, Pook, is that I love you like a brother. And if you ever pull any crap again like you did last night, it's my sisterly duty to kick some sense into your head by way of your ass."

Pook looked startled—then let out a burst of laughter.

The soft sound of wheels on the wooden floor interrupted before he could make any further reply. The light of the setting sun caught on the silver in Duncan's long hair, and seemed to etch the lines deeper in his face. "I would like to speak with you for a moment, Tam—Pook."

The laughter vanished from Pook's eyes, to be replaced by wariness. "What about?"

"I would like you to consider taking a trip to the highlands. To Knockma."

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The mechanical fan that Alex had devised turned the sluggish air, providing more of a breeze than the open window. She sat on the floor, carefully assembling the parts she had collected to make a device that, if it worked properly, would be able to record and repeat sounds. A light shift protected her from the grease and oil of her experiments, but sweat stuck the cotton to her skin, and she gave serious consideration to simply stripping it off. All the heat of the day had collected in the second story flat, and she wondered what sleeping must be like for the baker family across the street, whose enormous oven no doubt made things even more miserable. A part of her longed for the milder summers of Ruska, where the nights were frequently cool enough to require a blanket even after the hottest days.

It was a very small part, however. There were certain compensations to Niune that made the heat tolerable.

Pook sat on the floor beside her, dressed only in his trousers, handing her tools as she called for them and keeping Vagabond from making off with any vital parts. The sheen of sweat on his brown skin reflected the lamps, making his body look as if it had been dusted in gold. Somehow, she had expected that he would be less of a temptation after they had shared physical intimacy, rather than more. Never had she been so wrong about anything in her life.

He had lapsed into an uncustomary silence, however. When she asked him the third time for a part without him seeming to hear her, she set aside her tools and touched his arm gently. "Pooshka? Is anything wrong?"

He blinked, coming back to the here and now, then gave her a grin that raised the temperature another ten degrees. "Nothing important."

"Pook..."

"Okay, okay." He straightened and shoved the hair from his gray eyes. "It's just that...I want to be happy, you know? I don't want to have to think about fae or nothing right now. I just want to enjoy being with you, and I can't do that because of the damned fae, and it makes me crazy."

Despite the subject, his words brought a smile to her face. "I would like nothing better than to spend a week with you without any other thoughts or worries," she agreed. "But that isn't going to happen, not now at any rate. So tell me what's bothering you, and perhaps I can help."

"Duncan had some things to say to me this afternoon."

Alarm surged in Alex. "About us?" Neither Duncan nor Mina had ever shown any inclination to interfere in her affairs before, especially as she was now of age and technically free to do as she would.

She was keenly aware that Pook would never have been allowed through the door of her father's house. Even if he'd had the manners and the title of a lord, his dark skin alone would have ensured that no courtship of her would have been tolerated. As a penniless street thief, he would have been lucky to escape with his life.

Niune was different, though, even among the nobility, and God knew the RiDahn house had enough scandal on it already that nothing she did seemed likely make any difference at this point.

Pook looked surprised. "About us? Nah. Well, Mina said she'd cut my balls off if I did something dumb like forget the preventative spells."

That certainly sounded like Mina. "She means well, Pook."

"Yeah," he said, apparently not at all offended by Mina's threat. "No, Duncan wanted to talk to me about...about Finn Bheara and Oonagh."

When he was done relating Duncan's suspicions about the gift he might or might not be owed, he said, "I figure you're the smartest person I know—what do you think I ought to do?"

Even her pleasure at the compliment couldn't dim her unease. "My first instinct is to tell you to stay as far away from Knockma as you can," she said honestly. "Because I'm afraid for you. Not physically, so much—if they intended to punish you somehow for defying them, they could do it as easily here. But...if you go...it will hurt you. And I don't want that."

His smile had a wry edge. "I don't want that neither. But like you said, they're pretty mad at me—might be thinking that they want to teach me a lesson. Maybe they'll come after me...and maybe they'll come after you or Mina or Duncan. And I want that a hell of a lot less."

"You don't even know for certain that Duncan is right, that you have any claim they will acknowledge."

"I know. But there ain't a lot Duncan's been wrong about, is there?"

"I'll go with you."

His look softened. "I'd like that. I would. But I ain't sure how smart it would be to walk into Knockma and bring a

hostage with me. They'd get a laugh out of that, wouldn't they? I'm thinking if I go, I ain't taking nobody but Duncan, and him only 'cause he knows where to go and what to say."

She tried not to feel hurt. "At least take Mina with you."

Pook shook his head. "No. I ain't going looking for a fight. If I was, I'd be taking her, and you too. But all of us put together couldn't take on a whole mound full of fae by ourselves, right? This way, if something does go wrong, I got you and Mina out here to rescue me."

Alex frowned, but she couldn't argue with his logic, no matter how badly she wanted to. "It sounds like you've made your mind up, then."

"I guess." He leaned back against the leg of her worktable. Vagabond clambered into his lap, and he stroked her absently. "Doesn't make it any easier, or make me want to go any more."

"When will you leave?"

"Guess the sooner I go, the sooner it'll be over with."

Nameless dread touched her, but she struggled to push it aside. Pook's reasoning was sound; her head knew that, but her heart did not. *If I was one of those females who are always having an attack of the vapors, I could cry and scream and refuse to let him leave*, she thought. The idea was more tempting that she would have supposed.

"Just hurry back," she said, trying to hide her worry.

The look Pook gave her with his ash-gray eyes startled her with its seriousness. "I'll always come back to you, baby. Always."

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"Here now, what is this?" Duncan murmured.

He sat in the study, listening to the distant rumble of thunder. A breeze came through the window, lightening the oppressive heat by a few degrees. The long curtains fluttered, like the hands of the dead, reaching out into nothingness.

Mina curled in a chair a few feet away, intent in her own reading. The light from the lamps caught in her pale hair; with her feet tucked up under her, she looked almost like a child lost in the depths of the overstuffed chair. When she looked up at his words, however, the illusion of innocence vanished. "Is something wrong?"

Duncan frowned at the book he held in his lap. "I've been reading Moira's diary."

Shortly after Alex had told him the true story of Moira's tragic fate, she had offered him the diary that Moira had intermittently kept throughout her life in Ruska. If there had been any other journals from her time in Grynnyth, they had not gone with her to her final home.

Mina winced sympathetically. "Oh. I'm sure that can't be much fun."

"No. She was never happy in Ruska. I think she was keenly aware that her life was being wasted, that none of the things she might have done would ever come about. But up until now, the diary has been fairly ordinary, as such things go."

"And now?"

He ran his long fingers again over the page in question. Magic teased his senses, a spell woven into paper and ink. And blood—that he was certain. "There is an enchantment on this page."

Mina came over and touched the paper herself. "The original writing has been hidden," she said, surprised. "And not by a glamour. The substance of the page itself has been altered. Why would anyone do that?"

"They would do it if they wished to make certain that no one, mortal or fae, could read what had been written." Duncan frowned, feeling a shadow fall across his heart. "I do not think this can bode well."

"Should we break the spell?" Duncan looked up into his wife's dark eyes. "Can you?" She nodded. He hesitated, asking himself if he had any right to the words that

Moira had clearly intended for no other—not even Alex—to read. "Perhaps we have no right," he said at last. "But this is not an easy magic. Someone taught her to do this. And I find myself wondering who, and why."

"I'll do it, then." Mina closed her eyes, and he felt her calling forth the magic imbued in the diary. The words before him seemed to shimmer, then writhe, like a thousand squirming snakes. The faded ink formed itself into new words. Beneath them appeared a complicated sigil traced over and over again in blood. Hoping that his feeling of dread was unfounded, Duncan began to read, while Mina looked over his shoulder.

I had an unexpected surprise today. It is customary to leave every third firing of the bathhouse for the bannik, the creature that haunts it. The servants fired it last night, and left it for him, along with the customary gifts of soap and birch twigs. Normally it is bad luck to spy on the bannik during this time, but Dreya is proving to be a fitful infant, and not prone to sleeping through the night, or indeed much at all. When I was finally able to settle her, I went out to the yard, intending to use the privy. From the direction of the bathhouse, I heard the sound of voices, male and female, and for a moment I thought some of the serfs had snuck in to have a chance at bathing without anyone else knowing. But then the female voice said something in Niunish.

I was struck dumb, hearing the dear sounds of my homeland spoken aloud in this barbaric place. Without thinking, I ran to the bathhouse, but as soon as my foot crossed the threshold the voices fell silent. There was no one inside.

At first I wondered if I had gone mad at last. But the next morning, when I went outside...a fae was there, waiting for me.

Perhaps I should have been more frightened of her, but she did not seem menacing, and she spoke to me kindly. She called herself Traveler when I asked her name, and I suppose that is the best I shall get from her.

Later...I have spoken with Traveler twice more over the last few days. She gave me a bad turn the last time—I came into the nursery, to find her standing over Dreya’s cradle, and for a moment I feared that she meant to replace my baby with a changeling. But a quick look showed that all was well, and Traveler said that she wanted only to see my daughter. We talked for a while, and I mentioned my concerns for Dreya. Only a few weeks old, and already I fear for her future in this place!

But it was then that the conversation grew strange. I will try to recall Traveler’s words as best I may, and record them here. “Aye, love, the future,” she said. “It’s a slippery thing, isn’t it? Ye try and pick out the path ye want, but there’s so many ways it can go wrong. An omnibus driver runs over a boy without looking, a master gets too drunk and kills his charge, any of a thousand little things happen, and it’s all over. Disaster.”

I didn’t understand what she meant, and told her so. “What do ye want most in this world, love?” she asked me, which wasn’t an answer. Nonetheless, I replied that what I wanted most was for Dreya to be happy. She said that was not specific enough—what did I imagine might happen, that would give Dreya the happiness she deserves?

Since the moment I realized that I was pregnant, I brooded on what would happen should I deliver a daughter. Her only escape from this household will be through marriage, and as that will be arranged for her by her father, I can only pray that the husband he gives her to will be a kind man. Someone who will let Dreya be herself, whoever that self might be. Someone who will love her for who she is.

“And if I could help her to find that person, what would ye be willing to give up?” Traveler asked me.

The question frightened me—no, it frightens me still. Fae gifts are always double-edged in all the old stories. But I told her the truth—that no sacrifice, even that of my life, would be too great.

She seemed satisfied with that. Then she offered to show me how to cast a geas.

I knew then that her appearance and conversations were not so innocent, though I’m not certain what precisely gave her away. So I asked her: “Why did you come to me? Why are you here?”

*Traveler’s face grew troubled, and she turned to the window, as if she could no longer meet my eyes. “I once knew a great seer among the fae,” she said. “She told me the vision she saw in her mirror, *tirra lirra*. Before *Camhlaidh* strangled her and threw her body in the river.”*

*It shocked me. I think I may have called her a liar. Even now, I can’t fathom why any fae would behold me in a vision, or what it might mean. I told her I didn’t know the name she had spoken, *Camhlaidh*, but she said that it wasn’t important.*

“The future’s a murky thing, love, and I can’t be giving any promises,” she said. “But I swear upon the stone, the tree, and the scepter, that if ye follow my advice, if we can bring the vision about, yer daughter will profit from it. She will have what ye want for her.”

Traveler left me then. I have to think about her offer. I’m afraid that there is some trick, some horror that will only become clear after I have accepted. Surely there is no profit in involving myself in the affairs of the fae.

But then I look at Dreya’s sleeping face, and I wonder what other choice do I have?

Traveler showed me how to cast the geas. It is done. Chernovog have mercy.

Duncan stared at the interlocking knots scratched onto the page below the final line. How many times had Moira traced the design, over and over and over again, weaving the geas? How long would it take for a faeling who lacked great power to build such a working, siphoning off her magic into it, a little at a time along with her blood? Years, at least.

“Oh my God,” Mina whispered. “The fae. Traveler. She mentioned *Camhlaidh*.” “Yes. It would seem that the fates of our families were intertwined long ago.” “Do you think...that the fae...that Traveler...might have been Padgett?” Duncan sighed heavily. “I fear that it most likely was.” “Damn this! They’ve been playing us—setting us up—” “Yes, my dear. They have. And poor Moira was caught in the middle.” Mina touched the knotwork design carefully. “This wasn’t woven to compel, but to bind. But what?” “Not what, but who.” Mina tipped her head to the side, watching him with dark eyes.

“Tell me what you’re thinking.” “It would not be enough for Moira to compel just anyone to love Alex. She was looking for the man who would love Alex of his own volition, for her own sake, and seeking to draw them together.” He shook his head, his heart heavy. “I wonder if she could even have guessed what cascade of events her spell unleashed?”

“What do you mean?”

“None of this is certain, my love...but think on it. A little over a year after Alex was born, the queen of the unseelie fae bore twins, and one of them was left in the human world. Human logic would have dictated leaving the younger and keeping the heir...but the fae do things for their own reasons, and there is no discounting pure caprice. Either way, whatever their motive or lack thereof, they abandoned not the younger but the elder, their heir, to live or die as he would in the human world. Pook. And we know that at some very early age, he began to dream of Ruska, a

place he had never been and had no apparent connection to.”

“As if something called him there.”

“Precisely. But Pook couldn’t answer the call. At first he was too young, and later he simply lacked the means to take passage on a ship. He had no way of even knowing where in all the world it was that he dreamed of with such painful clarity. So...other things happened. And Moira paid the price.”

Mina ran her finger up the page, underlining the words. “She told Padgett that she would give her life for Alex’s happiness.”

Grief ate at Duncan, a thing with cruel teeth. Had Moira ever realized that she had sealed her own fate? “I fear that she did. My sister, who had kept her secret for twenty years without arousing the slightest bit of suspicion, suddenly betrayed herself in a moment of anger. She died, and her daughter was left alone to fear for her life and her sanity. Alex found the courage to escape, and when she did...out of all the places in the world she might have gone, she came straight to Niune. There were perfectly logical reasons for her to have done so, of course. Moira had no doubt told her that Niune is far more liberal in its attitudes, which would have made it an attractive destination. Alex spoke the language, another plus. It is a long way from Ruska, and can only be reached via the sea, perhaps yet another reason if Alex feared a determined pursuit.

“Logical reasons break down, however, when we consider that moments after docking in Dere, Alex all but walked straight into Pook, who just happened to be loitering about the wharf. And who, again, just happened to be on hand when this very diary was stolen by thieves, whom Alex challenged in her determination to get it back.”

“Damn.” Mina turned away and went to stare out the window.

“It could all be coincidence, of course.”

“Like hell. Padgett’s seer gave her a vision, one that we don’t know a damned thing about, but that apparently told her that she needed Pook or Alex exactly where they are now. I’m guessing Pook, from what she said about all the ways a boy could die.”

“You may be correct. After all, had Alex never come to Niune, never met Pook, he would most certainly have died. Nigel would have killed him, and there would have been no one to interfere.”

Mina nodded grimly. “Exactly. What I want to know is what is Padgett’s interest in Pook.”

“That I cannot guess. Perhaps Alex or Pook will have some suggestions when we share our discovery with them.”

“No.” Mina turned sharply towards him, and her eyes gleamed feral in the gaslight. “We’re not telling them.”

Her vehemence surprised him. “My dear, this concerns them both deeply. Surely they have the right to know.”

“Duncan, no.” She came over to his chair and laid one hand gently on his shoulder. “Think about this for a minute. I look at that sigil, I touch it, and I *know* what it was meant to do. It was meant to bind their fates together. It *isn’t* a compulsion—a love spell. It didn’t create feelings where there weren’t any. But is Alex going to see it that way? Will she believe it even if we tell her? Or will she believe the worst, that Pook loves her only because her mother set some stupid spell eighteen years ago?”

He was silent for a moment, considering her words. A part of him chafed at the idea of not being completely honest and letting Alex make her own decisions...and yet, he did understand Mina’s concerns, all too well.

“You’re right,” he said at last. “Perhaps someday, when Alex is older and more secure in herself, but there is no point to upsetting her now.”

Mina took out a pocketknife and carefully sliced the page from the diary. “Let Moira keep some of the secrets she took to her grave.”

Chapter Seventeen

Two days later, Pook and Duncan set out for Knockma.

The easiest—and quickest—way to get from Dere to the Highlands was by taking the train, although Pook wished there had been some other choice. For one thing, the engine represented a hell of a lot more iron than he ever wanted to get near, not to mention the wheels and those miles and miles of rails underneath. It made him feel vulnerable, which he didn’t like, and made him miss Alex, which he liked even less.

She’d love this, he thought gloomily as they waited for the train to pull out of the station. *She’d probably be at the front asking to ride with the engineer and telling them how to make the damn thing run better while she was at it.*

To save on expenses, they had paid for seats in a second-class car, which was nothing more than a big wooden box that was open on the sides—although at least it had a roof, something the third-class cars lacked altogether. Wooden benches ran along the sides, leaving the center clear for baggage and for those passengers who arrived too late to find a seat. It also gave Duncan’s wheelchair enough space, which the first class cars wouldn’t have done even if they’d been able to afford to ride up there with the really rich folks.

The faelings shared the car with a wide assortment of humanity: workmen, a farmwoman with a pile of empty vegetable crates, an old man with a cage full of chickens, and a horde of screeching children. A girl about Pook’s age was nursing a baby on the other side of the car; she watched the children with a faint look of dismay that made Pook laugh.

A bell clanged from somewhere near the head of the train, making Pook jump. “I believe that is the signal that the

train is about to begin moving,” Duncan said, tightening his grip on the armrests of his wheelchair.

The train lurched, and Pook grabbed onto the bench. The chicken cage slid several feet, and two of the children fell down and started crying, while their exasperated mother berated them for not sitting when she’d told them to.

It was a rough ride, the car bouncing and jouncing, until Pook felt like the bones in his butt were banging directly against the wooden seat. Smoke and sparks from the engine came back at them, floating in the open sides and choking everybody.

Once they were out of Dere, Pook found himself watching the green countryside pass by. Low walls of piled stone made ribbons across the emerald hills, and farmers toiled in their fields.

“Look—cows!” Pook shouted excitedly, pointing the animals out for Duncan’s benefit. “See that big one with the horns—that’s a bull. I got chased by one after I left Gloachamuir, when I was wandering around trying to figure out where to go next.”

Duncan nodded politely, although he didn’t seem very impressed. Maybe he’d seen cows in their natural surroundings before. “Why did the bull chase you?”

Pook scratched his head absently. “Well, I was kind of hungry, you know, and so I thought maybe I could steal some milk.”

Duncan’s mouth twitched, as if he tried to suppress a smile. “Pook, please don’t tell me you tried to milk the bull.”

“Well, I was just ten. What the hell did I know?”

Duncan threw back his head and laughed. His amusement was contagious, so pretty soon Pook was laughing too.

As morning turned to afternoon, the mist burned off and the sun came out, making Pook glad he had the smoked glasses that Alex had made for him. Some of their fellow passengers closed their eyes and went to sleep. Pook wished he could have joined them, but every time he tried to get comfortable there would be a jolt and he’d have a new bruise on his backside. So he rested his head against the side of the cart and watched while the hills got taller and taller on the horizon. As the sun began to set, its last rays illuminated great plumes of black smoke streaming out from the hills.

“I say, what is that?” Duncan murmured, peering at the drifting smoke.

Pook felt as if he’d swallowed a live fish that swam around in his belly, all cold and slippery. “Gloachamuir.”

“Is the city on fire, then?”

“No.” Pook closed his eyes, not wanting to see their destination. “The smoke is from all the fires in the smelters and the coke ovens. Coal is real cheap here, and there ain’t a lot of big trees, so lots of households burn it and put out a lot of smoke, too. You’ll see.”

Duncan must have sensed that he didn’t want to talk about it, because he just watched the smoke instead of asking more questions. It was just after dark when the train pulled into the station, and Pook once again found himself in Gloachamuir.

The moment they were clear of the train and not in anyone’s line of sight, he put a glamour over himself. When Duncan cast him a curious look, he shrugged. “I’m a wanted criminal here, ain’t I?”

When he was five years old, the family he’d been left with as a changeling had given him to a chimney sweep in Gloachamuir in exchange for a few coins. The chimney sweeps were a guild, which meant the law said no indentured workers could be used, to protect the jobs of the guild members. What that meant in practice was that apprentices didn’t even have the few protections that the factory slaves got. If they died, there wasn’t even anybody out there holding a contract who’d care one way or the other.

He’d run away a few years later, unable to take it any longer. Broken his apprenticeship, which meant that as far as the law was concerned he owed his old master big time.

Yeah, I owe him, all right. Owe him a trip straight to hell. He didn’t know what he would do if he actually ran into Fergus, but he figured it wouldn’t be pretty for either one of them.

The city hadn’t changed much since he’d left. The light from the streetlamps seemed wan in the smoky air, and a film of black grime lay over everything: buildings, streets, and people. Any clothes hung out to dry quickly became as filthy as before they’d been washed. The smell wasn’t all that great, either, and the fumes burned his lungs so bad he had to stop and cough.

“Dear heavens,” murmured Duncan, coughing as well. “Is it always like this?”

“Yeah.” Pook took the handles of the wheelchair and pushed it up the steep street away from the rail station, since Duncan was coughing so bad. “They say when hell’s full up, God just sends the extra souls here instead.”

“I can well believe it. Let us find somewhere to stay the night, before we suffocate.”

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They spent the night in a small hotel that had ground-floor rooms. Although Duncan didn’t seem to have any trouble getting off to sleep, Pook lay awake for a long time, staring at the ceiling and trying not to think about anything. The fact of being back in the city he’d run away from, on the same streets he’d walked as a kid, made him feel like something bad was going to happen any second. Worrying about the next day, when they went to Knockma, didn’t make sleeping any easier, either.

Wish Alex was here, he thought wistfully, even though he’d been the one to tell her to stay behind. He closed his eyes and imagined her snuggled against him, brushing his hair back from his face and telling him it was going to be okay. Eventually, the image lulled him, and he fell into fitful sleep for a few hours.

The next morning, they set out on foot. Duncan said that the entrance to the Faerie Realm was supposed to be in

the hills outside the city, so they started walking. The hills were tough going, but once they were clear of the fumes of the city, Duncan insisted on wheeling himself along no matter how steep the grade.

The landscape close in to Gloachamuir was barren, cluttered only by the refuse of the city, human and otherwise. But once they got further out into the countryside, the wasteland gave way to hills whose sides were covered with a purple blanket of heather. Bees buzzed lazily from plant to plant, and innumerable birds chirped and hopped amidst the tangled bushes. Pook felt like laying down in the shade and taking a nap, and his footsteps dragged more the higher the sun got.

The occasional traveler passed them by, mostly farmers headed for Gloachamuir with their produce piled in wagons. It wasn't a main road, though, so for the most part didn't see anyone else. Around noon, they stopped to rest and eat a cold lunch they'd gotten from the hotel kitchen that morning.

"We should make it to the mound at twilight, which is an excellent time to find doorways into Faerie," Duncan said, shading his eyes to watch the flight of a vulture on the wind.

"Because it's one of those between-times?"

Duncan looked pleased. "I see that all of my lectures didn't fall on deaf ears."

Pook didn't have the heart to tell him he'd just been guessing. "I ain't been the ideal student," he admitted ruefully.

Duncan hesitated, and Pook figured he was trying to think of some way to agree without being too rude. "You did not survive either the streets of Dere or your battles with the fae by being stupid," the old man said at last. "Had you been given the opportunity to concentrate on anything other than your own survival, no doubt you would have benefited greatly from an education. And still might, I'll add—it is never too late to learn new things." He hesitated, then smiled unexpectedly. "You may not have been the most learned of my students, but of them all, I believe you have shown the greatest heart."

The compliment surprised Pook. He'd always got on well with Mina, but Duncan was just so damned different from him that he'd never known what to make of the older man.

"Thanks," Pook said finally, uncertain what to feel.

They started off again after lunch. The sun turned westward, and as the shadows grew longer across the road, Pook began to get a weird sense of déjà vu. It wasn't until they came over the rise and he saw the tumbled-down homestead that he realized why.

"I think that's where my parents left me," he said, stopping as though his feet had gotten stuck to the road. "I ain't sure...it's been too damned long, but everything feels really familiar."

"That would make sense—we are getting close to the mound that marks the entrance to Faerie and Knockma." Duncan peered through his spectacles at the ramshackle outbuildings, corrals, and walls. "It doesn't seem to have been a prosperous place."

"No." Pook felt cold just looking at it. In the distance, he thought he saw a flash of red hair, and his heart clenched. "I was too little to remember well, but there was a girl...I guess she wasn't much older than I am now, if that. I think she might have been the sister of the boy I was swapped for. She'd hold me in her lap in front of the fire. She took care of me, when I guess the rest of the clan would've been happy to let me starve."

He felt an unexpected pain lance through his chest. The memory of being loved and safe was so distant that it seemed like he must have made it up, except that he knew it had to be true or else he probably wouldn't have lived. "I wish I knew where she was buried. I wish I could go there, just to say thanks."

Duncan had no answer to that, but he put a hand to Pook's arm in a gesture of comfort that did make him feel a little better. He wondered what had happened to the human baby, if there had been anybody in Faerie who'd taken care of it.

Stuffing his hands in his pockets, he walked past the little path that led down to the homestead. Duncan followed, cursing quietly as the wheels of his chair hung up on the irregular stones littering the roadway.

At Duncan's instruction, they turned off the main road a few miles farther along. The side road got worse the farther they went, dwindling rapidly to a narrow path, then to nothing at all. Sheep grazed on the lush green grass, but otherwise there was no sign of human habitation.

Even so, Pook started to get a prickling between his shoulder blades, like somebody was watching him. He turned around and glanced back, but the untamed landscape was devoid of anything but the sheep and a few late birds. *Just jumpy*, he told himself uneasily. *All this countryside is getting to me. Guess I'm just a city b'hoy at heart.*

The feeling increased rather than lessened, despite all his mental reassurances. He dropped his right hand to Bob's hilt and left it there.

"There it is," Duncan said quietly. "Knockma. In our world, a simple mound, but walk through the doorway and one enters the Faerie Realm, where it is far more than a hill."

Pook followed Duncan's gaze and saw a long, low mound that didn't look quite natural, although he couldn't imagine who would go to the trouble to make a hill where there hadn't been one before. Its sides were covered in purple heather, and the sweet smell of the flowers lingered on the evening breeze. Atop the mound, tall gray stones stood in twin lines, like soldiers marching to nowhere. The light of the westering sun painted their sides in amber and stretched their shadows out like groping fingers.

They went towards the mound, although Pook felt as if every step were a struggle. The sun slipped farther below the horizon, and the breeze took on a cool edge. The quality of the light changed; the world shifted into shades of purple and blue, streaked with gold. Every detail was painfully clear, and Pook felt something stirring in his blood, as if the wind was a faery piper calling him to dance.

"Twilight," Duncan murmured. "And we stand before the doors of Knockma. Are you certain you wish to do this, Pook?"

Pook swallowed hard and firmed his grip on Bob's hilt. "Yeah. I'm sure. Let's do it."

"Then call your father's name three times."

Tossing his hair out of his eyes, he forced himself to stand straight and proud. "Finn Bheara!" he shouted at the hillside. "Finn Bheara, I'm calling you out! Hey, Finn Bheara!"

For a moment, nothing happened, except that the uneasy feeling of being watched got even worse. Then the heather on the hillside rippled, as if something big moved beneath it. Thrashing and tossing, the plants began to shift aside, the dirt they had grown on crumbling down into a hole beneath the hill. Within moments, a rough-edged tunnel was revealed. Cold air blew from it, and Pook smelled the scents of dark water and rich earth, of winter and the last fading leaves of autumn. His heart leapt unexpectedly, and for a moment he was filled with a keen yearning, although he didn't know why.

"Whatever happens, do not take any invitation to go into the mound," Duncan advised quietly. "I fear that if we were to enter, we would find ourselves entrapped by our hosts. At the very least, keep one foot firmly on this side of the door. Make the fae come to you."

Pook nodded, even though he felt as if half his soul was waiting for him on the other side of the door. *It's Faerie*, he thought in a sudden burst of bleak understanding. *It's home. It's calling me back where I came from.*

The part of him that delighted in the darkest cold of winter, that secretly desired to unleash his power without caring who saw him or who got hurt, wanted to answer that call. He could feel the magic rising inside of him, the way it did when he got really angry or when he made love to Alex, riding that fine edge between control and madness.

Pook focused on Duncan's warning with all his strength. *One wrong step here, and it's over. I don't know what they'll do to me, but no way am I going to like it. Sure as hell they aren't going to be letting me out to see Alex.*

And he'd promised Alex that he'd be coming back to her, hadn't he?

"I ain't coming in there!" he yelled at the shadows lurking on the other side of the door. "You come out here. Got some things I want to say to you."

The quality of the shadows changed somehow...grew thicker for a moment, then parted, revealing a low, dank passageway...and beyond that, just a glimpse of color and movement, of a court dressed in cobweb and shadow, of tables piled high with gold and jewels and food beyond Pook's wildest dreams.

Screw that. I know a con game when I see one.

"I ain't coming in, so you can just stop playing around and get out here!"

Duncan cleared his throat nervously. "Ah, a bit of politeness might not go awry."

"If they wanted manners, they should've left me with a rich family, shouldn't they?" Pook unconsciously shifted into a fighting stance. "Come on out, damn it!"

The vision disappeared, as if a light had been shut off. A moment later, shapes appeared in the darkness, and the Sluagh came forth.

The air grew cold, and shadows writhed to life, capering and tumbling and scampering. Pook felt them plucking and pinching at him with clawed fingers, and he snarled threateningly. Monstrous shapes slithered through the heather, their scales glistening wetly in the last rays of the sun and the first beams of the moon. Things just human enough to horrify crawled or skittered back and forth between the door and the standing stones.

And then the Gentry came after them, the Lords of Faerie. Many of them had a terrible, cold beauty about them, and they dressed in silks or rags or weeds or nothing at all. Their eyes were the black of night or the white of frost, and their hair flowed like falling water over their shoulders.

In their midst walked Finn Bheara and Oonagh, and Pook felt unexpected grief slice his heart at the sight of the parents who had given him away so long ago. Oonagh's mouth was set in a sneer of contempt, but cold rage transformed Finn Bheara's countenance into something remote and utterly inhuman.

"You dare come here," said the unseelie king; his icy breath plumed in the warm summer air. "Foolish pup."

"Maybe," Pook agreed. His voice shook, and he swore silently at himself. "But I'm thinking..."

He trailed off, distracted as the feeling of wrongness that had plagued him suddenly intensified. "Pook!" Duncan hissed, and he had the feeling he was screwing things up by not holding firm to his demands.

He didn't know after what made him turn and look at the western sky, instead of assuming that the danger lay with the fae that were already all around him. Two streaks of flame came towards them, straight out of the sun, and if he hadn't been wearing the smoked glasses Alex had given him, he would never have seen them for the glare.

Pook heard himself shout a warning, and then the seelie were on them, twin comets whose ambush took the Sluagh unaware. Pook caught a glimpse of fiery wings and blazing eyes, of malice that looked for death. The paths of the two winged fae diverged at the last instant, and Pook saw that one of them made straight for his father, and the other—

Almost without thought, he flung himself at Duncan. The wheelchair went over, dumping them both onto the ground. Pook twisted as he fell, drawing Bob and striking out blindly. The blow missed, but it did make the seelie swerve. A single feather brushed across Pook's cheek, and he felt it slice open his flesh like the edge of a razor.

At the same moment, shouts and the sound of struggle broke out all around him. He caught a glimpse of sprites and other creatures he didn't know, all of them charging the Sluagh. They were dangerous enough, but nothing like the two Gentry who had swooped down on their unsuspecting enemies. The Sluagh might not have any trouble dispatching the lesser seelie fae, but they were dangerously vulnerable while the winged ones were still in the air.

“Stay here,” he ordered Duncan, even though it hurt like hell to talk. Then he realized how dumb a thing it was to say anyway.

The light grew as the winged fae came around for another pass. Pook staggered to his feet, feeling warm blood pour down the side of his face and neck. Most of the Sluagh were busy fighting off their attackers, but one stood right out in the open, paying no heed to the battle or to anything but the winged fae heading their way. With a little shock, Pook realized that it was Oonagh.

Finn Bheara lay at her feet, an unmoving mass of blood and cut flesh. Oonagh straddled her husband’s body, her eyes wild with rage. Even as the winged fae came back around for another pass, Pook felt her gather her power, like a black whirlpool sucking all light down into it.

“I’ll get one—you get the other!” he yelled.

His mother glanced at him, and for a moment he saw something in the way she held herself, defiant and angry, that hit close to his own heart. Then she nodded, once, sharply.

Okay. Now all I have to figure out is what I’m going to do.

Clutching Bob in his hand, he pelted up the hill towards the standing stones. He could feel the heat coming from the seelie fae pursuing him, hear the metallic clash of its wings in the air. In the instant before it reached him, he flung himself full-length onto the ground. It overshot, past him in an instant, and he heard its scream of fury.

It would only take the fae seconds to turn around and come back for him, so he wasted no time in scrambling up and racing towards the stones again. Once he was among them, he wove in and out of the twin rows, hoping that the fae was too big to maneuver between with its wings outstretched. It shrieked again, swooping around the outside of the formation, seeking a way in.

Okay...now we find out just how dumb I am.

The stones were rough-cut and cracked, providing plenty of hand and footholds. Pook scrambled up the nearest one, then balanced on its top, Bob held steady in both hands. The winged fae let out a cry of triumph and soared towards him, certain of its victory. As its hot eyes fixed on him, Pook deliberately glanced at the stone to his left, as if gauging how far he would have to go to reach it.

The fae noticed, and as Pook gathered himself to jump, he saw its wings begin to tilt so that it could intercept him in mid-leap and cut him to ribbons.

So instead of jumping to the side, he flung himself directly forwards, straight at the fae as it began its turn. Its deadly wings passed within inches of his face, and he felt the heat of its body like a fire against his skin. The edge of his katana slammed into the fae’s body just behind its wings, parting skin and muscle like water, pausing only briefly against bone. Golden blood spurting out, hot and stinging as acid.

Pook hit the ground and rolled. The fae’s body came down behind him in two pieces.

Damn. He lay on his back for an instant, gasping for breath. *No time, no time—the other one might be on its way now, b’hoy! Move your ass!*

Pook rolled over and stumbled to his feet, holding Bob defensively before him. But no seelie fae swept in to slash him to pieces in revenge for its fallen comrade. Instead, all was still and silent. The battle had ended, the lesser seelie fae running off when the winged ones fell, and it looked like the unseelie had pulled foot, too. The door to Faerie was closed; all that remained were the overturned wheelchair, Duncan...and two motionless figures.

Pook walked slowly down the hillside, feeling as if his insides had been scooped out, leaving him numb and hollow. Finn Bheara was gone, but Oonagh lay on the grass, her body scorched and slashed almost to pieces. The other winged fae lay with her, its light extinguished forever.

She’s dead, Pook thought, standing over her. *My mom.* He tested the thought like he might probe a sore tooth with his tongue, but he still couldn’t seem to feel anything at all.

“Pook!”

He looked up slowly and saw that Duncan had struggled into a sitting position. “Are you all right?” Duncan asked.

“Yeah. I’m fine.”

“You need a doctor.”

Surprised, Pook touched the side of his face. His hand came away red with blood. “What happened?” he asked, feeling as if even the pain in his face were a distant thing.

“Oonagh fell defending her husband and king,” Duncan said quietly. “While she did so, some of the other unseelie fae came and bore him away, into the mound. I believe he still lived, but he was gravely injured. I’m sorry, Pook.”

Pook only shook his head, unable to summon any words. Feeling tired beyond anything he could ever remember, he walked to the base of the hill, hauled the wheelchair upright, and helped Duncan back into it.

Battered and defeated, they turned back towards Gloachamuir as the moon rose above the horizon.

Chapter Eighteen

“Don’t fret,” Mina said. “They’ll be back soon.”

As if she hasn’t worn a hole in the floor pacing, nor smoked a pack of cigarettes in the last few hours, Alex thought with a touch of resentment.

The last three days had been excruciating for both the women left behind in Dere. Although Alex knew all the reasons Pook and Duncan had gone alone, the logic behind them had become less and less appealing with every hour. What if something terrible had happened— something that Alex might have somehow been able to prevent? What if the fae had taken Pook, and he even now lay in some dank dungeon, despairing of rescue? What if—

No. Stop this.

Alex had always done her best not to worry over things she could not change. But she had done nothing save worry from the moment Pook had walked out the door.

Mina stood at the door of the bookstore, staring out at the street. She had been restless all day, and in the last two hours she had given up even pretending to work. “Duncan isn’t stupid,” she said, perhaps as much to reassure herself as Alex. “He wouldn’t let Pook do anything too crazy. If he could stop him. Damn it, I should have gone.”

The clatter of hooves made Mina straighten. A moment later, a cab pulled up in front of the bookstore. The door opened, and Pook climbed out. Dark circles stood out beneath his eyes, and a white bandage covered his left cheek, stark against his brown skin.

Alex ran to him. He swept her up in his arms, kissed her, then hugged her close and buried his face in her hair.

“You’re hurt,” she accused, even as she held him.

“Yeah.” He pulled back and she could see that he was trying not to grin too broadly; no doubt it was rather painful at the moment. “Duncan put ten stitches in my face.”

He’d been hurt by a fae, then; any other wound he could have healed without so much as a scar. “Chernovog, Pook, what happened?”

“An ambush,” Duncan said, wheeling over to them. His long face was grave, and worry lurked in his blue-gray eyes. “Let us go inside, and we’ll share our story, such as it is.”

“You failed, then,” Mina guessed.

“We did, my dear. And I fear that we may have done far worse than that.”

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While Duncan related the disastrous events at Knockma, Alex gently peeled the bandage off Pook’s face. The wound beneath was long and narrow, and she guessed it would leave a thin, white scar over his cheekbone. *My poor, beautiful boy.*

She heated some water and wet a washcloth. While she did so, Vagabond climbed onto Pook’s lap and tried to wash the injury herself. Alex removed the cat firmly. “I’m sorry, Vagabond, but he’s mine,” she told her. Vagabond mewed back loudly.

Pook winced when Alex touched the cloth to his face, but didn’t complain. “So Oonagh is dead,” she said quietly.

“Yeah.” His eyes darkened. “I wonder if Dubh knows.”

A knock sounded from the rear of the shop. Mina rose to her feet instantly, her eyes wary. “No one ought to be calling at the back door.”

Pook immediately got up and followed her, so Alex followed *him*, and Duncan came last. As the knock sounded again, Mina flung open the door.

Padgett stood there, her pale face more grim than Alex had ever seen it. Her eyes met Mina’s for a moment, then she bowed, just a little. “Good evening. Me name’s Padgett—maybe Alex has mentioned it?”

“What do you want?” Mina demanded.

Padgett’s blue eyes sought out Pook. “Well,” she said gravely, “for one thing I’m wanting to convey me respects to the king of the unseelie fae.”

Wariness lurked in Pook’s gray eyes. “What do you mean?”

“I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but there’s no other way to break it to ye. Yer father’s dead, love. Lingered until today, or so I’m told, and died just this last little while. Yer the king of the unseelie fae now.”

Pook took a step back, shaking his head in denial. “No. You’re wrong.”

Alex touched his hand, and he stopped. Looking up at his frightened face, she felt her gut twist. “Someone will be coming for him, won’t they?”

“Aye. That they will, lassie. If yer wanting me advice, I’m thinking ye’ll need to leave here soon, because this will be the first place they’ll look.”

Duncan’s eyes were hooded. “And why should Pook wish to hide? If he is the king as you say, they are bound to listen to him.”

Padgett’s mouth twitched into a smile. “Ye know better than that, Duncan RiDahn.” She shifted her attention back to Pook. “I saved ye from prison, and helped get yer pretty girl back. If I was earning any trust from ye by doing so, I’m asking ye to come with me now. For I’d not have ye going into Faerie without knowing the truth.”

“I ain’t going into Faerie at all,” Pook said, but his voice sounded unsteady.

“Or anywhere with you,” Mina added, but Pook put his hand to her arm to stop her.

“No. Padgett helped us. And if she’s got some answers...I want to hear them. She’s earned that much.”

Padgett smiled grimly. “Thank ye, Yer Majesty.” She stepped back and bowed with a flourish. “Shall we be going, then?”

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The sun had set, and the night was lit only by the streetlamps and the far-off fingers of lightning that arced

across the sky. A hot wind blew, bearing on it the sound of thunder, but there was no rain. The wind and the impending storm made Pook feel jumpy, as if he'd accidentally touched one of Alex's experiments and gotten a spark off it.

Yeah. Just the storm that's making you all jumpy. Not the fact that you're the Goddamned king of the unseelie fae now.

What the hell am I supposed to do? I couldn't even figure out how to be a prince.

Padgett and Alex seem pretty sure that the unseelie fae are going to show up looking to take me back to Faerie with them. How am I going to get out of that? Tell them "sorry, there's been a mistake?" Don't think they're going to go for that.

Why is all this on me? What the hell did I do to deserve this shit?

Padgett led them across the city, to a small park midway between the river and the low hills. Some sort of ruin stood there, its tumbled walls covered by vines. As they approached, an owl flew out and was gone on silent wings. The light from the street didn't reach so far into the park, so Padgett held up her hand and conjured a little flame that danced on the end of her fingertips. It made Pook nervous, so he hung back a bit and kept a close eye on her.

A shadowy figure loitered near the ruin. As they approached, it lifted its head, and Pook was startled to realize that it was Dubh.

His brother looked...well, like crap, really. His dark brown eyes were red-rimmed and swollen, like maybe he'd been having a good cry just a bit before. When he saw Pook, his mouth trembled for a moment; then he said: "This is all your fault!"

Well, that was nothing new. Pook thought about just busting Dubh's lip in retaliation, but he had started to figure out that Dubh's feelings for their parents were probably just as screwed-up as his were. So instead he kept a hold on his temper and said, "It ain't. I didn't mean for none of this to happen. The seelie were waiting for their moment, and they took advantage of it when they saw it."

"They wouldn't have had an opportunity if you hadn't gone to Knockma!"

"Maybe, maybe not." Pook ran his hand through his hair tiredly. "You want to blame me, fine. But I figure you knew our mom and dad well enough to know why I had to go in the first place."

Dubh looked away, but didn't argue, which seemed like a good sign. "What are you doing here?" Pook asked cautiously.

Dubh shrugged. "After we went to the sceach in Hurley Park, I decided to take a closer look at the fae of Dere. I came across Padgett's trail shortly after she freed you from prison."

"Had a small dust-up with Camhlaidh, I did," Padgett put in. She pulled a pipe from one pocket and a tobacco pouch from another.

"So after...that is, earlier today, she came to me and said that you lot would be here." Dubh's mouth twisted into a slight sneer, although it wasn't nearly as nasty-looking as usual. "It seemed likely that you would botch things, so I decided that my presence was required as well."

Mina said something uncomplimentary to him, which Pook heartily approved. Duncan, however, frowned. "We should at least attempt to be civil to one another, given the circumstances," he said.

Padgett had gotten her pipe lit; the sweet smell of tobacco drifted on the restless wind. "Yer man's right, dyana. So if yer all done quarreling, should we be getting on with things, then?"

"I think we should." Danger glittered in Mina's dark eyes. "Let's start with why you wanted us to come here with you."

"So ye could meet the rest, of course," Padgett said with a smile that was as dangerous as anything Pook had ever seen.

They came at her summons, creeping out of the shadows or riding in on the wind. Stray sods hopped across the ground, grass flowing down their heads and backs like manes. The shelly-coat and green-tooth from Hurley Park were with them, as were fire sprites, and red caps, and a bewildering assortment besides, both seelie and unseelie. They gathered in a silent circle around the wary faelings, and Pook could taste their power on the wind. He moved between them and Alex, unsheathing Bob as he did so.

"There's being no need for yer pig-sticker," Padgett said mildly.

"Oh yeah? Then tell me who they are and what the hell they're doing here."

"They are the Banished."

"Banished from the Faerie Realm?" Duncan guessed

Padgett nodded in his direction. "Right ye are. We're all exiled from Faerie, trapped here in the mortal realm and unable to go back to where we'd like to be. Ye see, we—and others who aren't here—held to the old ways when the stone was sundered, and for that we're accounted traitors by Camhlaidh and his ilk."

"Hold on—what stone? What are you talking about?" Pook asked. He glanced at Dubh, but his brother looked just as bewildered as he did, which didn't make him feel a lot better.

"Ye younglings aren't knowing much of yer history," Padgett said as she settled herself down on a fallen arch. Smoke trailed up from her pipe, tracing lazy patterns around her head. "But that's not yer fault. Ye've been lied to by seelie and unseelie both."

"Lied to about what?" Dubh asked, but there was a note of dread in his voice. *Like maybe he ain't sure he wants to know the truth.*

"For one thing, they've told ye that we've been at war with each other since the beginning. But there was a time when we were one people, ruled over by one king—or queen, as the case may have been." Padgett blew a stream of

smoke out of her nostrils, then tapped her pipe against the rock she sat on. "It's a long story, but one ye need to be hearing.

"Our kind came over the sea to Niune, long ago, before humans ever set foot on this isle. We had our little spats, fae against fae, but nothing so grand as seelie against unseelie. In fact, we got along fair well, I'd say. Seelie ruled the day and the summer, and unseelie ruled the night and the winter, and we lived within the balance of the seasons like every other thing in the world. Where power waxed this month, it would wane the next; there was no reason to hate each other or to be jealous, for all had a time to call their own."

"But who ruled them?" Pook asked, hoping to divert Padgett out of what was starting to sound like a boring lecture.

Duncan shushed him, but Padgett only laughed. "A fair question, I'm thinking, and one close to yer own heart at the moment. Ye see, there wasn't just one royal line amongst the seelie and one amongst the unseelie, as it is today. Instead, each kind had three royal houses. Whenever the old ruler of all the fae would die, each house would send the best of its lot to the throne room at the palace, where the stone was kept.

"The stone wasn't much to look at—just a plain circle—but it was powerful magic. Each of the six candidates would step on the stone; and when the true king set foot on it, it would cry aloud so that all would know. Sometimes it didn't choose anyone, and then others would come from the royal houses and be tested, and always one of them would eventually be proclaimed the true king or queen. And that one would rule until weariness of the world or misfortune found him, when the stone would be trotted back out and the whole thing started again.

"Ye're all knowing the story of how humans came, and the trouble that caused our folk. It was a time of great unease, so when old Dagda died, everybody figured that a strong king would be called by the stone. There was one in particular, a seelie by the name of Kai, who everybody thought would be the natural choice. Big and strong he was, ready to fight the humans and lead the fae to throw them off the island and send them back where they came from.

"So when an unseelie was chosen, there was a lot of surprise in Faerie. Oidhche was a scrawny sort, sickly and bookish, not really what anybody was looking for in a king. Had times been different, though, that would have been that. The stone had done the choosing, just as it always had, and never before had it led us astray.

"But Kai refused to accept the stone's wisdom. He said that there had been some trick. Claimed our people would be doomed if they had to follow somebody like Oidhche, who could barely lift a sword, let alone fight with one. In his anger, he drew his own blade and cut off Oidhche's head. And then, he smote the stone with his bloody sword, and clove it into two parts."

Pook's heart skipped a beat. "This stone—it was maybe as big as a plate when it was together?"

Padgett nodded.

"And covered with weird writing, maybe?"

"Yes. Ye know of it, then?"

"No." He swallowed against a sudden dryness in his throat. "Or yes. I mean, I saw it, when Fox and me did the vision spell."

Padgett's interest sharpened right away. "Was there more to yer vision, then?"

"No. Not about the stone, anyway. I just saw it in two pieces. I was holding one in each hand."

She nodded slowly, absorbing the information. "With the stone broken, Kai declared himself king. But Oidhche's family wasn't just going to stand by and do nothing. Without the stone to tell them who should rule, Oidhche's daughter said she ought to be queen, and that Kai had to be executed for what he had done. Kai's relatives came in on his side, and more and more got involved, and pretty soon there was a war in Faerie.

"The situation got worse and worse, with more dead on both sides, and two self-crowned rulers out to own the whole. After a while, they each started thinking that it wasn't just the close relatives of the other that was their enemy, but anybody like them at all. And so it went from being house against house to seelie against unseelie.

"The longer the war went on, the more bitter feelings got, and the more it was being forgotten that we used to all be getting on pretty well. We got distracted from holding back the humans, and before we knew it they had taken over the whole of Niune. With every bit of power each side lost to the humans, the more they resented the other for the times when it was ascendant.

"But we didn't all forget what things had been like. The oldsters among us remembered, of course, and there were others who didn't think they ought to be killing other fae without better reason. By this time, the only two royal lines left were the ones of Kai and Oidhche—they'd killed all their rivals, now that the stone was sundered. Needless to say, all their own power was built on the fact of the war, so anybody who was against the war wasn't going to be very popular. And that's why we're all exiles here."

Pook wasn't entirely certain he'd followed every detail of Padgett's lesson, but he thought he had the basics down. "So I'm descended from his Oidhche guy, right?"

Padgett nodded. "Right ye are, me boy."

"How do we know any of this is true?" Duncan asked.

"Because it is." Padgett's smile faded. "I know because I was there. Kai was me brother."

Dubh swore.

Padgett nodded gravely. "That's what I've said meself, boy. I've spent centuries waiting for the chance to undo what Kai did, but it's never come. Until now. Now we've got the ruler of at least one side who might listen, who might agree that it's past time to be putting a stop to this."

Don't expect much, does she? "I've listened, and I agree that maybe we ought to stop this. But how?"

"When the stone was sundered, each side of the conflict took one piece away with them. If we can get the two

pieces back together, the stone can be healed. It can proclaim the true king once again.”

Duncan didn't look like he was buying that. “And why should anyone listen?”

“Because there's more magic to the stone than just picking the true king. The stone's tied to everything in Faerie, and when it accepts the true king, he'll be able to use that magic to enforce his claim. Oidhche wasn't expecting betrayal, but if he had been warned, Kai wouldn't have stood a chance against him. The conflict can be ended— but only if the stone is restored and the true king claims it.”

“And what poor bugger are you going to get to take that job?” Pook asked.

Padgett tipped her head to him. “That would be you.”

“Like hell!”

Alex put her hand to his arm. “Pook,” she said in a calm, reasonable tone that made him sure he wasn't going to like what she had to say, “think about it. If there are only two royal lines left, it would have to be either you or the seelie queen.”

“And Siubhan isn't having nearly the sense of yer boy,” Padgett added with a wry grin. “She'll be the one to watch for—her and the Gentry on both sides, most like. Fiends like Camhlaidh, who've got too much of their own personal power tied up in the war, who will lose that if we succeed. They'll all be trying to stop ye, Tammis. That's why ye've got to make up yer mind now. With Finn Bheara dead, there's no time left.”

Pook's first instinct was to dig in his heels and refuse to listen to a damn thing anybody said. He couldn't do this—knew he couldn't, and why that wasn't obvious to everyone else was beyond him. But he had a bad feeling that Padgett was right when she said they were out of time. He had to make a call, decide whose side he was on, and do it right now.

He turned to Dubh, who'd been listening to everything without saying a word, like he was just a ghost of the b'hoy Pook had known. “What do you think?”

Dubh looked shocked for a minute, like he'd never thought Pook would care one way or another about his advice. “You're asking me?”

“Yeah I am, although I'm starting to wonder why if you can't even figure that out.”

Dubh surveyed Padgett, then the rest of the Banished. “I've heard rumors, now and then, about the stone,” he admitted at last. “But I thought that was all they were. Rumors. Stories.” He bit his lip, looking suddenly young. “The seelie killed our parents, Pook. Don't they deserve to die for that?”

Pook sighed. “You know, I'm starting to get it now. Ain't no difference between the fae and a gang, is there? They hurt us, so we hurt them. Only they hurt us because we'd already hurt them, and maybe we did that because they'd hurt us before, and it just goes on and on and never stops, does it?”

“You don't understand. You weren't raised in Faerie—you never knew them!”

“I do understand. Oonagh and Finn Bheara were your family, but the Rat Soldiers were mine. Only one I ever hoped to have. And if some Firestarter or Rummie or b'hoy from some other gang had killed a Soldier, I would've been ready to hand out some pain. Unless...unless maybe he'd done something to them first, and they were trying to get some payback for that.” Pook shrugged. “Darcy would have kicked my ass good if I'd said that to her, would have called me a bad Soldier, a traitor. Maybe she would've been right.”

Dubh pointed accusingly at Padgett. “But she said the seelie started it! So it is their fault.”

Pook felt his temper starting to flare and he wished he dared put away Bob so he could start using his fists. “So they started it—so what? After however damn many centuries it's been, haven't enough people died to make up for them killing old Oid-what's-his-name? Not like either of us even knew the b'hoy! And I'll be damned if I do anything just because my great-great-whatever did it.”

Dubh's eyes were haunted. “Of course you wouldn't. You don't understand anything about family honor. *Changeling.*”

And suddenly it was all clear, although Pook didn't like what he saw. “Yeah,” he agreed, feeling his anger drain away. “That was the whole point, wasn't it? Camhlaidh, Finn Bheara, Oonagh, all of them wanted me to be a changeling. They wanted somebody who wouldn't think like everybody else in Faerie. Somebody who might win the war by doing something no fae would ever expect.”

He stepped away from his brother and thrust his sword into its sheath. “Well, that's what they got, ain't it? Something they didn't expect.”

Padgett rose to her feet. “Are ye with us, then?”

Pook didn't answer her at first, but instead turned back towards Alex and held out his hands to her. She came to him, a quizzical expression on her face, and he felt her fingers twine with his. “I spent years fighting the fae by myself,” he said, although he wasn't sure if the words were for her or for everybody. “Until I couldn't stand it no more, until I was so damned tired I was about ready to die just to get a break. I ain't going to spend the rest of my life fighting a war nobody's going to ever win. I got to think there's something better than that for us.”

He glanced at Padgett again. “If I do what you want, if we put that stupid stone back together and it works out like you're planning, will I be able to tell the fae to stay clear of Dere? To leave the kids alone?”

“Ye will.”

“Then I'm in. Tell me what you want me to do.”

Chapter Nineteen

“The seelie fae keep their half of the stone in Sidhe Finnachaidh, currently Siubhan’s palace,” Padgett said. Most of the Banished had left the ruins after Pook agreed to join them; only a few remained behind to listen in at what was, in essence, a council of war.

Damn it all, Duncan was right, Mina thought with a glance at her husband. Duncan’s attention was on Padgett, his blue-gray eyes intent as he absorbed her words. He said at the beginning of this mess not to assume that we knew the whole truth, or that all the fae had the same motivations.

“So how are we going to get our hands on the thing?” Mina asked. She fished a cigarette out of her pocket and held it loosely between her fingers. “I’m assuming that they aren’t just going to have it lying around unguarded.”

Padgett leaned forward, a gleam in her eye, and touched her finger to the tip of Mina’s cigarette. A moment later, it began to smolder. “That is going to be the tricky bit, I give ye that.”

She seems so...normal, for a fae. Someone you could have a drink with down at the saloon and never think twice. It was hard to remember that Padgett was an uncertain ally at best. In her patched coat and trousers, with her red hair falling into her eyes, she seemed more like an innocent child than an ancient fae of great power. Only the tattered wings on her back, which continuously stirred the air behind her, gave any visual reminder of her true nature.

“I think we might have a chance coming up,” the seelie went on. She had settled on the base of a ruined column, and now linked her arms around one knee. “Now that Finn Bheara’s dead, me kinfolk are going to force a battle. The field’s already been marked in mortal blood, as I’m sure ye all know. Now that the unseelie are in disarray, Siubhan will issue the challenge. She’ll want to make the battle as decisive as she can, so she’ll be taking all the strength she’s got with her to the field. That might be our best chance to sneak in the back door, so to speak, and take the stone.”

“So the fight’s got to be underway already by then,” Pook said, frowning as if he didn’t particularly like the sound of that.

“Aye, laddie, that it does.”

Mina glanced at Pook, trying to gauge the boy’s reaction. He looked...scared, she decided. Pook wasn’t dumb; he knew where this was all leading.

Pity touched her unexpectedly. He was too damned young to have to make these sorts of decisions. Padgett—hell, everyone—was asking him to carry the burdens of a man, whether he was ready for that or not, and the strain showed in his haunted gray eyes.

Well, she’d be damned if he had to do it alone. Mina took a step forward and put her hand on Pook’s shoulder. “If there’s going to be a fight, then I know where I’ll be,” she said, and gave him a feral grin.

After a minute, his expression lightened, and a bit of his usual cocky attitude seeped back. “Heh. Figured you’d be up for a brawl.”

“Anytime, anyplace.”

“And what of the half of the stone possessed by the unseelie?” Duncan asked. The faerylights that illuminated the ruin reflected in the lenses of his spectacles, making his expression unreadable. “Is it in Knockma?”

What appeared to be a small, wizened old man scuttled forwards; everywhere his feet touched, frost bloomed, killing the grass behind him. “They gave it to the bean-nighe,” he said, his voice like the sigh of a winter wind. “She hid it in a crack in reality, in between what is and what might be.”

“Well, that helps a lot,” Pook snapped. “Damn fae can’t give a straight answer to nothing. What the hell’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means the stone is neither one place nor another, which makes it both harder and easier to get at,” said Padgett. “Ye must find a place that’s slippery to begin with—an in-between place like a threshold, or a maze. Someone good at seeing could stand within it and reach that half of the stone.”

Alex straightened. She had been standing quietly by Pook, saying nothing with words...and saying everything with her solid presence at his side. “Do you remember the day we were at the Crawl, Pooshka? Fox was disturbed by the Labyrinth. She said...I can’t remember, precisely, but something about wanting to be whole.”

“I remember. Damn. If we’d known then, could’ve saved ourselves a hell of a lot of trouble, couldn’t we?”

“Not necessarily, me brollachan,” said Padgett. “If this place yer speaking of is at the battlefield, ‘twould be easier get to the stone after the battle begins.”

Mina frowned, not seeing the logic. “Why?”

“Don’t ye know why the battlefield must be marked, dyana? Once the fighting starts, that ground will become a part of the Faerie Realm, at least for a little while. The distinction between *here* and *there* will break down even farther, and make the magic of the maze even more potent, I’m thinking.”

“So there ain’t nothing we can do until the battle starts,” Pook said glumly.

Mina began to pace. “We can plan. We have to plan.” She felt wild and restless, and a part of her wanted to run and fight, not to follow her own advice to stand and think. *But that wouldn’t get us anywhere.*

“There’s one more thing,” Padgett said softly.

Pook flung his arms up in a gesture of defeat. “Ain’t there always?”

Alex shushed him, but Padgett smiled wryly. “Aye, laddie, I’ll agree with ye. It’s one thing after another with our kind, isn’t it? But there’s no getting around the fact that the unseelie are looking for ye. Every fae who’s been here this

evening is holding wards around this place, but once we disband for tonight the Sluagh will find ye. They'll want ye to go into Faerie with them, to lead them into the fight against the seelie."

"They can just buggar off, then, can't they?"

Mina had a cold feeling growing in her heart that she was unable to shake. "But they have to agree to go to the battle, if we're to have any hope of getting the seelie half of the stone. If you refuse...will they even show up at the battlefield?"

"Fine. Then let Dubh do it."

Dubh stood away from the group, keeping to himself. His eyes were dark when he looked up at them. "I'm not the king," he said flatly. "They will not follow me."

The cold inside Mina grew. *Dubh. Will he betray us? It's never been certain whose side he was on.*

I could make him loyal.

Her heart tripped in her chest, and she swallowed hard. *No. I promised Duncan.*

Pook didn't say anything for a long moment. Then he sighed, as if giving up some struggle. "Fine. I'll go."

Alex grabbed his arm. "Pooshka, no, don't do this."

"Ain't got no choice, do I?" he asked bitterly. But he looked away from her and met Mina's gaze. His gray eyes seemed to beg for help, and she realized that he knew he was out of his depth.

Pook had fought the seelie fae before, but only isolated individuals, and most of them not the strongest. Mina had not faced the fae the way he had...but she had led her pack. She could still remember what it was like to *see* what needed to be done, who needed to go where, to ensnare her enemy and destroy them without mercy.

"I'll go with you," she said, and hoped that the sudden surge of feral hunger she felt didn't show in her voice.

Relief showed on Pook's face. "You'll be my general, then?"

"Yeah. General Mina." It was a struggle to smile, to keep the conversation light, because she knew that she had just agreed to walk into Faerie, most likely face Camhlaidh, and pretend that she liked it, for a little while at least.

And if I can't pull it off, will they kill both of us, or just me?

"The Banished will join ye on the field, then, after ye've gotten the unseelie there," Padgett said. "I'm thinking I should be one of the group to go after the seelie half of the stone, seeing as how I know a little something about how the palace is laid out."

Mina nodded. "Alex, you go with Padgett," she said, ignoring Alex's look of surprise. "And Kuromori will join you. I'll make certain he and Fox are summoned before Pook and I leave. And Duncan..."

The words died on her tongue, her voice choked off by sudden fear. Duncan watched her quietly, giving no sign as to whether or not he knew anything of her thoughts. For a moment, she considered ordering him to go home and stay there, even if it meant ripping off his amulet and forcing him to obey.

He would never forgive me.

I could make him forgive me.

No. She took a deep breath. God, was this where power led, that she ended up considering breaking the will of her husband, even if it was in the name of his own good?

"Duncan, you and Fox will go to the Maze and find the unseelie half of the stone," she said, steeling herself for what was to come next. "Dubh, you go with them."

She struck, hard and fast, behind the tightest wards she could manage. For an instant, she felt Dubh's will rebel, tasted his uncertainty and indecision. He was torn between loyalty to his dead parents and his certainty that an end to the war would be the best for everyone.

Mina made the decision for him. *You agree with Pook. You'll support him and do what is best for him. And as for Duncan...you'll give your own life before you let him come to harm.*

It took only an instant. Dubh blinked, disoriented, then nodded. "Very well."

A mixture of relief and shame poured through Mina's veins, but she ignored it. There was no time for recriminations, not now. Later...if any of them survived this...she would face whatever consequences she had to face.

"All right, then. Pook and I will go out and find the Sluagh. The rest of you, go home and make whatever plans you can. And be ready to move when it starts."

She turned to Duncan, afraid to see his expression, afraid that he had either felt or guessed what she had done to Dubh. But he only looked worried, so she stepped over to the chair, bent down, and gently kissed the line between his brows. "Be careful."

"And you, my dear." He caught her hand as she started to move away. "Do not do anything foolish, Mina. Please."

"I'm going into the Faerie Realm. I'm going to stand in front of Camhlaidh and try to pretend that I don't want to kill him. After that, I'm going into battle following a seventeen-year-old gangster with a magic sword. I think it's a little too late to worry about doing anything foolish."

His long fingers tightened gently on hers, then let go. Turning away, she saw Pook and Alex locked together in an embrace.

"It's time," she said, although she hated to be the one to break them apart. *After all, we might all be dead by the end of this.*

Pook bent and whispered something to Alex. Then he kissed her softly, let go of her, and walked away. Alex watched him leave, looking as if he were carrying her heart away with him.

And maybe he is. But our Alex is a survivor. Magic or no, she's got a hard streak in her. She knows that the only way back to him is through getting the stone, so pity the fae that gets in between her and it, because Alex sure

as hell won't.

Pook walked up to Mina and stopped. His mouth was set, lower lip jutting slightly in a stubborn expression, as if he had made up his mind and expected someone to argue with him. "Let's do it," he said.

She nodded. Falling into step together, they walked away down the hill, neither one looking back.

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Pook had expected the Sluagh to show up as soon as they got beyond the wards of the other fae, but that didn't happen. Feeling a little let down, he looked around. It was getting on towards dawn now, and the street was pretty much deserted except for him and Mina. A bit of newspaper blew past on the wind, tattered pages flapping like the shroud of a ghost, but otherwise there was no movement.

"So what now?" he asked. "Do we just wait, or what?"

Mina shook her head. "Hell if I know. The fae do as they damned well please; you know that." She sighed and absently tugged on her spiky hair. "Let's walk back to the bookstore. If the others go to the house, at least we'll be leading the fae away from them."

"Yeah." Pook stuffed his hands in his pockets and tried not to think about how worried he was for Alex. He wanted to tell her not to go to this seelie palace everybody was talking about. Hell, if it were up to him, he'd stick her on a boat to somewhere safe, way the hell away from Dere, until things blew over. *Maybe I'd even join her. Kuromori ain't the same as us, so there's places in the world where there ain't seelie or unseelie, where nobody would know nothing about us. We could go there and start over, couldn't we?*

It was a nice fantasy, but in his heart he knew that it couldn't be that easy. *The Sluagh would probably follow me wherever I went. Hell, they'd probably start a whole new war with the local fae who was already there.*

When they reached the sidewalk in front of Blackthorn Books, Vagabond ran out to greet them. Her appearance surprised Pook; he'd never seen her venture into the street before. Going down on one knee, he reached out his hand and let her sniff his fingers.

"Hey, Queen of the Fence," he said. "You might want to be heading back to the yard. Get run over by a cab out here."

The wind picked up, brushing his skin with cold fingers and blowing his hair into his eyes. Pook felt something stir in his blood; startled, he looked up and saw that Mina felt it too. "What the—"

Mina held up a hand, and he shut his mouth fast. The wind grew stronger and colder, and he realized that it carried on it the sound of otherworldly music. Voices rose and fell in song, surpassing the register of any human throat, and made the hair stand up on the nape of his neck. Louder and louder they grew, accompanied now by the ring of hooves on stone, until it seemed that the source of the noise must be all around him. The wind twitched, plucked at him like the fingers of unseen hands, and he realized that the Sluagh had come at last.

Swallowing hard, he picked up Vagabond and stood, cradling the cait sidhe against his chest. The other side of the street seemed to shimmer and twist, as if he viewed it from underwater. Then reality itself simply...tore apart.

The Sluagh came through the hole in the world, and it was everything Pook could do not to turn tail and run. The Unseelie Fae were a thousand things, all of them fell and cold and dark. Knights in black armor sat upon bone-thin creatures that weren't *quite* horses; the knights had no faces behind their visors that Pook could see. Ladies dressed in cobwebs and the shrouds of the dead danced like madwomen; their partners were shapes cobbled out of wood and stone, with briars instead of hair. Shadows flitted, seeming to drink the light, and amongst them Pook saw black things with eyes like sullen coals.

Pookas. Like me. Sort of.

In the midst of the procession came the most finely-dressed, the most human, of them all. Pook saw a white-faced man of terrifying beauty, with pale blue eyes and hair that seemed spun from ice. Beside him was a woman dark as earth, wearing a dress that seemed to be made solely from jewels. There were others as well, all of them beautiful and terrifying.

And at their head was Camhlaidh. As the procession came to a halt, he took a step forward and bowed deeply, so that the black lace of his cuffs brushed the ground. "My King. Are you ready at last to come into Faerie and take up your rightful place?"

Pook's mouth was so dry that he could barely speak. "Yeah. I'm ready."

Camhlaidh straightened and gave Mina an unfriendly look. "And you, my wayward daughter? What business have you here?"

Pook had to give her credit—she looked Camhlaidh straight in the eye and didn't flinch. "The seelie could have killed my husband at Knockma," she said coldly. "It made me realize something. I may not like you much, but the truth is I won't have any peace until all of the seelie are finally dead."

He smiled, that smile so like her own. "So you have come to see the truth of my words?"

"Yes," she said, like she was choking on it. "Fine. You were right. Happy?"

The lids half-closed over his eyes. "I am. Yes, indeed." He held out his hands to them both. "Come, then. Join us."

Pook made to set Vagabond down, but to his surprise she sank her claws into his flesh and refused to let go. "Ow! Vagabond, quit it! If you want to come, too, you just got to ask, not shred me to pieces."

The cat quieted enough to let him shift her so that he had one arm free. He cast a brief glance at Mina, and their eyes met. The look on her face mixed both determination and sorrow, and he wondered uneasily what it meant.

Then he reached out and took Camhlaidh's hand.

Chapter Twenty

Alex sat in the garden at Duncan and Mina's house, her hands clasped in her lap, trying desperately not to worry. The ruined garden had come back to life with the advent of warm weather, and the night air was full of the sweet scent of jasmine. Briars and ivy tangled on the walls, drawing a green veil over the stone, and frogs called intermittently from the weed-choked pond.

When she had left Ruska, she had never imagined that she would come to this. She had thought to build a new life for herself, but somehow had never thought she might find that life in peril once more. The next few days would determine the course of all her years to come, and the knowledge terrified her.

She heard the creak of the door to the house, the soft rumble of wheels on the boards laid down over the steps leading from the patio into the garden. A moment later, Duncan appeared, his gray hair frosted by starlight. "Alexandrea? You should think about getting some sleep, my dear. Padgett thinks it won't be long now."

"I don't think I could sleep." *Any more than you can.* Alex was not the only one who lived with fear this night.

Duncan didn't say anything for a long time, as if considering his next words. "Pook is resourceful," he said at last. "He did not survive the streets of Dere so long by being a complete fool. He has his sword, which should level the field a bit between him and even the strongest of the Gentry. And he has Mina. Her power is not something to be sneered at, even by the fae."

"I know."

"But it doesn't help, does it?"

Alex smiled wryly. "No. It doesn't." She stood up and dusted her skirts off lightly. The memory of the night she and Pook had sat on the same bench together came back forcefully; he had talked about the stars, and she had been consumed with silent longing for the beautiful boy at her side. The memory made her heart ache.

No. I can't allow myself to be distracted, not now. Too much is at stake to become frozen by fear or self-pity.

"There is nothing to be gained by simply sitting about worrying," she said aloud. "We need to plan for our own parts."

"Fox and Kuromori have both arrived."

"Good. I...I need to go back to the bookstore, if I may. There are some things there which might be of use to us."

Duncan tilted his head to one side, but when she didn't elaborate, he said, "Very well. Perhaps Padgett and Kuromori should go with you, in case either side decides on an ambush."

"One other thing," Alex said as they began to move back towards the darkened house.

"What is that, my dear?"

"Do you have any idea how I might contact Hubert RiGrath?"

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"There you are, my daughter," said Camhlaidh.

Mina came to a halt. She stood in a long, dark hall in the depths of Knockma, where the Sluagh had brought them. Apparently, distances meant little in Faerie; what would have been a journey of days in the mortal realm had passed in moments.

Other things were different as well. Mina ran her tongue over her teeth; they were sharp as little daggers. A mirror had revealed that her eyes were inky black as the spaces between stars, and her hair had taken on the pure white hue of frost.

Once in Knockma, the fae had given Mina and Pook chambers and an offer to rest themselves. Gifts had awaited Mina in her room. A wooden staff carved from ash, its ends studded with ice that had the edge and hardness of a knife, fit itself to her hand when she lifted it. Beside the weapon hung strange armor: mail that had the look of fish scales in moonlight, plus a breastplate and arm and leg guards made from white ice. She had put them on, hoping silently that the armor was real and not simply a bit of fae fancy that would shatter beneath the blades of the seelie.

Camhlaidh moved closer, his clothes blending into the shadow of the hall so that it seemed his face and hands hovered disembodied in the air. "I must admit that I was surprised to see you, when we came for the king."

"I told you why I'm here," she said. *God, if he suspects anything...*

"Indeed." He tilted his head to one side, seeming to study her. "And when we cast down the seelie, what will you do then?"

Mina shrugged. "I don't know."

"There is power here, daughter. Tell me that you don't feel it. Tell me that you don't *want* it."

She could feel it, oh yes, like a swimmer feels the river she is drowning in. It was all around her, a tide of darkness that tugged at her heart, that entered her lungs with every breath. The power she had felt years ago, when running with her pack, was as nothing to this.

And suddenly, something clicked into place in her mind, something she had never even considered before. "You didn't make me just to rule the faelings of the mortal realm."

Suspicion flickered in the depths of brown eyes much like her own. "Whatever do you mean?"

"Did you know that I would be a dyana?"

A slow smile crawled over Camhlaidh's mouth. "I did," he said softly. "A seer told me, long and long ago, what

my faelings daughter would be.”

“Was this before or after Finn Bheara married a woman with human blood in her veins?”

“Ah. So you do see it, then.” Camhlaidh’s eyes gleamed like those of something feral. “Why else would I argue so hard for the value of faelings? Why else continue to push my king for so long? Especially after you were born.”

“Were you going to kill him yourself?”

“If need be. If you had been more amenable. But that matters not, Mina, if you will but listen to me now.”

He moved closer, and she could smell cold air and dark water on him, in him. “You can still become what you were born to be. The dark queen of both the mortal realm and that of Faerie. Go to the young king—he will never suspect you. Tear the amulet from around his neck, and make him the instrument of your will.”

“Betray him and everyone else I care about.”

“He is nothing, Mina. A child who pretends to be a man, and hopes that his elders will be fooled by the act. You know that—why else would you have come here with him? I have seen how he looks to you for advice. He would have you lead the army at his side, because he is too weak to do so by himself. But what if he makes a misstep in the heat of battle? What if he does something rash? His folly will cost you everything you love.” His voice dropped to nothing but a whisper. “Take the amulet from him, Mina. Become everything that you were meant to be.”

“Dyana. The dark queen without mercy.”

“Yes.”

Mina felt colder than she ever had, and yet it had nothing to do with the freezing temperature in the hall. She closed her eyes, wanting only to be rid of him. “I’ll...think about it.”

Camhlaidh drew away. Mina opened her eyes again, caught a glimpse of the anger and displeasure on his face as he turned away. “Do not think too long, child. Time rules even the fae.”

She stood still, frozen, as he walked away. The shadows swallowed him almost immediately, but the sound of his footsteps continued to echo eerily long after he was out of sight.

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Mina found Pook standing in the chamber the fae had given him, staring out one of two windows. Moonlight streamed through the window nearest him, gilding his black hair with frost, and finding the points of a crown of small horns. The other window showed the murky depths of an underwater city. How it was possible to see two such different views, Mina didn’t even try to comprehend.

The fae had readied Pook for the battle, as well. He wore mail woven from black cobwebs, and plate armor forged from purest shadow. His eyes were inky black, spangled with sullen red flecks, and his fingers were tipped with claws.

He grinned, revealing far too many sharp teeth, and for a moment she wondered what had happened to them both, and if there was anything human left in them now.

“Hey, Mina,” Pook said—and swept away all her doubts. This was Pook, all right—the same old Pook, with his cocky grin and silly sense of humor, and even if the Faerie Realm had unmasked them, it couldn’t touch what was inside.

“Hey,” she answered, coming in and shutting the door behind her. The room was plain, containing only a bed and table. There was no light except what came from the moon outside, but neither of them needed any illumination to see. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah. Only nobody will tell me nothing. Figure I’m stupid, I guess.” He shrugged. “You okay? At least I had company—they haven’t messed with you, have they?”

Pook’s “company” stirred on the bed. A living shadow the size of a panther, Vagabond slipped to the floor and padded in utter silence to his side. Her single eye glowed like a second moon, and there was a blue-green sheen to her black fur that Mina didn’t think existed in the mortal realm.

Even someone like Camhlaidh would probably think twice before pissing off a cat that big.

“Mind games,” she said. “Nothing more.”

“Your dad again?”

“Who else?” Mina crossed the room to look out the window with him. The landscape outside was one of the bleakest she had ever beheld. Snow covered the ground as far as the eye could see, and the starlight sparked off an ice-choked river. All the plant life—trees, shrubs, even the tall grasses that poked their heads above the snow— was dead and blasted, and she wondered what had happened to it.

“I didn’t think I’d ever be glad for the sun to come up, but right now I’d be happy to see it,” Mina said, turning away from the depressing landscape.

“It ain’t coming, Mina. It’s always night here.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah.”

Mina thought about Camhlaidh’s words, about what she had done to Dubh. About all the ways in which she had used her power wrongly.

When they had first met, Pook had held no trust for her at all, and she hadn’t been able to blame him for it. It had taken time to earn his trust, but she had done so, and it was not something that she took lightly.

Camhlaidh almost...almost...understood her. But he couldn’t cross that last little gap that separated them. He could never feel her human motivations in his gut.

Mina put a hand to Pook’s shoulder. “Hang in there, little brother. It won’t be long now.”

The sun had barely risen when Alex knocked on the door of the RiGrath town house. Factory slaves and other workers were on the streets, heading for a long day of labor, and the newsboys had already been up and about for hours, but she doubted that she would find anyone other than the servants awake in the residence.

After a few moments, the door swung open, revealing a dour-faced butler. His pale eyes raked over her, silently judging. Although she had put on her best dress and taken the time to see to her hair, she had the feeling that he found her lacking.

“May I help you?” he asked in a chill tone that implied she could not possibly have any legitimate business there.

“I am here to see Hubert RiGrath,” she said. Duncan had given her one of his calling cards, and she held it out to the butler. “My name is Alexandrea RiDahn—Mr. RiGrath and I met at the palace.”

The butler looked at her suspiciously, but ushered her inside and let her put the card on a small silver tray, which he bore away into the depths of the house.

Although he must have roused Hubert from bed, to the young man’s credit it didn’t take him long to appear. His fair hair was still slightly mussed from sleep, and his cravat wasn’t tied precisely right, but a genuine smile lit up his face at the sight of her. “Miss RiDahn! What an unexpected pleasure this is. I hope you will consent to take breakfast with us.”

Although the smells wafting from the kitchen had set her stomach to rumbling, Alex regretfully shook her head. “I fear that I don’t have the time, Hubert. Is there anywhere we can speak privately?”

“Of course.” He ushered her down a hall and through a door, into a small, neat sitting room. “Should I ring for tea?”

“No, thank you.” Alex sank down on the edge of one of the overstuffed chairs and looked up at Hubert. “Do you remember the night at of the masquerade?”

His mouth twitched into a rueful smile. “It’s hardly the sort of thing one forgets.”

“Indeed. You said then that I should call upon you if I ever needed help.” She hesitated, wondering if she had judged him right, or if he would renege on the offer. “So here I am.”

The young nobleman sat down across from her, his face uncharacteristically grim. “Tell me what you want me to do.”

When Alex arrived back at the bookstore an hour later, she found Duncan, Dubh, Fox, Kuromori, and Padgett waiting just inside.

“It’s time,” Padgett said. In the bright morning light, she looked even more disreputable than usual in her shabby coat and worn shoes. “Me cousin Siubhan sent her challenge, and Pook accepted. The battle will take place at twilight, in the instant when the sun is half below and half above the horizon.”

Alex frowned, wondering why the seelie would pick such a time. “Won’t it give the advantage to the unseelie fae if the battle is fought at night?”

Padgett grinned. “You’re not understanding, me girl. When I say ‘the instant,’ that’s what I mean. Time within the boundaries will not be that of this world. The sun won’t move in the sky until the spell is ended. Twilight is a balance point, ye see, so there should be no advantage to any. Not that I’m trusting there will be no attempts to cheat, mind ye.”

“Fox, Dubh, and I will go ahead to the Crawl, so that we can be in position when twilight comes,” Duncan said, his voice as calm as if they discussed the weather rather than matters of life and death.

“Aye. The Banished are waiting close by. They’ll stand ready to enter the fray as soon as it begins. That should make a fine mess of Siubhan’s plans.” Padgett cocked an eye to the window, as if judging the position of the sun. “Kuromori, Alex, and I will wait a bit longer, I’m thinking. It wouldn’t do to pop into Sidhe Finnachaidh just as all those strapping seelie warriors are gearing up for the fight, now would it?”

Alex swallowed back her fear. “Very well. Uncle, there is something I’d like to give you, that may be of help. Let me fetch it from my room.”

She went upstairs to the sitting room. Although she had meant to go straight to her worktable and gather the invention she had set aside for Duncan, the open door to the bedroom caught her eye. Pook’s kilt lay over the back of one chair, still rumpled from the night he had worn it.

Pook.

I can’t start all over again. I already lost Mama and had to begin a new life alone. If something happens to Pook...

No. She clenched her hands into fists, until her nails bit deep into her palms. I’m not some maudlin female, weeping and whimpering over my fate while everyone else risks their lives. I will make my own future. Our future. We can’t fail.

We just can’t.

Chapter Twenty-One

As the sun first touched the western horizon, Duncan, Fox, and Dubh bought tickets into the Labyrinth.

The long summer day was finally coming to a close, but the crowds were still thick on the Crawl and in the city around it. *What will become of all the humans, when the spell is cast?* Duncan wondered, as the barker ushered them through the curtained doorway. The sound of children laughing came from far away, turning his heart cold. In only a few minutes, an entire portion of the city would become part of the Faerie Realm, and he feared what might befall any innocents caught on the battlefield.

If only there were some way to warn them all. Wheeling through the crowds yelling that the faeries were coming would certainly attract attention. It would also accomplish nothing, save perhaps getting him locked away in a madhouse.

Directly inside the maze hung a series of mirrors, which warped the reflections of the three faelings, turning them into monsters. Dubh frowned in disapproval, but the sight seemed to remind him of something. "Once the battlefield passes into Faerie, don't be surprised if our...appearances change, at least a bit," he said. "Those of us with more fae blood will be more affected, of course."

Of course, Duncan thought with a shiver. "Will anything else change?" *Will you betray us?*

"Probably," Dubh said, and even though Duncan knew that he was responding to the spoken question, the answer sent dread creeping into his heart.

"Which way shall we go, Duncan?" Fox asked, seeming oblivious to their conversation. Her hair straggled about her face, and her mad eyes looked about in childish anticipation.

Duncan rested his hands lightly on the wheels of his chair. "We must locate the heart of the maze," he said. "If we can find it before the spell is cast, so much the better. Can you do that, Fox?"

"Ooh, do I get to lead?" Fox clapped her hands and started off, all but skipping.

Away from the mirror and the entrance, there was no light. Laughing and shrieking revelers bumped and groped their way through the blackness. Duncan guessed this would be a popular place for lovers.

He ran the wheelchair into one flimsy wall and cursed. "Here, let me," Dubh said and took the handles to push. Duncan thought about arguing, but decided against it. Time was of the essence; they couldn't afford to wait while he exercised his pride. Forcing himself to relax, he rested his hands on the bundle in his lap, which contained Alex's invention.

Her teachers at university will adore her, he thought, and tried to ignore the very real possibility that his niece wouldn't live long enough to sit in her first class.

Then, suddenly, the world shifted beneath him.

Duncan felt the rise of magic, like the roll of a great wave beneath a tiny boat. The smell of dark water mixed with that of heated metal, and the taste of ashes filled his mouth.

"Here it comes," whispered Dubh.

"We aren't at the heart yet," Fox said unhappily. "Duncan, I don't like this game."

The magic continued to rise, and Duncan felt an overwhelming pressure against his body. His ears popped painfully. Dimly, he was aware that the playful cries of the pure-humans around them had turned to screams of real fear.

Then, suddenly, the wave dropped them. The shadows took on weight and substance, and wind touched his face. He reached out blindly; the maze was narrow, and he should have encountered the splintered wooden walls with his fingers. He didn't.

"My head's all swirly," Fox breathed. Duncan couldn't see her in the blackness, but he heard elation in her voice. The sense of his own power was stronger than he had ever felt it before, and for a moment he wondered what would happen if he cast a spell. Would it be stronger—greater? Then he remembered the task at hand.

"We must locate the heart," he said firmly. "We're already late—if we linger too long, we will do no one any good. Hurry!"

Fox laughed, a mad, tinkling sound, and dashed ahead, her footfalls echoing weirdly. Praying that they were indeed on the right track, Duncan gripped the armrests of his chair as they plunged deep into the maze.

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Pook gripped Bob's hilt hard. The Sluagh had gathered at the edge of Faerie, standing before what looked to him like nothing but blackness. Like God had just quit the job of creation right here and left the world unfinished.

A group of the fae stood before them all, singing and weaving the spell that would bring the battlefield to them, or them to the battlefield, which he wasn't sure. And while he was glad to be getting that much closer to the mortal realm, he still felt sour fear in his gut.

Just the same old nerves I get before any fight, he decided. *Always feel this way, don't I?*

'Cept normally I ain't planning on betraying everybody around me.

Not everybody. He glanced at Mina, who stood beside him. She was even paler than usual, and her eyes were holes onto blackness. Vagabond prowled around them both, her hackles up and her teeth bared. Pook reached out his free hand and ran it through her silky fur. They were the only ones all the way on his side, he figured. The unseeleie

sure as hell weren't his buddies, and even the Banished had their own agenda.

For a crazy minute, he wished Darcy were there, too. He hadn't liked her much, but she'd been good in a fight, at least until she started the whole mess by shooting that one b'hoi and letting the seelie use his blood to make the faery food that had ended up enslaving her and the other Rat Soldiers. So maybe it was just as well she wasn't there, after all.

"Hold on," murmured Mina. Startled out of his thoughts, he looked up and saw that the black space in front of them wasn't empty anymore.

For a moment, colors swirled, forming no pattern he could see. Gradually, they coalesced, until it was like looking through a heat shimmer. And then everything clicked into place, and the world was finished now.

The Crawl lay in front of him. Its shadows were dark purple, and the sinking sun gilded the rides and games in amber. Startled seagulls screamed above, and he could smell the water of the Blackrush. Although the crowds were thinner than they would have been at midday or on the weekend, a whole bunch of real surprised-looking people were standing on the dock, staring open-mouthed at the Unseelie Host.

Well, we're in it now, ain't we?

"Where are the seelie?" he asked.

Hooves sounded hollowly on the planks, and he turned to see that the aughisky had climbed up onto the pier. Her lips drew back, revealing sharp teeth. "They are coming," she said in George's voice.

"All right." It wasn't helpful, but he figured they wouldn't be coming from the waterside, so he started walking towards land. The Sluagh came with him, and the humans caught in the spell started running. Some of the fae let out shrieks of glee and started to chase them.

"No!" Pook started, but Camhlaidh grabbed his arm.

"You cannot stop them, my king. They will lose all respect for you," the fae hissed.

"Screw that! We ain't here to tear apart humans!" Pook broke into a trot, hoping he could keep up with them. *What I need is a Goddamned carriage. Or a horse.*

The great carousel loomed up before him. Some of the humans had run onto it, maybe hoping to hide among the carved animals. If that had indeed been their plan, it went wrong as hell.

The magic of Faerie must have been saturating the place ever since the spell claimed it, Pook figured, because things were starting to look stranger and stranger. The animals on the carousel seemed more real than mere wood ought to, and he would have sworn that one of the horses stamped its hoof...

The carved tiger turned its head to one side and let out a deafening roar.

Pook stopped and gaped. Beside him, Vagabond lifted her sleek head and roared back a welcome. The tiger's muscles rippled; it twitched and shivered—and then broke free from the brass pole it had been mounted on.

All up and down the carousel, the animals began to come to life. Brilliantly-painted horses snorted and stamped as they ripped free of their moorings, while an ostrich stretched its long legs and the hippocampus wriggled across the wood, seeking the water.

The black charger that Pook had ridden back when it was just regular wood let out a loud snort. It sprang off the platform, its hooves ringing against the warped boards of the pier, and for a moment he thought it was going to charge him. But instead it slowed as it came closer, lowering its head and looking at him with glowing red eyes.

Mina nudged him. "I think these are our mounts, Pook," she said.

He blinked and nodded. The horse came closer, and he gingerly touched the smooth side of its neck. It felt warm and solid, although there was no sensation of hair against his hand. Taking a deep breath, he grabbed the reins and swung himself up onto its back. The horse tossed its head once and snorted; steam blasted out of its nostrils.

Mina grabbed a white horse, and he saw other fae choosing mounts. Tightening his grip on the carousel charger, he drew Bob and pointed straight ahead with the blade. "Come on! Let's find the seelie and get this over with!"

rs

Alex felt a sick, falling sensation that reminded her sharply of the heaving waves aboard ship. Then the ground grew firm under her feet, and she cautiously opened her eyes.

Faerie.

She stood in a dusty courtyard, Kuromori and Padgett beside her. The sun hung directly overhead, and she could feel its breathless heat beating against her like a physical force. A few plants littered in the courtyard, as if this had once been a pleasure garden, but they were all dead. The soil between them was parched and cracked, and every puff of wind sent dust into the air.

Then the position of the sun dawned on her, and she hissed sharply. "It's noon! What happened?"

"It's not noon," Padgett said softly. Her face was drawn and grim, the look in her eyes bleak. "The sun never wanes, never sets, here. Not anymore."

"I don't understand."

"Once this was a garden. I spent many a happy hour here when I was a stripling, let me tell ye." Padgett knelt and ran her fingers through the desiccated soil. The wind snatched it from her hand and flung it away. "Now ye're seeing the true consequences of the sundering. When the stone split, Faerie itself became divided. Here where the seelie live, there's no night, no water, no rain. And where the unseelie dwell, there's no sun, no warmth, no wind." She stood up and dusted her hand off against her trousers. "But nothing can endure with no water, nor without the sun. Magic supported the lands for a time, but that can only go so far, and now all is dead and lifeless. The rift must be mended if Faerie is ever again to be anything but a wasteland."

“Forgive me, Padgett-san,” Kuromori said. His katana was in his hands, and his posture was tense and watchful. “But it seems to me that the windows may have eyes.”

Alex looked around them. The palace of Sidhe Finnachaidh was a fantasy of white marble, its high columns seeming to disregard the laws of nature and float upon nothing. With Kuromori’s warning, however, the myriad balconies, windows, and nooks went from beautiful to sinister.

“Right ye are,” Padgett murmured. “Come with me, then.”

The three intruders went in through the nearest door. Out of the direct rays of the sun, there was some relief from the scorching heat, but not much. Alex felt sweat trickling down beneath her dress, and she wished that she could put down her burden. But the flamethrower on her back was her best weapon, and she hoped that any fae they encountered would be so shocked to find an unseelie armed with fire that it might buy her a few seconds. Kuromori carried a bag with her other invention packed carefully inside; she hoped that it didn’t break before they had the opportunity to use it.

Padgett led them through the marble-floored halls. Every scuff of a foot against stone made Alex’s heart jump, and she held her breath, certain that they would be caught at any moment. But the halls were deserted; as Padgett had predicted, Queen Siubhan had taken all of her people with her in an attempt to make the battle decisive and overwhelm the unseelie fae.

As they drew closer to their destination, Padgett’s steps became slower, until she stopped altogether. They were in a narrow corridor now; glancing out the window, Alex beheld a blasted landscape where dead trees burned like torches. The smoke pouring from the conflagration swirled away on the howling wind.

“There,” Padgett murmured, nodding at an open doorway midway down the long hall. “And I’m thinking that Siubhan won’t have left her half of the stone unguarded, no matter how bad she wanted to crush the unseelie army.”

“I will scout ahead,” Kuromori offered. He moved away on silent feet, creeping closer and closer to the door. When he was almost there, he flattened himself against the wall, slid to the edge, and carefully, carefully peered around and into the room beyond.

For what seemed like an eternity, he didn’t move. Then, very slowly, he returned the way he had come. The blood had drained from his face, and his dark eyes were troubled.

“I fear that we may have a problem,” he said.

rs

The shadows within the Labyrinth were alive. Duncan could feel their misty hands on his face, like the caress of a lover. The air smelled of dark water and cold air, and echoed with the frightened cries of the mortals trapped within the snare that the maze had become.

There’s nothing we can do to help them, Duncan told himself, even though every instinct urged him to take some action. The only thing we can do is to end this as quickly as possible, which means getting to the heart of the maze and finding our half of the stone.

Dubh stopped pushing the wheelchair; although Duncan could see nothing more than shadow-shapes, he sensed something was wrong. “What is it?”

“She’s lost,” Dubh said disgustedly.

“The threads are scattered,” Fox said. “I’m not sure...what way should I turn?”

Duncan cursed silently. “What are our options, Fox?”

“Left or right.”

“No straight?”

“No.”

“Very well.” Duncan took a deep breath and closed his eyes. He had always been good at feeling the flow of power, of tracing its elusive call. It was what had led Mina and him to the sites of Pook’s battles— what, years ago, had led him to Mina in the first place.

But here, in this place that was neither earth nor quite Faerie, the normal trickles of power were a rushing torrent that threatened to overwhelm his senses. A river of magic flowed past him, and he tasted its dark wine on his tongue. Brighter threads, like spun glass, intermingled with it, lacerating his inner senses. Nonetheless, he held on, following the flow as it wended its way towards the heart of the Maze.

“Left,” he said, but the word came out more like a gasp.

There was power here, too much power, and he might be dragged down beneath it and never surface. Keeping his eyes closed, he gripped the wheels of his chair and propelled himself forward, ignoring both Dubh and Fox in his battle to follow the flow of magic without losing himself to it. The river twisted, spiraling in on itself, until at last it reached the center, where it seemed to vanish into a deep well.

Duncan opened his eyes. A cold, nacreous glow lit the room around him, which could not possibly have ever been part of the original maze in the human world. The walls were made of stone, and tree roots wended their way down between cracks in the ancient mortar. The place stank of cold and rot and slime, and the icy air bit at his bones.

In the center of the room was a well, bordered by a low stone curb, and it was from this that the glow came.

In its light, he could see the changes that Dubh had warned of in his companions. Fox’s green eyes were slitted like a cat’s, and her nails had become claws. Dubh wore rams’ horns like a crown, and his teeth were too many and too sharp.

“Go to the well, Fox,” Duncan instructed. The intense cold made his teeth chatter, and he hoped she understood his words. “You must believe—you must *know*—that you will find half of the stone within it. Go and look.”

Like a woman in a dream, Fox wandered to the well and peered inside. The light reflected eerily in her wide, mad eyes, and a laugh came from her that made his hair stand on end. Then she dropped to her knees beside the well and plunged her hand into the water.

As she drew her hand out, the glow came with it, leaving the water dark. Fox held up her prize, and Duncan beheld a flat half-circle of gray rock, a knotwork of runes intricately inscribed on its surface.

"I got it," she whispered excitedly. "Look, Duncan, I got it!"

Even as she spoke, a dark shape rose from the well behind her.

rs

Pook gripped Bob with his hand, and the carousel horse with his knees. He'd ridden bareback once or twice, mostly when he was trying to show off or pull some stupid prank, but other than that all his experience with horses had involved being pulled in a carriage. *Going to get my stupid neck broke.*

But the horse remained steady under him; maybe that was part of the magic. He hoped so, because if it suddenly took it into its wooden brain to bolt, he was going to end up on his ass.

The Sluagh followed him, like a vast, dark wave. Unearthly music filled the air, accompanied by snarls and hisses. Mina rode silent but steady at his right hand, while something with no head and its skin on inside-out loped along on his left. He could feel Camhlaidh at his back, and he wondered nervously if he might not get a knife between the shoulder blades before all this was done.

Something that might have been a huge dog started baying, and cries of excitement and hate rang out all around. Broken from his thoughts, Pook looked up and saw a glow on the horizon.

Fire.

His gut clenched, and he swallowed hard. The tenements and warehouses that lined the wharf area burned as the seelie army progressed through them, headed for the Crawl. Winged creatures whirled above the conflagration, like sparks on the wind. Below them, he saw the first outriders of the army break rank and make towards the pier.

At their head was a woman. Her armor was like molten gold, so bright that its image was seared on Pook's retinas even when he looked away. Her golden hair streamed about her like flames, and her eyes glittered like diamonds.

Must be that Siubhan g'hal Padgett was going on about. Shit, she looks tough. Even Darcy would think twice before standing toeto-toe with the likes of her.

Ain't that just my luck?

He'd had the smoked lenses that Alex had made on him when he crossed into Faerie. Now they lay in a pouch at his waist, sort of as a combination good-luck charm and a reminder of her. Fishing them out, he put them on, and glanced at Siubhan again. Well, at least now he could look straight at her without being blinded, which made him feel a little—a very little—better.

Snow filled the air and sleet clicked against his armor, and he felt the rise of unseelie power. It called to him, demanded that he say to hell with all the plans in the world and just charge straight ahead and attack the seelie. Beside him, Mina hissed like a cat, and he saw her lean forward, as if she had the same idea.

We can't...not yet. Not until the Banished get here. So where the hell are they?

Just as he began to think that the Banished weren't coming, something small scuttled out into the rapidly-disappearing space between the two armies. A moment later, more creatures appeared, fae seelie and unseelie alike. All of them had a circle somewhere on their bodies or clothing, meant to show that they were fighting for the stone to be put back together.

Pook pulled his horse to a halt, and the Sluagh followed suit. Those with no human tongues cried out in bafflement, while the Gentry who could talk murmured darkly at the appearance of the Banished. Across the distance still separating them, Pook caught a glimpse of Siubhan and realized that she wasn't any happier about the outcasts being there than the unseelie were.

"You dare!" she shouted at the Banished. Flames blazed up around her, like great wings, and her followers echoed the cry. "Go back to the shadows where you belong, and I shall deal with you once I have destroyed the unseelie scum."

"Confident bitch, ain't she?" Pook asked wryly. He glanced at Mina, saw that her bloodlust had eased with the interruption. She gave him a sober nod, and he sighed, wishing for a moment that this wasn't on him.

Gathering all his courage, he turned his horse around so that he was facing the Sluagh. They watched him, confused and pensive, and he saw the flicker of dawning suspicion in Camhlaidh's eyes.

"This stupid war has gone on long enough, and I mean to help put an end to it," he said. "But maybe not the way you was thinking I would. Of all the choices I got, I figure the Banished've got the right of it. Stop the war, get over your damned hurt feelings, and call a truce. I'm with them. Anybody who wants to come with me better make up their minds now."

Rage transformed Camhlaidh's face, and Pook wondered how he could have ever imagined the fae looked even remotely human. "Traitor!" he shouted. "We have been betrayed!"

Mina put her horse between Camhlaidh and Pook, but she was grinning. "What do you know, daddy?" she asked with mock sweetness. "I suppose you weren't all that smart after all, were you?"

But even as she spoke, Pook felt a push against his mind. Her way of telling him to pull foot right now, while she had Camhlaidh's attention. The Banished were getting closer, so Pook just turned his horse and galloped towards them. He thought some of the unseelie were following, and he hoped it was because they were joining him, not because they were going to drag him down and eat him.

He caught a glimpse of the shelly-coat and green-tooth amidst the Banished; the green-tooth bowed to him, which made him feel weird. Swallowing hard, he wheeled his horse around, felt the eyes of two other armies staring at him, wondering what the hell he was up to.

“This is it, then!” he shouted at them. “We’re putting Faerie back together, and if you don’t like it, you can just go to hell! So what’s it going to be? Fight or make up?”

He could feel the Banished behind him, feel their tension, their bloodlust coming up, just like it had been when the Rat Soldiers would brawl. *Except this is a hell of a lot more serious. They’ll do a lot worse to us than give us a bloody nose.*

“Fight!” shouted Siubhan, and he gave her a few points for having the balls to hand it back to him on his own terms.

“Death to the traitors!” howled someone from the unseelie side— Camhlaidh, maybe.

Mina rode up beside Pook. “I’m going to kill that bastard,” she said conversationally. “So, Pook, everybody’s waiting—are you going to sound the charge?”

“Hell, yeah.” He thrust Bob over his head and drew in a deep breath. “Bring it on, motherfuckers!”

And the battle was joined.

Chapter Twenty-Two

“I fear that we may have a difficulty, Alex-chan,” Kuromori said. Sweat slicked his brown face, dampening his clothing. It was the only time she had ever seen him discomfited by the temperature, Alex thought.

Chernovog curse it. “What difficulty?”

Kuromori bowed slightly. “There is indeed a guardian set over the stone.”

Padgett brightened. “Only one? Siubhan’s not being as careful as I expected, then.”

“I fear, Padgett-san, that only one will be required.”

Kuromori ghosted back down the hall. Feeling dread pool in her belly, Alex followed him, moving carefully so as to keep the parts of the heavy flamethrower on her back from clanking together. When they reached the doorway, Kuromori cautiously peered around the edge, then beckoned the two women to do the same.

The room beyond was enormous; perhaps, in some earlier time, it had been a ballroom. A ruined chandelier dangled from the vaulted ceiling, and the marble tiles on the floor must have once been beautiful. Now, however, they were cracked and blackened, as if they had been exposed to a blast furnace. What might have once been silver candelabras lay scattered about, half-melted into the floor.

On the far wall hung a stone plaque. It must have once been a circle about the size of a dinner plate, inscribed with runes and sigils. But now it was split in twain, and the other half gone.

Between the door and the stone reclined the source of the burning that had destroyed the room. It was massive and covered in scales of burnished scarlet and orange. A pair of wings lay folded along its sides, and its horn-crowned head rested on its outstretched paws. The great eyes were closed, but Alex didn’t doubt that its sleep was shallow.

All but holding her breath out of fear of waking the beast, Alex backed slowly away, followed by Kuromori and Padgett. When they were far enough away, she let it out and shook her head. “A dragon? I thought they were unseelie,” she whispered.

“Nay,” said Padgett. “The wingless ones—the cold drakes—are. But the winged dragons, the ones who carry fire in their craws, belong to the seelie fae.”

Kuromori looked grave. “I fear that I may not be able to vanquish such a creature, Alex-chan,” he said regretfully. “My blade is sharp, but surely the dragon’s scales are as steel.”

“You won’t have to, if we’re lucky,” Alex said. “I never intended for us to fight our way through. If I may have back the bag I asked you to carry...?”

Kuromori gave it to her. Silently cursing the weight of the flamethrower, Alex cast about for a suitable spot to put her invention. *Not out in the open—we need as much of a delay as possible.* Eventually, she found a side room that suited her purpose. “We’ll have to run as soon as I start the machine,” she whispered, taking out the foil cylinder, diaphragm, and reproducer. “Fortunately, the layout of these corridors is such that we can run away from the dragon, loop around, and come up behind it while it’s investigating this.”

Kuromori watched her set up the machine with an air of puzzlement. “Forgive me, Alex-chan, but what does it do?”

“It’s a speaking machine.” Alex wound the motor with a crank; once started, the device would continue to run for about five minutes. “It can record and play back the sound of a voice. Once I start it, the recorded sound will come out. The dragon will hear it and, believing it to be an intruder, come to find out what’s happening. Or at least, I hope it will.”

Padgett frowned. “What did ye record, then?”

“The most blood-chilling screams I could summon. If that doesn’t get the guardian’s attention, nothing will. Ready?”

Alex triggered the device and scrambled to her feet. There were a few seconds of silence, recorded to buy them time. Kuromori matched Alex’s pace, but Padgett had already run down the hall and made the turn, when the first scream burst forth.

Chernovog, please let this work!

Alex ducked around the corner, Kuromori on her heels, just as the first rumbling growl sounded. The flamethrower on her back weighed her down, and she thought about dropping it, but that would take even more time. Gritting her teeth, she ran as fast as she could after Padgett, hoping blindly that the shrieks coming from the speaking machine would cover the sound of their footsteps.

The screams faded as they ran away, then grew louder as they made another turn and came back from the other direction. A quick glance down the hall showed that the dragon had indeed gone after the screams; its golden-red bulk seemed to fill the hall, and its long tail lashed wildly behind it.

Padgett was still in the lead; she slowed, perhaps hoping to make a little less noise. As they neared the door, Alex saw that the dragon was still distracted, hunting for the source of the screams, and her heart leapt. *It worked! We'll be able to get the stone now, and—*

The dragon let out a roar of frustration. Light flared as fire blasted forth from its mouth—and the speaking machine was instantly silenced.

In the stillness that followed, the scuff of Alex's foot on the marble floor was clearly audible.

The dragon whipped its head around, looking over its back, and Alex caught a glimpse of blood-red eyes with slitted pupils. The creature roared in fury, and began to turn; although huge, it was sinuous, and Alex realized in horror that it would only take seconds before it was upon them.

"Run, Alex-chan!" shouted Kuromori. He shoved her through the doorway, into the destroyed ballroom. She ran a few steps, wondering what good it would do. Even if she reached the stone, the dragon would catch them long before they could hope to escape.

Then she realized that Kuromori was no longer behind her. Stumbling to a halt, she turned, and saw the eastern faeling standing framed in the door, his katana at the ready.

No! He can't! He'll be killed!

Perhaps it took the dragon a few minutes before it could breathe fire again; at any rate, its next attack was far more direct. It bore down on Kuromori like a freight train, all scales and deafening roar. Its fangs were as long as Alex's arm, and seemed to shimmer in the heat pouring from the beast's throat.

At the last possible moment, Kuromori leapt aside. Rather than attempt to cut through the thick scales, he instead struck at the vulnerable eye as its head went past him. The dragon screamed in pain; hot, golden blood gushed from the wound, sizzling on the steel of the katana.

Kuromori didn't waste a moment gloating; instead, he struck again, no doubt intending to thrust his sword through the wound and into the monster's brain. But even as he did so, its head turned, trying to get a fix on him with its single, good eye. The blade struck instead the hard scales.

Weakened by the burning blood, it shattered into a thousand pieces.

Then the dragon was on Kuromori, bearing him over and tearing at him with its jaws. Alex heard her own scream of denial, felt Padgett dragging her back, but it seemed like something from a dream.

The dragon raised its head. Blood dripped from its jaws, smoking in the heat of its breath. Kuromori's broken body lay unmoving beneath one taloned foot. The eastern faeling was dead.

And it looked as if they would be next.

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"Fox!" Duncan shouted in warning, and flung a net of shadow at the thing coming out of the well, hoping to slow it down.

Fox turned and let out a yelp, clutching the half of the stone she held to her breast. The guardian of the well hissed and tore through the shadow-net. Duncan caught a glimpse of long, golden hair, a soft, pixie-like face, full breasts, and a narrow waist joined to the scaled body of a serpent.

He felt a surge of building power from Dubh, but before it could be unleashed, the guardian of the well opened her fang-filled mouth and began to sing.

The song...was beautiful. Seductive. It whispered of power, of contentment, of all good things. They had but to go to the guardian, to give themselves over to her embrace, and everything would be all right forever.

Fox turned and began to walk back towards the serpent-woman, a look of joy on her face. Dubh did so as well, and Duncan started to wheel forward, not wanting to be left behind. Alex's invention was a heavy weight in his lap, and he moved to discard it...

Alex. Mina.

It's a snare, you old fool!

Somehow, he managed to tear his eyes from the fae. Her song dinned in his ears, and although he was powerless to entirely escape its grasp, he forced his hand to close on the blanket covering Alex's gift and tear it aside. The contraption beneath was a confused tangle of wires, and he groped blindly for a moment, desperate to find the switch.

Light flared, so bright that he could see nothing else. It was stark white, overwhelming the nacreous glow of the well and destroying the shadows.

The fae's song turned into a discordant shriek. She jerked back, flinging up one arm to cover her eyes. The water boiled madly around her as her tail thrashed, and he realized that she was trying to climb out of the well.

"Run!" he shouted.

Fox obeyed instantly. "Go after her," Dubh said tightly. "I'll watch your back."

Duncan didn't argue. He got the chair turned and sent it after Fox, the brilliant light still burning in his lap. He could feel the heat of it on his skin, and sincerely hoped that it didn't accidentally end up setting him on fire.

Dubh came behind on his heels. "I don't think she's following us," he said after a little while.

Duncan shook his head. His arms ached from the strain of propelling the chair, and he silently wished that he were even a decade younger. "That doesn't mean we're safe. You may be certain that someone among the Sluagh knows what we have done, and will not be pleased."

"With any luck, the battle will keep them busy."

Duncan didn't answer; he needed his breath, for one thing. For another, he was not nearly so optimistic.

But we have our half of the stone. If Alex and the rest have theirs as well, it won't matter what anyone knows.

The light began to sputter and die. Duncan cursed.

"It doesn't matter—we're almost there," Dubh said.

And indeed, within a few moments, Duncan saw Fox framed against the twilight filling the doorway to the maze. Feeling nearly overwhelmed with relief, he followed her into the free air.

Instantly, all of his senses were assaulted by the chaos of battle. The quiet scene of early evening that they had left behind when they entered the maze was no more. Instead, weapons came together with deafening clangs, while fae screamed and roared and sang and died. Creatures of every type struggled with one another, while fires blazed out of control and ice coated every available surface.

The taste and feel and smell of magic overloaded his senses, and Duncan froze for an instant, letting the wheelchair roll under the power of gravity as he struggled to make sense of the pandemonium around him.

Power slammed into him from the side, sending the chair over and spilling him onto the pier. Pain flared in every nerve, and he was dimly aware of frost on his skin, on his hair. When he moved, his clothes cracked stiffly.

What happened? The others—the stone—

Dubh sprawled unconscious nearby, a bruise darkening one side of his face. Of Fox there was no sign, and Duncan prayed desperately that she had escaped the ambush.

A black boot appeared on the wooden boards near his face. Blinking blood from his eyes, Duncan looked up, and found Camhlaidh standing over him. The fae's cold face was drawn in an expression of raw fury.

"This is all your fault," Camhlaidh said. His eyes were black as a night with no moon, and even with the battle raging all around them, Duncan could feel the slow rise of his power. "How is it that I should have been defeated by a foolish coward with more human blood in his veins than fae?"

Duncan tried to push himself up on his elbows, but Camhlaidh made a small gesture. Instantly, the wooden planks around Duncan came to life, sprouting tendrils that clamped down over his body and flattened him to the ground. He tried to freeze them, or to wrest control of them from his assailant, but he was no match for the fae. The tendrils began to tighten, cutting off breath and crushing bone, and Duncan realized that Camhlaidh meant to kill him.

"I did nothing to you," he managed to choke out.

"You held my daughter to her human side," Camhlaidh snarled. "If not for her love of you, she would have become the dark queen that she was meant to be. She would have led the Sluagh here, not as a subordinate to the young king, but instead as his ruler. The faelings of both worlds would have belonged to her, and the two of us would have had the power to crush the seelie fae once and for all.

"You twisted her from her path, turned her into something no better than a mortal. But there is still time. There is still a chance that she will listen, that she will make the young king her slave, or else kill him here on the field of battle and seize the throne herself. But not if you still live to poison her heart with human feeling. And so, you see, I'm going to do what I should have done five years ago. I'm going to kill you."

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The battle was like every brawl Pook had ever been in put together, combined with his fights against the solitary fae, and multiplied by a couple hundred.

Everything around him was pure chaos. There were flames, and snowstorms, and faeries throwing ice spears and flying around and God only knew what else. A ben sidhe fixed her gaze on him and sailed in his direction on translucent wings. Her mouth opened, loosing her deadly song, so he brought Bob up like a shield. He could *feel* the death magic coming apart around the blade, see it in little bits of blue light that shimmered and fragmented and died.

The ben sidhe didn't like that, not one damn bit, so she started to back off. But Pook's blood was up now; he screamed a curse at her and sent his mount in pursuit. She was too fast, but a creature that looked like spun glass filled with fire got in the way, so Pook settled for it instead. It scored a hit along the horse's side, and the smell of burning wood filled the air before it shattered against Bob's blade.

"Pook!" Mina shouted at him. "Don't get too far away, or you're going to be surrounded!"

Startled, he looked around, realized that he was seeing a lot more unfriendly faces than otherwise. Everything was crazy; he had no sense of how the battle was going, or how the forces were moving in relation to each other, or even if their side was doing decent or not.

But that was what he'd brought Mina for, after all, so he did as she told him. Everybody else did, too; she was yelling orders like the general he'd called her, and he felt a wild surge of pride, buoyed up by the madness and confusion of the fight.

"They're driving us!" Mina shouted to him, as soon as he was near enough to hear.

"Who?"

"The seelie—they're shoving both the Banished and the unseelie towards the landward edge of the spell."

A sprite blazed at his head, distracting him. He pulled shadow and earth from the ground beneath him, caught the sprite in a net, and then skewered it on Bob. The golden blood froze on the blade and flaked off.

When he had a second to look around, he found that Mina was right. They were in the streets now, and the buildings around them were on fire, and he hoped nobody had been caught inside. God only knew what the people trapped in the alleys thought was going on. The edge of the battlefield showed as a red glow, the same color as the blood that had been used to mark it.

At first, it was hard to see beyond the edge of the spell, as if the mortal world was hidden behind a flimsy curtain. But as they got closer, the curtain got thinner, and he realized that there were a whole bunch of b'hoys and g'hals lined up along it.

They stood right on the border, one foot in the mortal world, the other over the line into Faerie. Some of their faces were familiar—there was a Rummie, and a Firestarter, and a bunch of other gangs he knew.

“What the fuck?”

The Rummies threw open their long coats, revealing pistols strapped beneath. The rest of the gangsters pulled weapons from wherever they'd hidden them. In the instant before Pook realized what was happening, they simultaneously lifted their guns and opened fire.

A hail of bullets slammed into the nearest fae. The aughisky was hit; Pook saw her rear and then fall to the side, screaming and thrashing. Several of the Banished went down, seelie and unseelie alike, and the carousel ostrich took a hit that sent splinters of wood flying everywhere and turned it back into an inanimate carving.

Oh shit.

“The guns—they've got iron bullets!” Pook shouted at Mina. He and the rest of the Rat Soldiers had helped bring the damned things into the city, but he hadn't given a lot of thought to what had happened to them afterwards. Now he wished like hell he'd given it a little more consideration.

“Damn them! This is what they were driving us towards!” Mina snarled. “We can't stop the humans—they're in the mortal world, with only a toe or two in Faerie so they can see us. We've got to go the other way—break through the seelie formation!”

But no one else was listening. The iron bullets were starting to spread panic among the fae, as more and more were wounded or killed by them. Some began to run back and forth, trapped between the blades of the seelie and the death coming out of the mortal world, howling in their despair.

Damn it! Pook gripped Bob and turned his mount towards the gangs. He didn't know what would happen if he started hacking at the edge of the spell with the sword, but it was the only thing he could think to do. *Assuming I don't get shot through my head or my heart before I even get there. Fuck, at that range, they won't be able to miss.*

He started to tighten his knees around the horse, intending to go for it anyway, when suddenly a new figure appeared on the other side of the veil.

Seeing Hubert RiGrath standing there was so surreal that for a minute Pook thought he'd taken a knock to the head. Then old Hubert lifted one hand and pointed dramatically at the gangs. “There they are, officers!”

Pook would never have thought he would be glad to see the crushers, but when the uniformed shapes charged the gangs, he couldn't help but be happy. The gangs stopped shooting right away and started running instead. The crushers chased after them, yelling and blowing whistles and waving their own guns, totally oblivious to the magical battle going on only a few yards away.

Hubert RiGrath started to turn and go after them, then hesitated and looked back. Across the distance, their gazes met, and with a shock Pook realized Hubert could see the battle just fine. The noble offered a grave salute—then headed off after the crushers.

Hunh. Maybe he isn't such a poofter after all.

The danger from the streets was gone, but they were still caught between the edge of the spell and the seelie horde.

Not for long, though.

“Come on, Banished!” Pook yelled, stabbing Bob skyward so everybody could see him. “Come on, you unseelie b'hoys and g'hals! Let's show those cheating seelie what we've got!”

Some of them actually let up a cheer, which startled him so bad he almost dropped Bob. He kicked the wooden sides of his horse, and they charged forward, followed and surrounded by the mass of angry fae. The two sides hit one another with the crash of swords and the flash of magic.

In the midst of the chaos, though, Pook caught a glimpse of Siubhan. She was glaring at him, and when he looked back, she lifted her sword in challenge.

The euphoria of battle was riding him, and he started to laugh, feeling wild and crazy. “Come on, then, g'hal! Show me what you got!”

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Alex backed up slowly, her hands shaking as the dragon turned its head, trying to focus its only remaining eye on both her and Padgett at once. *Chernovog, we're dead. It's going to kill us both.*

Oh, Pook, I'm so sorry.

Perhaps it was her movement that caught its attention, because it suddenly lowered its head and began to pace across the room towards her. Her heart in her throat, Alex turned to run. She had dropped the flamethrower's nozzle, and its hose tangled her legs. Blindly, she tore away the straps, struggling to free herself. Behind her, the dragon roared; she felt the scorching heat of its breath on her back.

Talons slammed into the tiles only feet away, and she turned to see the enormous head looming above her. Its

huge jaws parted, and she saw again the scimitar-like fangs, Kuromori's blood still smoking on them.

Alex had only one weapon left. She had unfastened the straps holding the flamethrower, and it had slid halfway off her shoulders. With only the blind thought of doing something, anything, to postpone death for one more second, she shrugged it free of her arms, grabbed one strap with both hands, and slung it as hard as she could at the dragon's head.

The dragon's jaws closed around the projectile, its teeth puncturing the tanks of the flamethrower with ease. Fuel gushed out—and encountered the blazing heat of the dragon's breath.

The tanks exploded. A wave of heat and air slammed into Alex, flinging her to the ground several feet away. For a moment she wasn't entirely sure that she hadn't been killed.

Silence fell. No scales or claws dragged on the scorched marble. Every inch of Alex's body hurt; her exposed skin felt scalded by the heat, and her ears rang. The stink of burning hair filled her nostrils, and the afterimage of the explosion disrupted her sight and hung before her even when she closed her eyes.

"Alex! Alex, are ye all right?"

Alex opened her eyes cautiously. Padgett knelt beside her, a twisted length of metal in one hand. One of the candelabras, Alex realized; Padgett must have been getting ready to use it in a last-ditch effort against the guardian.

"I...I don't know. I think so."

Padgett helped Alex to her feet. The dragon's body lay unmoving on the floor; most of its head was missing. Bits of golden blood and flesh clung to the walls, floor, and ceiling, but none of the chunks were any larger than one of Alex's fingers.

"Chernovog," Alex whispered, and swayed on her feet. Padgett steadied her. "Kuromori. He's dead, isn't he?" Padgett only nodded.

Even so, Alex forced herself to walk across the room to where the faeling's body lay. His wounds were even more horrendous up close. The shattered hilt of his katana was still clutched in one hand. Alex gently took it from him; it was the only thing she could carry away. What would happen to his body, she couldn't guess.

At the moment, she couldn't feel anything but numbness. "Let's get this over with," she said.

Padgett nodded. Together they walked to the back wall, where the stone hung. Alex pulled it gently down and stared at it; it felt warm against her skin, almost like something alive.

But then the air here is hot. It's probably nothing more than that.

According to Padgett, no gateways between Faerie and the mortal world could be created within the palace itself. Once they were on the dusty plain outside, however, Padgett stopped.

"It's time for the third favor I promised ye," the fae said gravely.

Something about her tone set fear into Alex's heart. "Now? Can't it wait?"

"Nay." Padgett looked away for a moment, almost as if ashamed. "My third gift for ye is the gift of yer heart. The stone is alive, in its own way. When the two pieces are rejoined and it's made whole again, it will have a powerful intelligence inside it. And when Pook steps on it...the stone will join its mind to his. The Pook ye knew will be gone, and something new in his place, and I'm not thinking ye will like that."

Alex felt as if the world had dropped out from beneath her. "What? No!"

"I'm afraid so, me girl."

The stone was heavy in Alex's hands. She looked down at it, but it seemed no different, no more sinister. Just a broken piece of carved rock. "Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"Because I was afraid ye would refuse this task."

"You bitch." Alex took a step back, her hands tightening on the stone, even though she knew that the fae could easily take it from her. "I won't do it! I won't let Pook touch it! You'll have to kill me first."

"Then yer lover will die as well," Padgett said implacably. "The battle has begun already, and everything is in motion. If we don't take our half of the stone to the field, the armies will simply continue to fight, until someone wins. And that someone won't be the Banished, and likely won't be the unseele, either. Everything we've worked for will be for naught, and all yer friends will die."

Tears of rage stung Alex's eyes. "So that's it? I destroy Pook either way?"

"Nay, love. What sort of favor would that be? When Pook steps on the stone, it will cry out, and Faerie will be reunited. Ye will have but an instant to act. Grab hold of him—and whatever ye do, don't let go. The stone will use every kind of trick to make ye surrender him, understand me? It will look into yer heart and find yer deepest fears, and will use them against ye. It will trick yer very mind, so that Pook will seem to become whatever it is that ye most fear. So if yer afraid of spiders, ye'll find one in yer arms, its hairy legs tickling yer face. *But ye can't let go.* If ye hold on long enough, if ye refuse to surrender, then the stone will be forced to give him back, with no harm done to him."

Alex's heart tripped against her ribs. *Chernovog, what if I fail? What if I can't do it?* "But—"

"There's no time left, girl," Padgett said urgently. "The battle is raging, and all the threads are coming together. We've got to be getting that stone to the field, before it's too late. Just remember—*whatever ye do, don't let go!*"

And with that, the fae opened up a gateway, and the world tumbled away.

Siubhan didn't wait around for Pook to make the first move. She came straight at him—then fainted at the last minute, and sent her sword through the legs of his horse. Pook yelped and hurled himself to one side, so that he crashed into the ground shoulder-first. The horse hit beside him, nothing more now than painted wood, its front legs completely sheared away.

He rolled onto his back, just in time to fling up his sword and ward off Siubhan's next blow. She looked scary as hell, her hair streaming around her like a corona, and the wildness of battle started to subside in the face of straight-out fear.

"Stupid puppy," she sneered. "Cower. Cower before your betters."

That pissed him off. "You ain't better than me, bitch!" he shouted, and slapped aside her next try at skewering him so hard that she took a step back.

"How dare you!" she hissed, like she couldn't believe he'd be so damned inconsiderate as to mess up her day by not letting her kill him.

Pook took the opportunity to get to his feet. His left shoulder hurt like hell, and he wasn't totally sure that he hadn't broken his collarbone in the fall. "You ain't nothing," he told her. All the stuff that Kuromori had spouted at him came back of a sudden, like his sensei was standing right there by him. "You got no honor."

She came at him with a scream, but he turned the attack. He was starting to get her number, now, starting to get the feel of her style, just like Kuromori had taught him. So he waited, made himself be patient, let her think she was driving him when in reality he was drawing her. Let her wear herself out trying to beat him back, trying to get her magic past Bob.

And finally it happened. Her foot hit a broken cobblestone, and she stumbled, just a little. Everything fell into place, the most perfect thing he'd ever felt, and he stepped up and drove Bob into the gap between her armor and her throat, putting all the shadow he could summon behind it.

She tried to scream, but nothing came out of her mouth but blood. He grabbed everything he could find: fog, mist, cold, shadow, and ran it down the conduit of the blade and into her body. He could feel the flame of her life, and he poured winter magic onto it until it turned to ash.

Tired to the bone, Pook ripped Bob back out of her flesh. Siubhan slumped to the ground, lifeless.

"The Queen is dead!" someone—he didn't know who, or what—screamed, and a moment later it seemed like everybody was shouting it. The seelie began to waver, and Pook heard Mina yelling, telling the Banished and the unseelie to seize their chance, to drive the seelie back to the Crawl.

A moment later, a white flank appeared in front of him. Startled, he looked up and saw Mina, leaning over and offering her hand.

"Come on up, boy," she said, like she knew how worn out he was. "You did good."

He grabbed her hand and let her help him scramble up behind her. The horse snorted and broke into a trot, then into a gallop, and the seelie fled before them.

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Alex ducked behind Padgett as a huge, black-furred panther charged them. The transition from the sterile emptiness of Sidhe Finnachaidh to the insanity of the battlefield had caught her off guard. She had thought it would be simple to find Pook—had somehow imagined that they would simply step through the gateway at his side. Instead, she despaired of even catching a glimpse of him through the struggle.

And now this.

Padgett spread her wings protectively and hissed at the great cat. It ignored her, instead ducking to one side, as if its only interest was in getting to Alex. One eye glowed an eerie blue-green; the other...

"Stop!" Alex shouted, grabbing Padgett's arm. "Don't hurt her! I think...I think that's...Vagabond?"

No longer blocked by Padgett, Vagabond plowed into Alex, butting her head against the girl so hard that she nearly fell down. A series of shallow scratches had drawn blood down one flank, but otherwise the cat seemed unharmed. *If quite a bit larger than I recall.*

Keeping a tight hold on her half of the stone with one hand, Alex stroked the cat with the other. "We're looking for Pook," she said urgently. "Do you know where he is, kitten?"

Like a living shadow, Vagabond bounded away, towards the heart of the battle. Cursing silently, Alex ran after her, Padgett on her heels.

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Pook's hold suddenly tightened on Mina's waist. "Look!" he shouted, pointing in the direction of what had been the carousel. "I think I saw Alex! They're back!"

Thank you, God, Mina thought, relieved beyond saying. At least one half of the stone had been recovered, then, and this whole damned mess wasn't for nothing.

But what about the other half?

"I'm going to look for the others," Mina said decisively. "You hop off here and try to get to Alex, all right?"

She didn't have to tell him twice; Pook was off the horse almost before she got the words out of her mouth. Trusting that he could look after himself, she leaned low over her horse's flowing mane and urged it in the direction of the maze. It responded, using its mass to shove aside combatants, snapping and biting with its ivory teeth when anyone was too slow to get out of the way. A few fae shouted challenges at Mina, but she ignored them; fighting was meaningless if they didn't get the stone rejoined.

The tides of battle had moved away from the maze, and so Mina unexpectedly found herself in the midst of a quieter space. She started to slow her horse so that she could get a good look around, perhaps figure out what had happened to Fox, Dubh, and Duncan. Then she saw Camhlaidh.

He stood alone, his stark black clothing turning him into an omen of doom. All her father's attention was focused

on something at his feet; whatever it was, it was being covered over by a thousand tendrils summoned forth from the wooden planks of the pier. Nearby, Dubh lay sprawled motionless.

And even closer laid the smashed remains of a wheelchair.

A mix of terror and fury sliced into Mina's heart like the thrust of a knife. She kicked the horse hard and lifted her staff, even as all of Camhlaidh's treacherous words rang in her ears.

I should have killed him, I should have killed him, oh God don't let Duncan be dead because I didn't kill him...

Mina's mount slammed into Camhlaidh, knocking him to the ground. A moment later, however, the horse itself stumbled and went down, encased in a web of shadow spun by the fae. Mina sprang free and hit the ground, rolled, then came up on her feet with her staff at the ready.

Camhlaidh had risen as well; his pale face was ghastly. "I sought no quarrel with you, daughter," he hissed in a voice like the rattle of sleet in tall grass.

"By killing my husband?" *Don't let him be dead, please oh please.*

Camhlaidh showed his teeth. "He was far, far beneath you. You knew that, and yet you bound yourself to him, to his dreary, mortal life, when you could have ruled everything."

"And you with me? Don't pretend that you ever wanted anything for my sake." Mina gathered all her power, pulling the memory of ice from the river beneath them, the whisper of rain from the air, the solid strength of stone from the ground. "You never gave a damn about anyone but yourself."

And so saying, she struck, both with magic and staff. Camhlaidh staggered under the combined assault—then flung himself at her in swift retaliation.

The temperature around them plunged, and the planks of the pier groaned as ice formed within them. At first, Mina was able to hold her own. But Camhlaidh was old and powerful, and had not become so by being slow. His magic moved like a snake, twisting out of her grip and finding every gap in her defenses. Her earlier fights had drained her, and now she found herself struggling simply to deflect his attacks, unable to launch one of her own.

Mina went to one knee, the impact with the ground jarring her spine. Her staff was heavy in her hands, and she felt aching weariness eating at her bones. Camhlaidh stood over her, his golden hair wild about his face, and there was only rage in his eyes.

He's going to kill me. He can't let me live after this.

A dark shape of shadow and cold cannoned into Camhlaidh, knocking him to the ground. An instant later, it became Dubh, who launched himself onto the fae's back, his eyes wild and desperate. Camhlaidh snarled and twisted, seeking to fling Dubh from him.

Now! Don't just sit staring, do it now!

Mina heaved herself to her feet and brought her staff down on Camhlaidh's skull with all her might. The blades of ice set into the end sliced through hair, flesh, and bone, and he crumpled to the ground.

Whether it would have killed him, she didn't know. As he staggered, Dubh pulled a bronze knife from his belt and drew it across Camhlaidh's throat, laying it open to the bone. Camhlaidh collapsed, blood pooling around him at a sickening rate.

Oh, God, Duncan!

With Camhlaidh's death, the tendrils that had encased Duncan were blackening and crumbling into dust. Mina fell to her knees beside her husband's inert body, dashing away the remaining fragments of lifeless wood. His face was terribly pale, and blood trickled sluggishly from a wound on his forehead.

A moan of grief and terror tore itself from Mina's throat. She turned him over, then wrapped her arms about his shoulders and dragged him into her lap. His long hair trailed down to the blood-stained wood of the pier.

His eyelids fluttered, and her heart lurched. "Duncan!"

"My dear." His voice was nothing but a breath, so low she had to almost press her ear to his lips to hear it.

"It's going to be all right—we'll get you to a doctor—"

"There's no time." Duncan coughed, and to her alarm she saw blood bubble around his lips. "Fox—where is she?"

"I don't know."

"She has half the stone, Mina. You must find her, make sure no one takes it from her."

"But—"

"Go." Somehow, he dredged up a smile. "I'll be fine, my dear. I just...need...to rest."

Dubh's shadow fell over them. "I'll look after him," he said.

Mina wanted to protest, to say that she wasn't about to leave Duncan alone for an instant. No matter what he said, it was clear that her husband was badly hurt. At the very least, he had a punctured lung; God only knew what else might be broken and bleeding inside him. Every instinct screamed at her to stay with him, to protect him, to do *something* to help him.

But there was nothing she could do. She wasn't a doctor, didn't even have anything to bind his wounds. If she stayed here...if Fox were caught...if everything went horribly wrong...

If the halves of the stone were never rejoined and Faerie continued to tear itself apart, neither side would look kindly on any of them. The odds of Duncan leaving the battlefield alive went from uncertain to zero.

Not to mention Alex and Pook.

"Damn it," Mina said. "You'd better be here when I get back, Duncan RiDahn."

She eased him down to the ground, then, feeling as if her heart were being torn out, she stood up and walked away. Her mount had regained its feet and waited, watching her with one blank eye. She swung into the saddle and

urged it back towards the battle. “Come on,” she murmured to it. “Let’s find Fox.”

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Alex turned at the sound of Pook calling her name. Vagabond had led them as near as she could, but the thickest part of the battle kept them from winning through completely. Even now, the tides of war threatened to pull them apart; she saw Pook’s sword flashing as he cut this way through the spells that would have blocked his path. His black hair was stiff with drying blood, and she thought she caught a glimpse of small horns poking through the dark locks.

She started towards him, desperate, but an enormous, white bull with red ears came in between them, cutting her off. Padgett grabbed her by the back of her dress and yanked her out of its path.

“Look!” the seelie fae shouted in her ear, and turned her about the other way.

A white horse made its way through the press towards them. Mina sat on its back, seeming to blaze in the gloaming, her clothes and hair and skin all the color of snow, broken only by the black pits of her eyes. Fox sat behind her, arms wrapped about Mina’s waist, and Alex saw the twin to her stone clutched tight in Fox’s hands.

“Go!” Padgett said, pushing her towards them. “Now! And don’t forget—don’t let go!”

Her heart in her throat, Alex ran, ducking around the struggling fae, praying that she didn’t get cut down. Someone must have noticed her, and realized what she was carrying, for cries rang out behind her, calling for her to stop.

Chernovog, help me, please, help me!

The Banished rallied, forcing a path to clear for her. Mina pulled her steed to a halt, and Fox slid down, running towards Alex, her half of the stone outstretched.

The two halves met. Light flared along the broken edge, then vanished, leaving behind no sign of a seam. The stone of destiny was whole once more.

“Drop it!” Padgett shouted from somewhere behind them. Alex looked across at Fox, and then both women let go at the same moment. The stone fell to the wooden planks of the pier with a dull thud.

Now what?

She looked again for Pook, saw that he was closer now. The Banished fell on anyone who threatened to stop him, fighting with the fierce desperation of those who know their lives depend on the next few moments. A net of fire caught him for an instant, but his sword sliced through it, killing the magic.

And then there was nothing between him and the stone. Pook broke into a run; Alex could see the mix of fear and determination in his dark eyes, and she started to raise her hand, to warn him...

His foot touched the stone.

A mix of light and shadow flared all around him. At the same instant, a great voice cried out in a tongue Alex didn’t know. The very earth seemed to shake under her feet, and all around the hosts of Faerie fell to the ground. The air thickened, as if two great weather fronts collided, and Alex felt her ears pop.

Pook stood with both feet firmly on the stone. His head was thrown back, as if in either agony or ecstasy, and the wind turned his hair into a dark corona around his head. Both arms stretched up towards the sky, and lightning and shadow alike danced around the blade of his sword. Alex felt as if her heart might stop, as if she should fall to her knees in awe at the power that suddenly saturated the air. She could feel everything shifting, focusing on the boy before her, as if he were the fulcrum on which the world turned.

“Now!” screamed Padgett, from what seemed like far away. “Now, Alex, before it’s too late!”

Gathering every ounce of her courage, Alex flung herself forward, into the heart of the maelstrom, and wrapped her arms around Pook’s waist.

Instantly, the magic was disrupted; she felt it swirling around them, angry, cheated. Pook let out a furious shout and struggled, but she clung to him as tightly as she could, ignoring his protests even when the talons on his fingers dug into her arms. He had dropped his sword to grapple with her, and she wondered distantly why he didn’t use it against her, or if that was some part of the magic whose rules they both now had to follow.

I won’t let go. I won’t. No matter what, I won’t let go.

The form in her arms shifted, changed. She no longer held the strong, lithe body of her lover, but rather one with softer curves. All the color drained from his skin, and his features changed, became those of her mother.

Chernovog, give me strength...

Moira’s face was streaked with tears, and her eyes were bruised. “Let me go, Dreya, please,” she begged. “You’re hurting me!”

Alex swallowed hard. “No. You’re not my mother. You’re just a trick.”

“How can you say that to me, Dreya?” The tears poured down from Moira’s familiar eyes. “Please, let go. I can’t bear to be touched. When I was in the madhouse, the caretakers raped me in the dark, and the chains kept me from even fighting back! Please, I can’t stand for you to hold me!”

Pain lanced through Alex’s heart, and she felt tears starting in her eyes. That had been a secret fear, one she had never allowed herself to consider as a conscious thought, unable to bear the grief and horror of it. “No,” she managed to say somehow. “You’re not my mother. Whatever happened to her, she’s beyond all pain now.”

Moira’s features blurred and ran, like a watercolor in the rain. Now Gosha’s face, wracked with agony, stared back at her. “You killed me,” he said, as if he still could not believe it. “You murdered me. Do you have any idea how long it took me to die? I lay there in the cold for hours, praying that someone would find me.”

Alex tightened her grip on him. “Gosha—the real Gosha—would have taken me back to die.”

"I loved you like a daughter!"

"You would have given me over to Mama's fate, all to preserve your own hide. You let the woman you love die, and would have let me die as well. You were a coward, Gosha. Mama deserved better than you, and so did I."

Gosha dissolved, replaced by Aleksei's round face. "You'll never be free of me," her father said. "I'll keep returning, no matter how far you run. You're coming back to Ruska with me, girl. I've the perfect place for you. You can even have your mother's chains."

Alex could feel her heart knocking against her ribs. The illusion was so perfect, down to her father's angry tone of voice. But it was still an illusion. "You must be getting desperate," she said, putting all the scorn she could summon into the words. "My father has been defeated once—I will do it again, if need be."

Aleksei's bulk shrank, and Alex tightened her hold. The skin darkened, and the features became themselves once again. Pook looked back at her with his beautiful gray eyes, and she felt her heart leap.

"We did it, Pook!" she cried, turning the embrace into a warm hug.

"Yeah," he said, but his voice sounded cold. Distant.

Startled, she lifted her head from where she had started to rest it on his chest. The look in his eyes was contemptuous and faintly bored.

"Is everything all right?" she asked uncertainly.

"Sure it is. 'Cept that I'm a king now, and you're hanging all over me in front of everybody."

"W-what do you mean?"

Pook rolled his eyes impatiently. "Look, it's been amusing, right? But you got to know it was just a temporary thing. You ain't stupid enough to think I was really in love with you, are you?"

Alex could feel her heart breaking. "I-I thought..."

"What? That I really wanted a cow like you, when I could have the prettiest girl in Dere just for the asking?"

Stunned and hurt beyond all thought, she began to loosen her hold and step away. Pook didn't want her...had never wanted her, never loved her, and she should have known that all his pretty words were just lies...

"No!" Mina shouted. "It's a trick!"

It took Alex a precious second to realize the meaning of Mina's words. Horror swamped her—she had almost let go. She tried to grab Pook more firmly, but he twisted suddenly, snarling like an animal, and she could feel her precarious hold starting to slip...

Then Mina was there, her black eyes fell. "That was a dirty trick," she hissed in a sibilant, reptile voice. "But I have one of my own."

With a single move, she reached out and tore the amulet from Pook's neck, the one thing that protected him from her power. Even Alex felt it, then, like a dark hand ensnaring something deep inside of Pook, wrapping tight around all the things that made him who he was.

"Give up and let go, you bastard," Mina growled. "Because we sure as hell aren't going to."

Something snapped. Pook went suddenly limp, nearly dragging Alex to the ground as she found herself supporting his entire weight. The feeling of pressure eased around them, and the air suddenly became easier to breathe. Mina stepped back, letting go of her magical hold on Pook, and Alex saw her hands shaking.

Pook's eyelids fluttered open. He looked confused, and tired, but entirely himself. He lifted one bloody hand and gently, gently ran it along Alex's cheek.

"Hey, baby," he whispered.

And then faded from her arms.

She cried out, grabbing at air, but he was gone. The stone had vanished as well, and when she looked up, she saw that none of the fae remained behind. Only Mina and Fox stood there, both of them filthy and exhausted. The remaining carousel animals lay scattered about, nothing but bits of carved wood. From the direction of the wharves came the whistle of a steamboat's horn, and Alex realized that they were once again fully in the mortal world.

"What happened?" she asked, staring up at Mina.

Mina shook her head. Her eyes were their normal brown once again, and her hair merely pale blonde rather than the color of snow. "I think we won," she said.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Alex followed Mina and Duncan through the crowds that thronged the docks. A shipment of books had come in from Grynnith, and the cargo master insisted they sign for it personally. They had cajoled Alex into coming with them, and she had acquiesced, hoping that it would ease a little of their worry.

It had been two months since the battle. The pure-blooded humans who had been caught up in it—those that lived through the experience, anyway—had no memory of what had happened. As far as the mortal realm was concerned, one moment everything had been fine, and the next a large part of the waterfront had either been on fire or wrecked. Numerous theories, none of them close to the fantastic truth, had filled the papers for weeks afterward. The most accepted was that the damage had been caused by a gas line explosion.

For the most part, their wounds had healed. Duncan had been the most badly hurt, with a punctured lung due to a broken rib, not to mention a dislocated wrist and any number of minor scrapes and bruises. He still couldn't move the wheelchair on his own, and relying on Mina and Alex had kept him in a grumpy mood for weeks.

Alex's burns had faded with time. Her hair had been badly singed; at first, she had simply hacked off the burned part herself. Eventually, she'd let Duncan talk her into going to a stylist, who had trimmed it off neatly, so that it hung to just below her shoulders.

Of Pook, Dubh, and Vagabond, there had been no sign. All three had vanished back into Faerie with the breaking of the spell. For the first few days, Alex had expected some word, or even for Pook himself to appear on her doorstep. But she had not even seen him in her dreams.

Did we really free him?

Mina assured her that they had, but Alex doubted. Padgett had warned her that the stone would use her greatest fears to trick her, and yet she had still failed the test. Although she had never entirely let go of Pook, she had let her hold loosen considerably; perhaps that had been enough for the stone to claim him.

And if so, it's my fault. My fault I'll never see him again.

Even so, there was evidence that he would be visiting the mortal realm. Last week, the newspapers had been filled with an unexpected announcement. Queen Dagmar was engaged; her fiancé was the third son of the raja of Indus. From his picture in the paper, the young man was very handsome. The gossip Alex had picked up from the baker sisters reputed that he had been kicked in the head by a horse when a child, and as a consequence was as stupid as he was beautiful. Most importantly, he had black hair and brown skin, so that no one would question it if Dagmar brought forth a child with such coloring.

Although there was no proof, Alex felt certain she knew the truth behind the marriage. Pook was the king of all Faerie now; why shouldn't he marry Dagmar, or at least sleep with her behind her mortal husband's back? Dagmar had both seelie and unseelie blood in her veins; any children of their union brought back to Faerie would only further seal the peace that the stone had brought.

Whereas Alex...would live her own life, somehow. She would be starting at the university in a few weeks, but she felt no joy at the prospect. No joy at anything, it seemed. She tried to tell herself that her heart would mend someday, that the passage of time would make her pain less intense, but she could not quite bring herself to believe it.

The docks were as crowded as they had been the day she had first come to the city. A cart came between her and Mina and Duncan, so she stopped to let it pass, deciding that it wasn't worth the effort to make her way around it. As she idled, she looked about...and found herself staring directly into a pair of gray eyes.

He leaned against a brick wall, watching her with a grin on his face. In the summer heat, he wore his sleeves rolled up and his collar open, revealing skin the color of coffee cut with cream. His black hair had grown out a bit, and hung to just below shoulder length. The wound on his cheek had healed, leaving only a thin white line, stark against his dark skin. A black cat with a single eye sat at his feet, contentedly washing her paws.

It can't be. I'm seeing things. Dreaming.

Chernovog, then, may I never wake up!

She ran to him, heedless of anyone in her way. Pook caught her up in his arms, lifting her off her feet and spinning her around in a circle. "It's you!" she gasped, too startled to say anything else.

"Yeah," he agreed, and set her back on her feet...only to give her a kiss that she felt all the way to her toes.

"Chernovog, Pook..." She had started to cry, she realized, and hugged him again, just to prove to herself that he was truly there. "Where have you been? Why didn't you send word?"

He returned the embrace: solid, warm, and real. Vagabond rubbed her head on their legs, as if to add her own greeting.

"I'm sorry, baby," he said regretfully. "I wanted to come back the first damn day. But Dubh was all 'you got to settle this,' and 'you got to settle that.' Not everybody was real pleased by the way things turned out, so there was some brawling to do. And time ain't so solid in Faerie as it is here. Though at least they got days and nights back again, anyway. Thing is, I didn't realize how long it had been until I got back and looked at the newspaper."

Her heart sank a little. "I've seen the headlines. So...you're going to marry Dagmar, then?"

His beautiful eyes widened in surprise. "Me? Why the hell would I do that? I'm kind of a one-girl type of guy, you ought to know that."

Relief swamped her, so strong she wanted to sink to the ground. "I'm sorry. I saw the papers and jumped to conclusions."

"Dagmar's nice and all, but I ain't marrying her. That's Dubh's job."

"Dubh?"

"Yeah." Pook grinned wickedly. "I kind of fixed them up. Figured they ought to meet each other, you know, especially since Dubh's the king of Faerie now."

Alex felt as if she had missed some vital bit of information. "What? Dubh? But you're the king, Pook!"

"Not no more, baby. I gave it up. What did Dubh call it? Abdicated, that's it. Told him I wanted him to have the damn job instead. I mean, it makes more sense, don't it? He's the one who knows all those fae, knows the politics and stuff. And they know him. This way, I don't have to put up with them, and they don't have to put up with me, and we're all happy."

"So anyway, Dubh agreed, and he stepped on the stone, and I guess Mina put the fear of God in it or something, cause it didn't put up no argument. He gets to be king, and marry Dagmar, although she's going to marry this human b'hoy, too. But I guess if Dubh don't mind sharing, that's his business. Oh! And you won't believe this!"

The silver flecks in his eyes fairly sparkled as he let go of her long enough to pick up a satchel lying on the ground by him. It was packed to the brim with brushes, paints, charcoal sets, watercolors, and everything else an artist would need. "Dagmar said that since she figured that sketch I did of her wasn't too bad, maybe I ought to get into

drawing a little more serious-like. And since I did her a good turn by introducing her to Dubh, she'd be my patron. Give me money to get some real lessons. I even got enough to rent a loft someplace to do my painting!"

"That's wonderful, Pook." Alex hesitated, torn between happiness for him and her own uncertainty. "So...you're staying in Dere, then?"

He put the satchel back down and slid his arms around her waist, drawing her closer. "Long as you want to, anyway. I can paint while you're at classes, and then we'll have the evenings together. If you still want to be my girl, anyway."

"Yes!" She flung her arms around him. "Chernovog, yes, Pooshka!" She kissed him again, not caring if they were scandalizing the entire waterfront with their behavior. Through the layers of clothing between them, she could feel the strong beat of his heart, and it came to her forcefully that he was alive, and hers, and that they would not be parted again.

"We should find Mina and Duncan, and let them know the good news," she said when she could speak clearly again.

"All right." He slung his satchel onto his back, picked Vagabond up in one arm, and slid the other around Alex's shoulders. She leaned against him, happier than she had ever been, and together they waded into the crowd.

THE END

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>.