

Unseelie



Meredith Holmes

UNSEELIE

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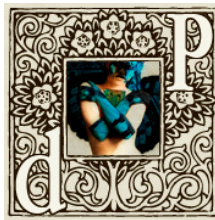
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These stories contain numerous references to mythologies, legends, and stories from around the world as well as from Pagan paths that are still followed today. Any mistakes herein are my own and I apologize for any misunderstanding that may arise out of my creative use of old stories.

For the real Unseelie Court. I love you all.

And Vamp with her Creatures. Murr.

Also for my grandparents, whom I miss very much;

and my mom, who always encouraged me to write

(even when I would roll my eyes and flounce off in a huff).

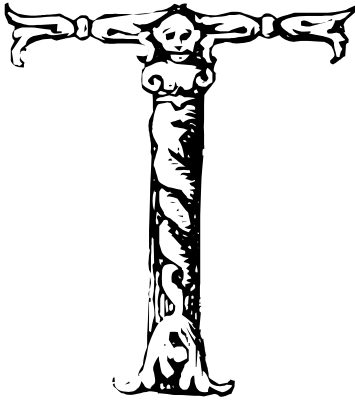
And a huge, heaping, special thanks to Deena Fisher, who made my first novel one I am proud of and who has the patience of at least four saints.

UNSEELIE

Or, in which our heroine finds a naked man in her rosebush, which is not nearly as kinky as it sounds . . .



CHAPTER ONE



HE MAN SAT UP, AND AFTER one disorienting moment when he seemed to shimmer in the morning sun, I saw him clearly. He looked young, younger than me if I had to guess, and had the most unusual colored hair—it reminded me of looking at autumn leaves just as they turned from green to golden red. I couldn't name the color of his eyes, though blue seemed to be the nearest fit. And the rest of him . . .

My face turned seven shades of red and I had to force myself to retain eye contact. "Get out," I repeated, though even I didn't believe myself then. My voice was too quiet, too cracked. "Please."

He raised his eyebrow at me. "This would be a lot less awkward for you if I were to have some trousers on, yes?"

"How did you get here?" I demanded, hating the tremor in my voice. "I'm going to give you five seconds before I call the cops!"

"That's hardly enough time to answer you," he shot back, rising from the spot where I had found him, beneath my thorny, recalcitrant rose bush which refused to do more than be green and prickly, no matter how I fed, watered or neglected it.



He raised a dark brow at my own state of undress and seemed somehow amused by it. “Aren’t you cold? Your sort always seems to get cold in even the mildest weather.”

“My sort? What’s that supposed to . . . Oh, screw it. GET OUT!” My voice echoed off the high garden walls and sent a flock of birds who couldn’t be bothered to go any further south for the season scattering skyward, their winter home disturbed by my shrill scream.

“I’m trying,” he replied calmly, easing out from the narrow space between the rose bush and the stone wall, “but you seem to be in my way. If you’d just put that cudgel down and step back, I’ll be on my way and you never have to be aware of my existence again.” He punctuated his words with a tiny half-bow that almost made me smile. Almost.

I took a few steps back towards the house, painfully aware that my bare legs were unshaven and my nightshirt had a gruesome coffee stain across Winnie the Pooh, but I didn’t lower the bat I’d grabbed from the hall closet on my way out to investigate the neighbor dog’s barking.

The naked man smiled thinly at me and extricated himself from the precarious situation without further comment, seemingly unashamed and unbothered by his lack of clothing as he walked towards my locked garden gate.

“How did you get in here?” I called after him. “It’s locked.” *Way to sound like an idiot*, I added for my own internal benefit. *Just engage the burglar-rapist in tea time conversation at six in the morning while you freeze your bits off.*

“Good day, Alfild.” He unlocked the gate and, still naked, let himself out into the narrow alleyway between my home and my neighbor’s.

I couldn’t see him over the high stone wall surrounding my back garden but I heard him whistling as he headed down the path towards the street. It took a second for me to realize he knew my real name and a moment more to force my legs to carry me to the gate.

“HEY!” I shouted, dropping the bat as I wrestled with the rusty lock that had been in place since my great grandfather was a boy. “That’s a busy road!”

I finally yanked the damned gate open and burst out into the alley only to find myself staring at Mister Culbertson, my nearly deaf, eternally cabbage scented neighbor.

“Um . . .”

“Hullo, Lorelei!” He waved his news paper at me as he scooped it up from the tiny stoop before his side door. “Dressed a bit scantily for this weather, aren’t you, dear?”

A quick glance showed me that my intruder was gone, the alleyway empty save for me and Mister Culbertson. “Something new I’m trying,” I said loudly, smiling and nodding as I backed into my garden, tugging at the hem of my nightshirt to cover as much thigh as possible.

Mister Culbertson watched me with keen interest, his former remarks about liking “more meat than bone” on his women ringing in my ears as I latched the old gate firmly.

“Today,” I announced to the recalcitrant rose bush, “is going to suck.”



“Whoa,” Jackie held up one hand to silence me as I poured more coffee for our breakfast meeting. “He knew your real name? How? You don’t even have it on your driver’s license! It’s not on any of your mail.” She stabbed a grape viciously with the fork from my grandmother’s silver service. “It’s Gulliver playing a prank,” she announced before I could posit my own theory. “It has to be!”

“Gulliver,” I reminded her, pouring more cream than coffee into my own cup, “isn’t smart enough for that. He couldn’t think his way out of a wet paper bag.” Gulliver, her ex-fiancé and my half brother, was the bane

of both of our existences at the moment. “Besides, if he were going to pull something, it would be for his financial gain, not just to startle me and make me flash the neighbors on accident.”

The coffee was bracing, still slightly bitter despite my addition of brown sugar, and just what I needed. I had prowled the house until the sun was well up before calling on Jackie, my best friend of ten years, to come over for breakfast. I hadn’t even waited until she was properly settled at the table before blurting out everything about my morning visitor. She, true to form, had decided to approach it as a conspiracy against me.

“But he would do something that would make you give up the house. You know how bad he wants it. He’s always saying how he can sell it for a fortune and retire. That boy,” she added around a mouthful of biscuit, “ain’t right.”

I snorted involuntarily. It was nice to hear a familiar expression so far from home. It was easy to forget most days that Louisiana was so far away from my mother’s ancestral home in Scotland, especially on days when I was so busy with my work with the university. Today, though, I was already homesick and it wasn’t even lunchtime. “He’s got problems, sure, but this wasn’t his deal, Jackie. I promise you on my favorite coffee mug that Gulliver had nothing to do with this.” I glanced out the kitchen window, which afforded me an excellent view of the back garden and the offending rose bush which had harbored the intruder for who knows how long before Sophie, the neighbor’s dog, started barking and awakened me.

Following my gaze, Jackie leaned across the table conspiratorially. “Did you check to see if he dropped anything? Maybe some clue?”

“Jacks, this isn’t one of your mysteries. He was some freak intruder who was trying to hide . . . OH!” I sat up straight, an idea popping into my head that seemed as plausible as any other explanation. “I bet he was running from the cops already! That’s why he was naked!”

“Of course,” she replied slowly, pushing a long red curl out of her face. “Because he was on the run, he shed his clothes and tossed them as he fled, throwing the dogs off the scent!”

“And he somehow got over the fence and hid back here, waiting for the cops to pass before he slipped out my back gate!”

“And his calling you by your given name was an amazing streak of luck,” she added in a blatantly sarcastic tone. “Face it, dear. He was sent here for a reason. Only three people in this country know your real name and we’re two of them. That leaves one who you know would just love for you to panic and move out so he could take over this old home. He’s been drooling for it since his father married your mother, before you were born.”

I didn’t like Gulliver, but I just couldn’t believe he was in any way tied into the morning’s incident. It was too subtle for him.

“Come on,” I ordered, shoving my chair back with a loud scraping sound against the slate floors. “We’re going to go see if Mister Naked left any clues.” I ignored her muttered commentary on my fickle mind-changing and marched out the back door and into the garden, my coffee firmly in hand as I approached the rose bush.

“If he was naked, what kind of clues could he leave?” she wondered aloud as she followed me at a slower pace. “Something worth me dying of frost bite?” Winter was not Jackie’s element and any foray into the cold made her overly dramatic in her response to it.

“May I remind you that this is really your idea? I never would have thought of it if you hadn’t said anything,” I shot back in a prim tone, dropping to my knees in the moist earth around the rose bush.

It was always green. It never bloomed but it never faded to the dormant brown and gray shades of my other roses in the cold months. My grandmother swore it was because of some ancient magic but my mother told me it was just good gardening and a sheltered corner that kept it

green. I was prone to believe the latter, since grandmother had tended towards flights of fancy even before the senility set in.

Jackie's loud sigh was followed by an equally loud yawn. "It's not even eleven o'clock, Lorelei," she complained, using my chosen name. "I really should be back in bed right now."

"Hey, you eat my grapes, you help me root around in my shrubbery," I retorted, patting the ground beneath the thorny branches carefully. "All I'm getting is dirty," I sighed after a moment or two of futile searching.

"Oh, bugger," she relented, gingerly kneeling beside me. "You're doing it wrong. You have to look at what you're doing. As it is, you've likely messed up evidence with your patting and such." She bent low and peered into the shadows of the shrub. "Oh . . .huh."

"What huh?" I ducked down and tried to see what she was seeing. "I just see plant and dirt . . . Is that my clue? He's a naked gardener, traveling the country side to check on the state of rose bushes in early winter? If so, he needs a new hobby . . ."

"No . . . I just thought I saw something. I suppose it's nothing." She sat back carefully, dusting garden bits from her sleeves. "I thought I saw some tinsel or something."

"Tinsel?" I shot her what I knew to be an incredulous look from my perch nearly flat on the ground. "There's no tinsel under here just dirt, rose bush and . . . oh!"

I almost missed it. It was dark amber, set in bronze or some other dark, rich-toned metal. It was half-buried in the soil near the base of the bush and took a bit of scrabbling to get out. Carefully, I sat up and brushed the soil from the crevices, ignoring Jackie's chirping voice demanding to see what I held. It looked, I noticed, as if it came from a necklace. "Wow," I finally breathed. "This is expensive!"

“That looks like amber and . . .whoa . . .emeralds! Or just very well cut glass,” she amended, reaching out a tentative finger to trace the slightly misshapen edge of the charm.

Originally round but now slightly bent and flattened from wear, the charm was a smooth metal disk, just an inch or so across, set with flower petals done in golden amber and emeralds such a dark green as to be almost black. I flipped it over, hoping it bore some inscription or clue as to ownership, but the only markings on the back were smudged, dark fingerprints from our own handling of it.

“Do you think it’s your intruder’s?” Jackie asked in a near-reverent whisper.

“I don’t know,” I replied after a moment’s hesitation. “But I know where I’ve seen this design before . . .” Jackie gave me a questioning look but I shook my head. “I’ll tell you tomorrow, when I’m absolutely positive that I’m right.”

Raising a brow, she nodded slowly. “Right. I’ll leave you to it then. Call me in the morning unless the dashing naked man returns and sweeps you off to parts unknown.”

I waved her off as she disappeared into the thick shadows of the sideyard, heading for her car out front. Tucking the charm into my pocket, I shoved myself to my feet and headed for the house, determined to dig out the book.



“Damn,” a soft voice muttered from the shadows of the hall.

My heart leapt to my throat and my vision narrowed to a pinpoint. It was well past midnight and I had finally started to doze off, but now I could barely breathe, much less move my fingers as I fumbled for the dial on the phone. “Hello? Emergency? There’s someone in my house . . .”

I couldn't hear anyone moving and for one frantic moment I wondered if it were a ghost, some Victorian shade who had forgotten their manners.

"No, I don't know who it is! That's why I called you!" I hissed in response to the operator's question.

A shuffling sound came from the direction from which the voice had emerged, an invisible hand pushing me against my headboard as the noise grew closer. I dropped the phone, part of my brain dimly registering the clunk of the plastic hitting the edge of the nightstand.

"I have a gun!" I cried shakily, my mouth dry as cotton wool and tasting of copper. "I'll shoot!"

"It's not nice to lie," a soft voice replied from a shape barely discernable as a person in the shadows, "especially to me." He sounded not-from-around here, British but not. His accent was soft and rolling, unlike any I had ever heard. "I won't harm you, Alfhild."

I couldn't feel my body; I wondered if I had fainted or if this was just a terrible dream. Having my home broken into had long been a fear of mine and I had spent countless hours as a child making plans for escaping axe murderers and other assorted maniacs who might harm me in the night in my own bed. Now, here I was, faced with the fear and all I could do was grip my sheets and pant as my heart raced a mile a minute. "Take whatever you want," I said, my voice still shaky. "Just don't hurt me!"

"You have something of mine," the man allowed, stepping closer to my bedroom door. "But I'm willing to let you keep it if you come with me."

A strange warm draft crept over my legs and for one horrible moment I thought I'd wet the bed in my fear. The sensation spread like light, drifting up my body and making me feel as if I were filled with a golden light. Flowers, I thought. My bedroom smelled of flowers. Not cloying like that fake perfume stuff but real flowers, roses and jasmine and honeysuckle. If moonlight had a smell, I thought, that would be it.

“Alfhild, where is my amulet?” He stepped into the light then, a thin slice of yellow glow from my nightlight bisecting his form. His eyes skimmed over me and I felt his gaze like fingers on my skin. The blush creeping into my cheeks angered me, reminded me that he was an intruder and I was alone in my house, the strange eyes of this man coveting my belongings and, I dreaded, me.

“I don’t have it. Get out! Just get out!” I ordered, sounding confident, an effect ruined, I’m sure, by the fact I was cowering in my bed.

He raised a brow, dark as a raven’s wing in the half-light of my room. He looked oddly at ease amongst my belongings, a mixture of antiques passed down from both sides of the family and thrift store finds.

Moving further into the room, he paused just inside the sphere of light from the tiny lamp on the shelf near my window. Part of me was relieved to see he had gotten dressed since last we met. A dark suit of some old fashioned design clung to his form, absorbing the light and making him seem as if he were made of the shadows themselves. What I had taken to be black was actually, when he took another step closer, revealed to be deep green, like the open ocean. He saw the amulet. I could tell by the way his eyes widened ever so slightly and his body seemed to jerk to attention.

“Alfhild, you’re a terrible liar.” He didn’t move toward it, though it seemed as if it were all he could do force his gaze away from it and back to me. “Bring it to me.”

“No,” I spat, something in me finally snapping. Fear melted away with the smell of night flowers. I threw my sheet and blanket aside and rolled from the bed, making sure to keep it between me and him. “Get out of my house! I’ve called for the police and they’re on their way!”

He opened his mouth to respond but a new voice cut him off. “Hurry, Cadfael!” A small man, barely my height and vaguely cat-like, appeared in the doorway behind my intruder. “We’ve not got long!”

I felt the scream before I heard it and it took a second or two to realize it was coming from me. The men winced. The smaller one covered his ears and shouted something I couldn't understand. The other, my intruder, frowned and started rummaging in his pockets for something.

Gun, I thought. *He's going to shoot me!* Lungs burning with a need for air, my scream died and became sobs. "Don't hurt me!"

"Oh, shut up!" A bright flash blinded me and I felt suddenly very cold, all the way into my bones.



CHAPTER TWO



S SHE DEAD?”

“No, you dolt, you just stunned her.” A shuffling sound niggled at the corners of my thoughts, dragging me from a near-blissful sleep. The pillow under my cheek was rough, and it smelled herbal. The sound stopped, and for a moment I began to slip back into a deep sleep, but a soft whistling started up.

“Could you please be quiet?” the lower of the two voices hissed. “I need to think!”

“Mmmm . . .” I shifted, or tried to, and found my body held firmly in place by what felt like a silken cocoon. My eyes flew open, and, seeing only blackness, I tried to scream again but no sound came out. Something was stuffed in my mouth, blocking any sound I might make. I began to thrash in earnest then and the silken fabric surrounding me seemed to grow tighter.

A bright glow cut through the blackness and the face of my intruder, his hair pulled back from his face and his dark eyes gleaming, smiled down at me. “If you stop wiggling about, you’ll find it easier to breathe.” The glow seemed to be emanating from his skin, I noticed despite my panic. His voice was soothing as he repeated his suggestion, this time motioning to his companion, the cat-like man. “Good girl,” he breathed as my body stilled.



I felt half-asleep, drugged, and I wondered if this was some rape plot or worse; just thinking about it made me want to vomit. I could feel the bile rising in my throat and I had a sudden, horrific flash of Jackie finding my body, my face livid and dried sputum on my cheeks and chin.

“You’re not going to choke,” he said in his soothing tone. “Just lay still for now.”

“She smells panicky.”

“Wouldn’t you be?” He bent and plucked a scrap of fabric from my mouth, tossing it aside with a grimace, and dabbing his fingers on his waistcoat before returning his gaze to me, his smile not quite as warm as before but not entirely false. “But Alfhild isn’t going to panic, is she? She’s going to stay very calm and very still.”

“I’m not,” I managed to rasp, my throat raw from screaming and having fabric stuffed in my mouth, “a dog. Don’t talk about me like I’m some wild animal you’re trying to tame.” Even as I spoke, I wondered if talking back was going to get me killed. His face darkened for just a moment, but his smile returned before it ever even really went away. “Untie me. Take what you want from the house but don’t hurt me. If you want ransom, you’re out of luck. I don’t have liquid assets.” Not entirely true, but he didn’t need to know they were tied up in Gulliver’s scheming.

“Stupid woman,” the cat-man muttered. “Money is silly. Not useful at all. Shiny, though!” he added, almost an afterthought. He dropped to a crouch near my ribs and peered at me with gold-green eyes, his sudden smile nearly feral in its intensity.

“Hush a moment,” the other man said, and I felt rather than saw him move closer. He knelt next to me then and reached for my chin, forcing me to turn my head and look him square in the eye.

It was like looking at everything beautiful in the world at once. His eyes were like pools in a deep forest, every color reflected and absorbed to make a kaleidoscope image, shifting and turning even as I watched. I couldn’t

even begin to describe him; though he was so close to me I could smell the honey-wine of his breath and feel the warmth of it on my skin.

“She’s addled.”

His words were like cold water over my head. I blinked rapidly, the last vestiges of my stupor dissolving like sugar in warm water. “Am not!”

Wincing at my petulance, I started to sit up but both men pushed me back down.

“For the love of god, let me go! Take your stupid amulet and leave!”

“No,” the cat man sighed patiently. “We can’t leave. We live here. You’re the one that would need to leave and you can’t.”

“Bugger all, she’s fainted again!”

“No, she hasn’t. She’s just laying there with her eyes closed.” I felt a claw poke at my ribs and I resisted the urge to swat at the probing foot. *Just wake up, I told myself. Wake up so you stop having this screwed up dream.*

“Du,” came the lower of the two voices, “stop breathing on her face. She can’t open her eyes for it.”

For some reason, the brotherly tone of his words made me want to smile. I heard the cat-man grumble and move away but I didn’t do as the other suggested I might. Instead, I squeezed my eyes more tightly shut. “No place like home,” I muttered, almost involuntarily.

“What’s she saying?”

“Du, be quiet!” The other man was close to me now. I could feel him. It was like a small sun moving across my skin, tracing the path of his fingers. He was feeling my arm gingerly, looking for something I didn’t understand. He didn’t check my pulse or even feel for broken bones; he just skimmed me, heat chasing along my cold skin. “Alfhild, open your eyes.”

I found myself obeying, wincing as the glow rising from his skin filled my vision. “Stop doing that!”

“Doing what?” He raised a brow, his lips curling into a semblance of a smile. “Being concerned?” His fingers left my skin and I felt suddenly bereft, and hated myself for it. “Breathing?”

“Glowing!” I snapped, the silk bonds which I still could not see tightening perceptibly as I tried to shift away from his piercing gaze, only to fetch up against the cat-man, Du I remembered him being called. “Stop glowing!” I repeated weakly, feeling color suffuse my cheeks as I realized how ridiculous that sounded.

“I’m afraid,” he said quietly, a hint of derision in his voice, “that’s impossible. I cannot help how I am made any more than you can.”

“I told you this was a terrible idea,” Du put in, apparently picking up the threads of an earlier argument. “She’s the last of the lot and she’s not got a clue about us or anything!” He bent low and peered at me, his pale golden eyes slit with black pupils. “Do you?”

“I know that I’ve called the police and they’ll be here any minute,” I snapped, prim anger replacing the last of my fear. *Survive*, I told myself, *and then deal with them later, when I have help*. “I don’t know what else you want from me but you know where the amulet is! Take it and go!”

The other man—Cadfael—rolled his eyes. “You honestly are the most obtuse creature I have ever met!”

With a sudden gesture, he whipped away my bonds, a flutter of movement dissolving them into thousands of tiny pieces, scattering away into the darkness like jewel-toned butterflies. It felt as if a weight had been lifted from me. I drew a deep breath, my lungs aching, as Du slid his hand behind my back and gently pushed me into a sitting position.

My room was gone, I noticed with a certain detached numbness. I was on what seemed to be a grass mat, but like no grass I had ever seen. It was a rainbow of colors, shimmering slightly in the glow rising from my kidnapper’s skin. What I had taken for a pillow was a hummock in the grass, dozens of tiny flowers sparkling like precious gems in the dimness.

“Don’t overreact,” my captor began, but I didn’t let him finish.

“Cadfael, right?” I asked, staring at him. The name seemed to fit; he seemed the type to have one of those stoic, old fashioned names which no one knew the meaning of anymore.

As if reading my mind, Du leaned close. “It means ‘battle prince’ in the tongue you lot call Welsh.” He smiled smugly at my startled expression, his broad wink and tiny snicker letting me know that he was entirely unconcerned about the present situation. To his companion, he added, “Don’t give me that look! She’d ask sooner or later. Figured I’d save time. You know she’s going to be difficult getting through the fens.”

Cadfael stood suddenly, his coat, reminiscent of the kind highwaymen once wore, swirled about his knees. “Remind me to give you that talk again about shutting up.”

He offered me a pained smile and held out a hand to help me up. “Please, I most humbly beg your pardon for this sudden shift in locale but I’m afraid it was necessary. The law enforcement in your . . . place . . . is rather oblivious when it comes to us.”

I found myself on my feet, my right hand in his as he bowed low over it, a ghost of a kiss skating across my knuckles. “Okay, I figure I have about ten minutes before whatever you slipped me wears off and I start freaking out again,” I found myself saying, an eerie calm in my soul. “So while I’m all nice and not panicking, I want you to tell me why I’m here. You have the amulet. Why do you need me? Gulliver knows he can’t get any ransom for me! There’s no one left to pay it! He can’t have the house . . . this scheme isn’t going to work!”

Cadfael rocked back on his heels and, for the first time, I noticed the space we were in. Really noticed it. Something about his motion drew my eye to the walls, which seemed to be made of stone, rough hewn and damp. A cave, I thought, my lips moving to form the word without sound. My eyes darted downward to take in the lush, varicolored grass we stood

on with its multitude of sparkling flowers. Somewhere, water ran. The air was tinged with the cool, night flower scent I had smelled in my room earlier.

“How—” I began, but this time Du interrupted me.

“This is just the first stop on the journey. We wanted to make sure you weren’t dead.” He plucked one of the flowers from the grass at his feet and, after a momentary examination, tucked it behind my ear. My cheeks flared red as I realized I had on a Garfield nightshirt and a pair of boxer shorts that had somehow found their way into my wardrobe. I felt positively naked next to these two in their fine fabrics and intricate details. “You’re alive. Let’s go!” He bounced on his toes and I halfway expected to see a tail swish around his hips.

Cadfael merely shook his head, his eyes fixed on me. I felt his gaze move over me, not in a sensual way but more like a man looking at a car he wished to buy. I wondered if he was going to kick my ankles to see if they were sound before he spoke again. “The integrity of our portal has been compromised. For centuries, your family has protected my kind from the mortal world and we have asked only one thing in return, but that pact, as of today, is destroyed.” His eyes were flashing gray and black like storm clouds as they found mine. “How old are you, Alfhild?”

“Excuse me?” I sputtered, my arms folding across my chest as I desperately wished for a robe or blanket or pretty much anything to cover my bare limbs. “That’s none of your business! And why do you keep calling me Alfhild? My name is Lorelei!” Even as the words came from my lips, I knew he would accuse me of lying.

“I know Lorelei,” he sneered. “She’s not amused by your name choice. Jealous creature, that one. Alfhild is the name your mother gave you, smart woman that she was. Your abandonment of it is just one more problem the host would like to address with you.” He nodded at Du, who made a cooing noise of pure happiness, and began to trot away from me,

deeper into the darkness that spread along the slight rise of the grassy expanse within the cave.

“We’ve only got an hour in their time,” Du called to us. “Then the sun will be up!”

Cadfael growled under his breath. “She won’t be missed by many. Come on then,” he said to me as if I were a simple child. “Give me your hand and I won’t have to use the lead.” He patted a pocket threateningly and I had visions of being put on a leash and dragged behind him. Hesitantly, I held out my hand to him again. This time, when he took it, there was no trace of gentle gallantry. His fingers nearly crushed mine as he dragged me to his side, setting off at a steady stride after Du, who was still within sight. Amazingly, the cavern we were in seemed to stretch forever, no end visible. “When this is all over, you won’t remember a thing. Maybe have a bit of a hangover from the dew but no clear remembrance of your night among us. But for now, stay with me. Never let me out of your sight. If you do, I will not be able to bring you back to your world at the end of the night!”

“I thought the sun was coming up!” I panted, hurrying to keep up with his long legged strides. “And what do you mean ‘my world’?” He was moving fast, his legs long enough to make me have to jog to keep up. Du stayed just out of reach but not so far as to disappear as he hummed and sang to himself, picking out a path along the grass that only he could see but Cadfael was apparently glad to follow.

“The sun is coming up in your world, not ours . . . it rarely comes up too high here,” he added, glancing aside as we passed an outcropping in the stone wall. “If you remember nothing else, Alfchild, remember that you are not to take any food, drink or gift while you are here. Not even from my own hand. Is that understood?” He paused, a ghost of a smile crossing his lips. “Unless you would like to stay—then freely partake of all nourishment offered.”

I tried to pull away from him but his grip was like iron. Gasping in pain I spat, “Don’t order me around! What the hell is all this? I’m not going to let you drag me around some freaking cave and pretend it’s all okay! If you don’t tell me what you’re going to do with me, I’ll . . . I’ll . . .”

“You’ll what?” he demanded, motioning for Du to wait for us. “Scream? Throw a fit? You’re in the Unseelie Court now, Alfild. Scream all you want and no one will care. The voice of one human, one of our oppressors, one of the ones who nearly killed us all, will go unnoticed here. I do not have the time or patience to educate you on what should be basic facts so you heed what I tell you, when I tell you. Your parents did you a disservice by not teaching you the ways of old, but that is not my problem.” He jerked on my arm once more, bringing me flush against his side. I could feel his heat through the layers of velvet and lawn that separated our skin. “Now do you understand what I have told you?”

“Yes,” I replied, feeling his grip slacken just a bit. “And I understand you’re insane!” I twisted away then, the burn of his fingers still hot on my skin as I ran for all I was worth.



CHAPTER THREE



HAD NEVER FELT SUCH EXCRUCIATING PAIN before in my entire life; tiny, searing bites of pain blossomed on my arms and legs, darted across my neck and seemed to grow hot and inflamed as I ran, or tried to run, rather. I could hear Cadfael and Du calling my name but they drew no closer. In fact, I thought with a flare of triumph, they seemed to be letting me go. The cave was huge, bigger than any I had ever suspected to be in Great Britain, and the grass under my feet was giving way to slimy mud. The pain sliding and nipping at my skin grew more pronounced and for one horrible second, I thought I saw eyes in the darkness, towering over me, but then they were gone. Without warning, my knees buckled and I went down, my hands skidding from under me as I tried to break my fall. The searing bites on my skin ceased for the time being and I managed to catch my breath, each inhalation a little less painful, a little less burning than before. Coughing as I tried to breathe properly, I rolled onto my back, groaning as my skin and bones ached. “I’m not,” I complained to no one in particular, “that out of shape!”

“Alfhild, do not move!” came Cadfael’s voice, sounding oddly stern. Well, I supposed it was stern seeing as how I didn’t have a great deal of experience with his moods just then. “Just . . . lay down.”



Frowning, I sat up. I didn't want to wallow in mud, especially not when my entire body felt as if it were going into spasm. "No!"

A crackling noise made me snap my head to the right. I couldn't see them, but I could feel that someone was looking at me, hunting me.

"Don't move, lass," Du called.

I couldn't see him either but I saw a flicker of movement out of the corner of my eye and thought it might be him. The spots on my arms and legs that had been blossoms of pain were bleeding freely, a sight which made me gasp. I thought it had been muscle fatigue or even some weird stress reaction, but tiny wounds scored my flesh, red blood welling and dripping at a disturbing rate.

"Stay very still."

I was prone to obey at that point. The crackling noise grew louder and was accompanied by a low mutter, like an old man talking to himself. Carefully, I shifted just enough to face the direction from which the crackling noise seemed to arise. I wished I hadn't. It looked like a wiry little man, no taller than me when I stood, was creeping towards me, his hands by his sides as he moved in a crouch. His teeth looked as if they were filed to points in his dusky face, dark rivulets running from the edge of his cap downward. It looked, I thought, like blood. His sodden cap hung limply on his head but he didn't seem to notice. One of his hands came up and I saw what he held: a long, pointed spike. With a cackling cry in some tongue I did not know, he leapt towards me.

I shrieked and flung myself flat on the ground, waiting for the impact which never came. A yowling snarl sounded instead and a heavy thud came from my left. Hissing and spitting, the sound of flesh tearing, movement in the dimness of the cavern, then it was over. Du staggered back into my line of sight and I cried out in shock. He was ragged, a deep gash across one cheek, but he was alive.

“Damned redcap,” he said in a slightly shaken voice. “No brains, just blood.” With what sounded like a resigned sigh, he dropped to his knees next to me, and then fell over on his side. “Ow.”

“I told you,” Cadfael sighed from somewhere nearby, “to stay down. When I told you to stay by me,” he continued tightly, not looking at me as he knelt next to his companion and began tending to the wound on his cheek with a handkerchief, “I said it for a reason, not just because you’re pleasing to look upon. There are dangers here for which you are not prepared, redcaps being one of them. You’re lucky that one was relatively dull-witted and slow. If Du had died, you would be forfeit.”

Du made a noise that sounded akin to a laugh, but I couldn’t be sure.

Before I could ask anything else, Cadfael added, “I will tell you once more to stay by me. If you choose to flee again, I will not even do you the courtesy of calling a warning. The redcap here was tame compared to the ones that cross the veil into your world. He is the least of your worries with the host.” He looked up then, pinning me in place with a hard glare. His eyes were like black pools then, no color showing. It was like staring into nothingness and it chilled me to the bone. He rose to his full height, never breaking our gaze, and I felt like he was peeling away layers to get at my innermost core. Then, as quickly as the feeling had swept over me, it was gone. “Now, Du needs a healer and I am not permitted to exercise my skill within these walls. We can either stop at Hoelle’s or we can continue into the host itself . . .”

“Hoelle’s,” Du hissed, struggling upwards. “It’s closer.”

Cadfael shot me one last, disgruntled look and nodded to his friend. “Hoelle’s then. Maybe we can get this one some decent clothing.” His gaze flickered slightly towards the amused end of the spectrum but he didn’t add anything further. Du offered me a weak smile and an elbow. Unwittingly, I found myself accepting and even smiling a bit in return.

“Redcaps,” I began, but Du jerked on my hand slightly, silencing me. He mouthed the word ‘later’ to me and then steadfastly refused to look at me in the eye. “Oooooookay . . .” My wounds were still seeping but not as profusely as before. “Does this Hoelle have Band-Aids?”

Cadfael muttered under his breath before replying, “No. She will heal you, though, if I ask her to. She owes me a favor and she will traffic with humans if she must.”

“Humans. Look, buddy, you and I are both the same thing here, humans.” I glanced at Du. “I’m kind of iffy about him though . . . When I wake up and this all makes sense . . .”

“You are awake, you daft woman!” Cadfael stopped in his tracks, forcing Du and I to stop short or run into him. “All I ask is that you shut your mouth until we reach the host, then all will be revealed. Is that too difficult to comprehend?” His accent thickened as he spoke, shifting from a Northern lilt to something else, something older and more archaic. I could barely understand him as he continued. “You’ve been sorely underserved by your ancestors, Alfild. You’re like a naked, mewling infant in our world now and I have but a handful of hours to educate you in all you need to know before facing Mabd.”

My brain decided to choose that moment to take a tiny vacation. *Supposing this is real, I thought, this means I am somehow involved in the goings on of a nonhuman. Redcaps are mythological beings, I added primly to myself. They don’t exist. Mabd, queen of the faerie folk, is a legend. She doesn’t exist either.* I let myself descend into a pleasant fuzz of disorientation and inward promises of a nice, stiff drink and a real vacation as Du half-dragged me along some secret path through the cavern.

I wasn’t sure how long we’d been walking before I was jostled to an abrupt halt, Du’s breath coming hard and fast yet silent beside me. Cadfael was several feet in front of us, his jacket slung over one shoulder and his

arms extended upwards. It took a moment for me to realize he was feeling something, his fingers probing seemingly thin air.

“Ah,” Cadfael sighed after a moment, bending and running his fingers down thin air, tracing a large rectangle. “If I do this wrong, you’re going to be stuck here with your friend the redcap.”

I glanced at Du, who was wearing an intent look on his feline features. “Right, stuck in a cave with rainbow grass and faerie tale monsters. Got it. You know, this would’ve been easier if you’d just thrown me in the trunk of a car. I gotta tell you, whatever you doped me with . . .” Words literally failed me at that moment.

A rectangle of light burst into existence before us, Cadfael’s fingers brushing away darkness like so many cobwebs. Sound exploded from the light: people chattering, music playing, something breaking. It was as if a party were in full swing just beyond the glare of the golden light. “Whoa.”

“Cadfael,” Du said softly, “has the host moved?”

“No,” he replied just as quietly. “Seems Hoelle has visitors.”

Both men turned to look at me with similar expressions of concern and annoyance. “What?” I sighed, exasperated. “I didn’t invite ‘em!”

“You,” Cadfael said primly, “are going to be more of a problem than I’d bargained on. You were not meant to be seen so early on.” He glanced at Du. “Maybe use a charm on her? She’s close enough to being one of us anyway . . .”

Du shook his head. “If you use it now, you’ll surely miss it later. The only thing to do is go in feet first, Cadfael. You know it and I know it. Hoelle’s guests be hanged.” He sighed shakily. “Damn but that spike caught me well.”

Cadfael inhaled and held as breath as he thought, assessing me with cool eyes. Finally, he exhaled in a rush. “Take off your clothing, Alfild.”



CHAPTER FOUR



“EXCUSE ME?” I GRASPED MY NIGHT-shirt tightly, pinning it to my body with my arms.

“Alfhild,” Du groaned. “Please just work with us here. We’ve seen naked women before and you’ve got nothing to surprise us, not even that weird birthmark on your bum.”

“How do you—”

“Nudity is far more excusable here than humanity,” he cut me off with a faint smirk. “Naked. Now.”

I jerked back slightly, tilting my head to give them both the benefit of my glare. “Fine . . . I’ll take off my shirt on one condition.”

“What?” Cadfael and Du sighed in unison. Cadfael caught on first, following the direction of my gaze. “Oh, hammers and tongs.”



“Prude,” Du whispered in my ear as I fastened the velvety coat around me.

It was a very tight fit, my body not of the same athletic build as Cadfael’s, but so long as I didn’t move too quickly or breathe too deeply, I thought, I’d be fine.

“Maybe,” I allowed, fighting the urge to smile, “but I’m a warm one.”



The jacket hit me just below my bottom, barely covering my hated jiggles. It fastened snugly across the chest and stomach but mercifully, the buttons held.

“Now we can go see your friend and get Band Aids.”

Cadfael rolled his eyes at me and stepped forward, into the rectangle of light.

Du chose that moment to whisper in my ear, his breath tickling my neck as his words hissed across my skin. “Alfhild, dear, sometimes it’s best to just let go and roll with it.”

“Huh?”

“Come along,” Cadfael called softly, the sounds of the ruckus in the light nearly swallowing his words. “We’re already attracting too much attention with her as it is!”

Du pushed me forward as Cadfael walked confidently into the melee, his back straight and stride nearly bouncy as he plunged headfirst into it all.

“Listen,” Du added as an afterthought, his graceful gait marred by whatever the redcap had done to him, “just keep your head down and do as Cadfael says. They won’t hurt you if they think you’re his.”

“If they who what now?”

Du did not respond, just tugged me inexorably towards the heart of the crowd. Forms moved around me and spoke, sang, laughed, shouted, but I could not see them. The light blinded me, and even with my eyes closed it hurt my head to even be in the room. At least I assumed it was a room. It felt close, warm, like someone had a fire going and there were too many people in the space. Someone called my name softly and I jerked, trying to look for the source but only seeing light.

“Du?” I called shakily, no longer feeling his hand on me. More tentatively, I called “Cadfael?”

The light blinked out and silence fell. It lasted the space of a breath, then someone was touching my face.

“Open your eyes, dearest,” a soft female voice. The fingers were firm and cool, skimming across my cheeks and then my eyelids. “I need to see you to heal you.”

Unwillingly, I did as I was told and found myself staring into eyes so blue they were like deep Arctic ice. I gasped to see them and their stunning sunburst clarity, feeling the cool touch of fingers still moving across my lips. It took me a moment to realize that the woman was blind, feeling her way across my features to discover my appearance. “The redcap in the outer rim found her,” I heard Cadfael murmur. “See to Du first. He’s more gravely injured.”

The woman’s fingers left my face and I was able to see the rest of the space now. Whatever party had been in full swing as we crossed into the light was gone. We were in a rough kitchen, copper pots and pans gleaming brightly from overhead beams as some unseen light source picked out the dust motes dancing around bundles of herbs and assorted plants.

“Cadfael,” I paused, waiting for some sort of response, “is this Hoelle?”

“It is,” he replied curtly.

Gingerly, I shifted in my seat, a rough hewn wooden chair in the middle of the room, butted against a block style table. Hoelle was just to my right, bent over Du where he lay on a pallet.

“Will he recover fully?” Cadfael demanded of the healer woman. “Is he—is he done for?”

If I had known Cadfael better, I would have said he was crying, or close to. As it was, I could only assume. “Du,” I called softly to him, “Du, I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

“Be quiet,” Cadfael urged before Du or Hoelle could respond to me.

“That’s no way to talk to her,” Hoelle noted dryly, pressing those long, cool fingers against a red mark in Du’s skin, running the length of his thigh. “Not if you want her to stay around.” She turned her eyes to me, blindly staring, a white, toothy smile spreading on her features. “You want to stay around, don’t you? It’s been a long while since one of your sort has come down here.”

“She’s asleep,” Cadfael replied before I could. “This is all a bad dream she’s going to wake up from in a bit and write it off to that last bit of wine before bedtime.” He slid a sideways glance my way and for a moment, I felt a frisson of some unknown feeling radiate from my belly to my spine, sending webs of electricity through my soft core. “Isn’t that right, Alfhild?” He patted the cat-man on the shoulder and brushed against Hoelle as he returned to his spot by the hearth.

The sores on my legs were long since clotted but they ached, as did the marks on my arms and neck, irritated by the velvet fabric of the borrowed coat. I felt the heaviness of the amulet in the breast pocket but I didn’t dare reach for it under Cadfael’s watchful eye.

“Alfhild-Lorelei,” he began, and then paused, his eyes darting from item to item along the wall of Hoelle’s space. “You must be told something soon and there is no good way to do it. First, I believe that all news is best received on a full stomach. I’m sure Hoelle can spare us some bread and a bit of salt for a sandwich?”

I didn’t understand the nature of the look that passed between Du and Hoelle, then the two of them and Cadfael. I just felt the knot tighten in my belly, my senses reeling as I tried to process my entire evening. Hell, I corrected, my entire day. “I’m not hungry,” I protested, but Hoelle was already on her feet, her eyes never leaving Cadfael’s as she moved to one small, purple painted cabinet that I had not noticed before.

Quickly, she produced the loaf of homemade bread and the tiny container of salt Cadfael had suggested and deposited both in his waiting

hands before trundling back to Du. She was willowy, that much I could tell despite her voluminous robes and cloaks, and she moved like her joints hurt, but she did not look old.

She looked, I thought, barely older than I, save for her long, snow-white hair. It fell past her hips in a wavy cascade, thick and shining, not yellowed with age at all. Her eyes in their blue blindness further added to her icy appearance. I was not sure but I thought her pale skin sparkled like frost as she moved through the pool of light that came from a small globe on the ceiling.

Whatever party had been here had cleared out quickly and must not have been as large as I thought. I didn't realize I spoke that part aloud until Hoelle snorted.

"No one's left, lass. You're just in between. You've chosen to close them out now, is all." She reached over Du and pulled a packet of something dark and earthy-smelling from a shelf along the wall, which itself appeared to be made from hard-packed dirt. "Here, lad, I'll make your tisane and you'll be fine in a jot."

I looked to Cadfael for some clarification but found him muttering to himself, making small gestures as if he were trying to keep a conversation hidden or subtle. "Um, Cadfael?" I hazarded, keeping my voice as neutral as possible. The wooden chair was cold against the bare backs of my legs and my rear and I was hoping to beggar a blanket while we sat in the chill home of this Hoelle person, but I was starting to worry about my captor's mental health, of all things. "Cadfael?"

"Just a moment, dear, I'm talking to someone," he said aside to me, returning to his muttered, fluttering conversation.

Du snorted, his eyes closed. With a rumbling sigh that resembled a purr, he informed me, "You're not rolling with it."

"I'm half—no, three-quarters—naked sitting in some strange woman's home, kidnapped from my nice, warm, bed. I've been chased by a psycho

with an iron spike, attacked by killer mosquitoes if these bites mean anything; you're drinking a cup of dirt and he," I jabbed a finger in Cadfael's direction, "is talking to himself! What's there to roll with? The insanity defense?" My voice had been steadily rising the entire time I was ranting and the temperature in the room had been dropping noticeably. My breath was visible as a thin, foggy puff with each word now. "Isn't there a fire in here? Why is it so cold?"

Hoelle stood straight as a ramrod, her long fingers gripping her dun and gray skirts tightly. "It is cold because you're angering them," she said sharply, her eyes locking onto mine. "You cannot see because you are the blind one, Alfhild, or Lorelei. You are the one who has plucked your eyes from their sockets, hidden things away in dark wrappings."

Without warning, her hands shot out and grabbed the sides of my face. Cadfael had gone very still and Du was sitting up, the mug of dirt-colored liquid gripped tightly in his hands.

"See," she ordered me, her thumbs pressing against my now-closed eyes. "See!"

"Hoelle," Cadfael's warning tone insinuated itself into the moment. "We need her whole."

"And whole she is," the woman said with an obvious smile in her voice. "Now, at any rate. Open your eyes, girl. See."

The feeling of her thumbs still fresh on my skin, I hesitantly opened first one eye, then the other. It looked as if the room had filled with mist and we were in the middle of a cloud. The mist was moving, throbbing almost, and Hoelle was smiling. Cadfael, for his part, looked worried, the frown on his face marring the clean line of his features and making me, irrationally, want to make him smile.

Du let out a low whistle and muttered something that I couldn't understand. The mist was thickening, taking on shapes, and I gasped as something or someone touched my hair.

“What the hell is this?” I demanded, standing so quickly that I overset my chair. I didn’t care what part of me was showing then, things had taken a decided turn for the weirder. The mist was now solid white, blurring my view of the others in the room. “What did you do to me?”

“She’s a talker, ain’t she?” someone asked near my ear, and then sound swelled around me. The party, it sounded like, was back in full force. The mist solidified, and then divided. Shapes became fully-defined creatures, and I saw everything.

The room was filled with things that looked like people, drinking and talking, having animated conversations, some crying and laughing, one yelling. The noise was deafening; I clapped my hands over my ears and sank down to my knees, tears springing unbidden to my eyes.

Cadfael was on his knees beside me before I could do more than keena long, pitiful sound of frustration and fear. “It’s real, isn’t it?” I sobbed, my body shaking. “This . . . this freak show is real!”

He frowned at my terminology but he didn’t scold me. “Yes, Alfhild. This is all real. And we owe you an explanation. Something I was hoping to do sooner but things did not begin as I’d hoped. Now we can just hope they end as they should . . .”



CHAPTER FIVE



KAY, DEEP BREATH,” I TOLD myself aloud. “This isn’t that bad . . .” I stood up and wrapped the blanket Hoelle had so kindly provided more tightly about my person. I couldn’t sit still. Not right then. Thankfully, at some point in my nervous breakdown the partygoers had faded away, giving me room to pace.

“It’s been awhile since I’ve been above,” Hoelle whispered too loudly to Du, “but do humans always react like that?”

“Only,” I said a bit too sharply, “when their perceptions of reality are severely fucked with!” I took another deep breath and let it out slowly. “So you’re trying to tell me that you two are faeries –”

“Sidhe,” the two males corrected automatically. Du added, “Faerie just sounds so . . . dainty.”

“Fine, Sidhe. You’re Sidhe.” I stopped near the hearth, pressing my forehead against the rough hewn mantle bearing oddly shaped bottles and containers, all filled with dark things and smelling of earth and herbs. “And you’ve been using some portal under my rose bush for roughly six hundred years.”

Cadfael cleared his throat gently. “Well . . . more or less.”

“More or less? Which is more and which is less?” I looked up at him wearily, tucking the blanket more tightly around me.



“I’m very tired. These bites hurt like hell. I want my bed back. Please.”

I was bone-weary, would have seriously considered violence if I weren’t so tired, and on the verge of a nervous collapse. It had always bothered me in movies when the hero or heroine would fall into some unseen world and be just dandy about it. Nervous breakdowns seemed to be the way to go in that instance.

“It’s more like a thousand plus and—” he took a deep breath and glanced sideways at Du and Hoelle, “—the rest has to wait. There are forces at work here that I can’t tamper with, and to tell you more now . . .”

“To tell me more now,” I snarled, feeling my lips curl over the words as I lurched towards him, grabbing the front of his shirt and shaking him as hard as I could, “would mean you don’t sing soprano in approximately two minutes.”

Hoelle reached for me and pressed a piece of bread into my hand. “Dear, you need sustenance. You haven’t eaten in so long and this journey will be hard on you.” She smiled at me, reminding me at once of my grandmother, and I raised the bread to my lips.

“Alfhild,” Du began, earning a sharp hiss for silence from Cadfael.

The bread smelled wonderful and for one moment, it made me feel at home, like I was cared for and nurtured and everything terrific bread symbolized in the world but a tiny worm of fear was niggling in my belly. Something was amiss. They were all three staring at me with bated breath, making me feel like some prized insect at the end of a pin.

“I thought,” I said after the briefest pause, “I shouldn’t eat anything down here.”

Hoelle frowned deeply, her face becoming momentarily ugly. “Who told you that? Was it some silly tale in the nursery?” She stalked towards me, her blind eyes seeming to pin me to the spot. Jabbing her finger at my chest, she continued in a harsh, heavily accented tone that lacked lilt, but rolled in gutturals. “Nursery stories are lies, mostly. They add to them,

change them, make them pretty and shiny or horrible and slimy. All for the entertaining of the bairn.”

“I’ve told you all I can, Alfchild,” Cadfael cut in, sounding almost sad. “I just need you to do something that seems impossible and trust me a bit. At least enough to know I won’t let harm come to you.” He smiled faintly and nodded at the bread. “Go on, eat something.”

“No,” I replied, setting the slice down on the table. “I’m not hungry.” It was a blatant lie, something revealed by the rumbling of my stomach. “I want to understand. Why is that damned amulet so important? Why not just take it and leave me alone? You’re freakin’ faeries! Can’t you be sneakier than tripping over yourselves in my hall? Or showing up naked in my garden?”

I flung myself down on the cot which Du had recently vacated and I let out a long sigh. “I just need some sleep. It’ll be better when I wake up.” Almost immediately, I felt my eyes slide closed. My body ached with exhaustion and seemed to melt into the straw mattress beneath me. There was silence and I think I drifted off.



I know I halfway awakened when Hoelle began tending to the tiny bites on my arms and legs, dabbing them with a mint-scented salve. I could not hear what they were saying but I could discern their tones. Du sounded tired, more bored than anything. Hoelle seemed annoyed, angry even. Cadfael was . . . neutral. He wasn’t giving anything away, I thought. He’d said he had too much to lose, that things were delicate down here Why not, I thought, my mind wandering toward a deeper rest again. Why not accept that I’m not in my own world anymore? Stranger things have happened, I mused. Maybe it’s just a very vivid dream and when I wake up, I’ll laugh it off and tell Jackie to meet me for bloody marys at ten.

Cadfael's voice was low, almost a purr like Du's, and very close to my face. I held still, unsure of how long I had been asleep, part of me worried that I had been drooling all over his jacket as I dozed. He was speaking, but it was no language I knew. It was almost singing, the language, and it was soothing and sensual all at once. It was as if I were being caressed by the words, and I wished I knew what he was saying.

"She's waking," Hoelle murmured in English. Her cool fingers moved across my eyelids, barely touching me as she added, "I think I scared her earlier. The wraiths are much to take. I'm just happy old Herne was not visiting. He's a sight even for the Sidhe."

"Mabd won't be pleased," Cadfael said, the floorboards creaking as if he were rocking on his heels while he stood next to me. "She wanted this done cleanly. Tinker's bells, she wanted this done when Alfhild was a bairn herself."

Du made a noise that sounded like he was choking on something. I'm sure I frowned then, marring any semblance of deep sleep. "A bairn? It's against our laws to take 'em before they're of childbearing age!"

"That would have put her at thirteen human winters," Cadfael pointed out. "A bairn to you and I." He pressed his fingers against my neck then, feeling my pulse. "So slow . . . I'll never get used to that."

Hoelle sighed. She sounded as if she were far across the room when she spoke, her voice muffled by something. "She needs to know soon. Now. Mabd can be angry if she likes but it remains that you're the Blood. You're the one that needs Alfhild most, no matter what the Herself says." A sloshing sound like water being poured into a large bowl filled the room for a moment then Hoelle spoke again. "Alfhild, child, open your eyes and come to me."

I found myself sitting up, brushing past Cadfael without even pausing, and moving towards Hoelle before I had a chance to question her. She was sitting at the rough hewn table with a large copper basin before her, the

sides carved with dark symbols, worn with age and use. “Look into the waters and tell me what you see,” Hoelle said gently, shoving the basin towards me. “Just look down and relax.”

I started to take a step back but Du pushed me forward. With a resigned sigh, I bent to look into the basin and was a bit surprised to see that it was all black inside, like onyx or obsidian, something that captured the light but did not shine overtly. “What is this?”

“It’s a bowl,” Du explained. “Holding water. Look into it and see what looks back. Humor the old man,” he added, winking at Cadfael. “He’s had a rough month.”

I bit my tongue on a rude reply and bent low over the bowl. “I see my eyes,” I sighed. “And the lamp.”

As I looked at the poor reflection, it began shifting. I thought the water was moving at first, stirred by some minute movement of the bowl, but I soon realized it was the image itself that was changing. My face disappeared, dissolving into the dark waters. A tiny flicker of green swam to the surface then seemed to explode across the basin.

I was falling, but my feet never left the floor. Around me, voices called my name and I recognized none of them. The green began to form into shapes and quickly became a large hall carved from stone streaked with cupric green and adorned with bushels of growing things. Tiny pinpoints of light swarmed down from the ceiling, coursing over the walls before swooping upwards again in some wonderful choreography.

Creatures I had read about as a child populated long rows of tables set for a feast, sweets and savories vying for space on the wooden boards. It looked like Christmas, I thought, with the dark greens and reds. Tiny beings that looked like children but played like adults darted across the foreground before sliding into seats next to each other at the far table.

The room fell silent and all eyes turned to the head table. A thick tapestry opened behind the center chair and a veiled woman stepped out.

She was zaftig and graceful, her face veiled with diaphanous red material that seemed shot through with stars. A fine silver circlet bound her hair from her face and her gown concealed more than not, but seemed to me to be the finest, most sensual dress I had ever seen. Silently, she took her seat at the place of honor and took her crystal goblet up in her hand. Lifting her veil just enough to drink, she took a sip of the amber liquid in the cup.

A cheer broke loose from the crowd, rumbling like thunder and bursting into a cascade of hooting and joyous noise. The veiled woman set the goblet down and turned to the person in the chair next to her. *Cadfael*, I realized in an instant. Wearing pale green and brown, he looked like some forest spirit as he took her hand and pressed a kiss to her knuckles. He stood and reached out, pulling the veil back.

“Enough,” Cadfael barked, shoving the bowl of water away, and leaving me blinking and stunned.

Letting out a breath I didn’t know I’d had been holding, I turned watering eyes up to Hoelle. “What. The. Hell. Was. That?”

“Your reason for being here,” she replied simply, taking up the copper basin and turning away from me. “That’s all you need to know.”

Du cleared his throat, interrupting whatever it was Cadfael had been about to say. “We’ve got barely two hours to find Mabd and let her know,” he said quietly. “I’m well enough for the journey. The main route is safest . . .”

Cadfael nodded and grabbed my elbow. “We’ll dress her on the way. Destroy her human clothes, Hoelle. We don’t need any workings done this evening.”

“Wait! I’m not going out like this!” I protested, tugging at the hem of the velvet coat I still wore. “It’s cold out there!”

“Would you feel better if I took off my pants?” Du asked kindly, a wicked gleam in his eye. “I’d be happy to do it.”

“Enough,” Cadfael repeated, his eyes narrowed. “One death is enough for tonight.”

I held the blanket even more tightly around myself. “No.”

Cadfael looked, for one moment, as if he would like to just haul off and shake me. Instead, he smiled as sweetly as I’d ever seen anyone do it, and offered me his elbow. “Fine. We’ll do it your way. Du . . .”

“Got it,” the catlike man replied. “Claws are sharp, nose is twitchin’.” He gave Hoelle a resounding smack on the cheek, the frost-colored woman smiling at the kiss. “See you at the ball?”

“Wait,” I had a horrible vision dancing before my eyes now, nothing to do with the one in the bowl. “I’m not going to a ball in this, am I?”

“Of course not,” Cadfael replied coolly, leading me to the door of the tiny house. “You’re going naked.”



CHAPTER SIX



THOUGHT,” I GROWLED THROUGH GRITTED teeth, “you were kidding.”

“More fool you then, hmmm?”

The blanket hung about me in tatters, torn by a thick stand of bramble outside of Hoelle’s home, and then by several miles of rough, narrow road seemingly cut through razor-sharp rock.

Du was somewhere ahead in the thick blackness that passed for night in this place while Cadfael kept pace behind me, so close that his breath tickled the back of my neck.

“I need to find something warmer,” I said patiently, trying to maintain some semblance of calm in the face of the bizarre. “I’m not one of your sort. I don’t have some weird magical ability to stay warm even when it’s cold as a well digger’s ass outside!” I tugged the ruined blanket higher up on my shoulders, recognizing the futility of the gesture but stubborn enough to maintain some semblance of dignity.

“Cadfael.” Du was suddenly close again, his yellow eyes wide, his pointed ears twitching slightly. “We have a bit of an issue. The pass is blocked. We have to go up and over. Through the woods.” Raking long fingers through his hair, he laughed shakily. “For a second there, I thought this was going to be easy.”



Cadfael peered into the darkness past Du and frowned. “We don’t have to climb. We’ll just . . . go through.” He shrugged, glancing sideways at me. “Mabd will just have to deal with it.”

“I think Mabd is the one who’s trying to stop us,” Du replied softly. He motioned for Cadfael to come closer and I found myself standing, isolated, in a shredded blanket as the two of them huddled close together, their voices low and masculine, rumbling in their shared foreign tongue.

As they talked, Cadfael gesturing and Du pacing, I turned to face Hoelle’s hut, barely visible in the darkness of the starless night. Were we still in the cavern, I wondered. Were we just in my own head? To be fair, Grandma had told me a lot of stories when she was lucid, things about faeries and trolls, things about fantasy creatures that moved among humans for centuries before people began ignoring them, killing them off with factories and housing developments. Maybe it was true. Maybe it wasn’t such a strange thing. Our ancestors had believed in the Sidhe and ghosts and gods without question but now we wrote them off because we were enlightened, we were evolved past that. Well, I groused inwardly, logic and science had once also claimed the solar system was geocentric and the world was flat, and see how that had worked out for us?

I’d been so wrapped in my own thoughts that Cadfael’s hand on my shoulder made me yelp in surprise. “Sorry!” I gasped as he frowned down at me. “I thought you were talking to Du.”

“We’re done,” he replied, stating the obvious. “There’s been a bit of an incident on the path ahead; part of the rock wall has collapsed and made it impossible to cross easily. Du has reason to think that it was intentional, to slow us down. My mother . . .” he paused, and then smiled tightly. “It’s a small matter. We can either climb or use another method which I don’t think you’ll enjoy.”

His brows had drawn together in concern as he looked at me. My stomach fluttered and I scolded myself for finding him attractive, for

noticing that his eyes were yet another color, another pattern that could not be human. The fact that his hand was still resting warmly on my shoulder did not help, either. He smelled like night time still, less like flowers and more like honey and cool water and something herbal and spiced. Mead sprang into my mind. Mead and incense.

“Alfhild?”

I didn’t even bother to correct him about my name. “Take the fast way,” I stuttered, stepping away from his touch. “Take the fast way and get it over with. I don’t care what it is. I’ve had a hell of a night so far and I can’t think of anything that would make it weirder or worse.”

“Careful what you say out loud,” Du called, scrambling up the side of the rock wall to my right. “Things have a way of coming true here. Damned pixies,” he added, swatting at something pale flitting in the darkness.

“As milady wishes,” Cadfael said without a trace of irony. His hands closed around my elbows and I heard a rustling noise, and fabric tearing. It felt as if the ground was falling away from beneath me, my stomach flipping as my body registered a lack of stability.

I uttered a startled “eep” but did not open my eyes as Cadfael pulled me closer. My cheek rested against his chest, his rapid heart beat under my ear as his fingers tightened on my back.

“It is nothing to fear,” I heard him murmur, his voice thrumming through his chest. “It happens every day.”

“Not to me,” I replied weakly, afraid to make too much noise or movement. I could feel air rushing past me and I knew I was no longer on the ground. I felt muscles moving in his shoulders, through his chest. My hands were trapped between us, pressed against his stomach, and I had to suppress a tiny laugh as I felt it rumble in hunger. “If I opened my eyes,” I asked after a moment, “would I scream?”

“Most likely,” he admitted. “But it will only be a few moments more and you will be fine, no worries to speak of for the next short while.”

Even as he spoke, I could tell we were descending. My body shivered with the cold of the air, the tattered blanket flapping around my legs as my feet touched the ground again. "I think," I gritted out, "that I would like some clothes, please."

I opened my eyes slowly, not sure what I would see, and nearly choked on my own surprise when I looked on Cadfael. He stood before me, arms folded over his chest as his eyes skimmed my body, seemingly looking for injuries judging by the concerned look on his face.

His face, I thought, was frightening. Not because it was suddenly hideous but because it was alive with a power I had never seen before, his glow a dull shine in this brighter place. Shadows fell across his body and I found my eyes drawn upwards.

Wings. There were wings. I hitched a surprised, nearly hysterical breath as I saw them. They were delicate, not like feathered angel wings. They looked like autumn, all earthy colors and rimmed in black, a faint sparkle seeming to move through them like blood flowing. "Oh," I finally breathed. "Oh."

Cadfael's gaze finally found my face and he smiled a bit ruefully. "Du will be along in a moment. Cait Sidhe are quick but I am quicker." The wings were disappearing, folding down as I watched until they seemed to simply vanish.

"That," I replied weakly, "isn't something most men like to admit to, being quick." I was shaking slightly and I knew he could tell, but I was striving for normalcy and it was almost working.

He rolled his eyes, shaking his head at me before he glanced back the way we came to check for Du.

I could tell the cavern was gone now; there was a dark sky above, shot through with silver stars. We were in some sort of clearing, I thought. I smelled wet grass and tree bark. Tiny lights twinkled around us like fireflies and I smiled involuntarily.

“I should tell you now,” he was saying without looking at me, “that the chances of you leaving this place are slim. You refused the bread and salt at Hoelle’s, which was wise, despite my offering it to you as I did, but you cannot go forever without food and water down here. There are limited resources that would be safe for you to have but in the end . . .”

“In the end, I will be at home in my own bed before the sun is up,” I replied, tightening my fingers in the ruined bedding. “Jackie will look for me. The police were on their way when you took me from the house . . .”

“Time passes differently in this world,” he sighed, giving me a look both pained and exasperated. “A day to us can be years to you. Or it could be the reverse is true. No one has ever quite figured it out.” His gaze swept over me again, this time in a more predatory fashion. I felt the blush explode across my skin and suffuse me with pink-red embarrassment, but he did not look away. “You will hate me before long. When you find out the truth, you will hate us all.”

“I can’t hate you if you don’t exist,” I shot back, feeling suddenly cruel. “Whatever this is, it isn’t real.”

A horrifying scream tore through the darkness, cutting off whatever he had been about to say. It sounded like a cross between a wildcat and a person, pure pain and anger combined into one keening, blood-curdling noise. “Du!” Cadfael shouted. “Du!” He was moving then, so fast I couldn’t have kept up with him even if I’d wanted to. The scream came again and I felt it all the way to my bones.

“Cadfael!” I hated how my voice sounded, needy and scared. It was shaking, I was shaking. He was gone from my sight.

Silence had fallen in the clearing and the tiny lights I had seen earlier were no longer blinking. They had gathered in the tree tops, a steady green-white glow punctuated with pinks and reds and blues. I could not hear a struggle, even distantly. I felt only cold, heard only the ragged harshness of my own breath. A tickling sensation on my foot made me look

down and I nearly fell to my knees when I saw what was looking back at me. A tiny woman, wings like a minute butterfly, glowed there, pink like a rosebud. “Oh, god”

“Come to the trees,” she said, her voice barely a whisper. “He’ll find you there.”

Tiny hands tugged and pulled, a few pushed, and I was nearly blinded by the sudden sweep of light that seemed to come down from the sky itself and up from the grass. I felt fingers and toes, hands and arms, tiny bursts of breath all against my skin as I was led towards the thick stand of trees yards away.

I could feel the cool, damp crunch of the grass underfoot and smell the herbaceous tang of it crushed beneath my step, but it didn’t seem real to me. Not even when I felt the rough bark of the thick-trunked tree under my hands, scraping my knees as the tiny, glowing forms led me upwards. The blanket I had been so adamant about keeping fell away, drifting towards the ground in freakishly slow motion. A sound like soft bells and buzzing insects assailed my ears, tugging at my awareness until it became like nothing to me, just part of the world. The lights dispersed, settling on leaves and bits of branches as I found myself in the crotch of the tree, securely held between two thick branches twice as big around as I.

I didn’t care that I was naked then; I felt drugged, pleasantly tipsy almost. In wonder, I saw that my skin bore a fine sheen of opalescent dust, as if I were covered in minute rainbows. I could hear no sound but the tiny bell-like noises and the soft buzzing like so many locusts on a warm summer afternoon. The tree held me and I didn’t worry or fear anything.

Somewhere, a small voice in the back of my mind said, *Cadfael and Du need help. But you don’t know how to help them*, a more rational side replied.

The lights around me seemed to be quivering, almost like they were waiting for something. One broke away from the cluster on the nearest leaf

and hovered in front of my face, a delicate nose and wide blue eyes barely visible in the hazy glow around the small body. He—or she—raised a tiny leaf to my lips, the shiny green surface bearing a scattering of dewdrops. “Drink,” someone said and the leaf was pressed to my chin, just below the curve of my lower lip. I could feel the cold touch of it, the dampness of the dew and the just-picked promise of fecundity the leaf bore. The blue eyes bored into mine and a worm of fear niggled in my stomach, a warning I could not hear. The leaf shifted and a drop of dew spilled onto my skin, disappearing before it could drip. “Drink,” another voice trilled, sounding like birdsong.

“No,” I managed, the words thick in my throat. I was sleepy, bone weary in a way that did not feel natural. “Not thirsty . . .” In fact, I was. It felt like fire was coursing in my veins and parching me dry.

“Sip,” a softer voice commanded, breath brushing against the shell of my ear. Delicate hands caressed my hair, pushing it away from my eyes. The lights had dimmed but still they moved, dancing in the air around me. I could feel the bark beneath me as I tried to move away from one particularly persistent glowing being, my bare skin abrading as I shifted.

“No,” I protested, so faint I could barely hear myself.

“Stop it!”

The roar of anger from below jolted me to wakefulness. My groggy eyes blinked rapidly and everything seemed to snap into focus.

The glowing beings resolved into minute, perfectly formed humanoid shapes, naked and winged. The silver of their voices clanged like broken glass now, a discordant jangling that made me cringe, my hands moving to cover my ears as several of the creatures burst into angry sounds as Cadfael shouted up at them, his words a tangle of emotion and sound that formed a language lost to humans.

I dared not move. The reality of my precarious position hit me like a wave and I was frozen in fear. A soft whimper of sound from below made

the glowing ones burst into a united noise, all exclaiming the same word or idea.

“Cadfael,” I chanced. “Is Du . . . is he”

“Can’t get rid of me,” a hissing voice replied, “that easily . . .”

“Alfhild, come down. Du is gravely injured and we have barely an hour to reach Mabd.” Cadfael’s voice was eerily calm, which only seemed to agitate the creatures surrounding me all the more.

“You lie to her, Battle Prince. You lie to her like you lied to Macha so many years ago. You do not do her honor, though she is written in our books.” The voice seemed to come from the rose-colored orb near my feet, bobbing in what could only be described as anger.

“Be. Quiet.” Cadfael looked up at me, his eyes narrowed as he apparently gauged how best to climb up after me. “Alfhild, come down now or I will be forced to leave you here.” He glanced aside at Du, huddled into a dark shape on the ground that I could barely make out. “They didn’t feed you did they?” he asked, his voice taking on a slightly worried timbre.

The rose orb spun upwards before taking a sharp downward plunge towards Cadfael, leaving streaks of the opalescent dust in its wake. “She would not take the fairy dew,” the voice complained. “She will die here if she does not take it!”

“Hey,” my voice erupted from my throat in a thick torrent. “Why? I’m not that hungry! I’m fine!” I started to scoot forward, and then thought better of it. “Cadfael! I need clothes! I’m naked!” I paused and glanced around. “I’m naked in a tree!”

“Springtime brings the strangest fruit,” Cadfael muttered. He shook his head, a tiny, faint smile playing about his lips before Du groaned anew. His face set in hard lines now, he motioned to me. “Just start climbing down. I’ll catch you if you fall.”

“You’re missing the point,” I called back. “Hello? Naked!” I drew my knees up as best I could to cover my breasts, keeping my ankles crossed to cover any other incidentals.

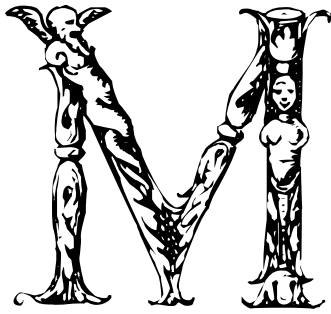
“For you,” a chorus of bell-like voices announced, dropping something slightly stiff and waxy feeling into my lap. What I took at first to be some odd, large sheet of paper was picked up by my miniscule hands and shaken out, resolving itself into a shift of some kind, barely long enough to reach my upper thighs, I judged, but it was something.

“Well,” I sighed, “better than naked.” I accepted the leafy garment and did my best to get into it without tearing the delicate ‘fabric.’ After a moment or two of struggling, I was more or less dressed.

A swarm of particularly small, silver lights swirled about my head, speaking in one voice. “He will tell you to return it once you are down, but keep it. It is a gift! It is from fairy and will do you more good than your human garb!” The cloud dispersed and I found that I was alone, the lights that had been in the leaves gone or hidden, leaving me perched in the fork of the branches.



CHAPTER SEVEN



Y EYES,” CADFAEL CALLED helpfully, “are closed!”

“Oh, hell and bother,” I sighed, and began the laborious process of climbing down from the ancient tree.

“Alfhild, you cannot keep that dress!” Cadfael informed me as he pressed a wad of crushed grass to a red gash on Du’s side.

“Lorelei. My name isn’t Alfhild,” I replied, refusing to look at Du for fear of being sick to my stomach. “Alfhild died ages ago.” A flash of Gulliver’s face swam before my tired eyes, but it faded before the spike of anger that usually accompanied it could surface.

Cadfael looked up at me sharply, his face a mask of benign efficiency as he treated his companion with the packet of herbs removed from his pocket. “If Alfhild were dead, so would I be. Take the amulet from my pocket, Alfhild.”

I opened my mouth to protest his use of my birth name but snapped it shut a moment later, moving towards him. “Which one?”

“Left hip,” he said, shifting on his heels to give me access to the pocket. “And don’t worry, dear. I’m not happy to see you.”

I frowned, doing my best to ignore the implications of my hand so close to that part of him.



A chorus of silver laughter sounded from the grass around us, but the lights did not come back. I found the charm immediately; it was smooth and cool to the touch, heavier than I remembered as I drew it out. It seemed to have new detail to it but I could not tell what. The design was incised still and the edges still age-worn as I placed it in the flat of his outstretched hand, his other hand still pressed on Du's leaking wound. "Okay, now what? Is this really the time to admire shiny objects?"

"Hoelle gave you eyes to see," he said patiently, with a hint of iron in his tone. "See. Read what it says."

I glanced aside at Du and frowned. I wanted to argue with him but it wasn't the time. If I humored him, I reasoned, we could get Du back to Hoelle faster. He looked like he needed a hospital but I doubted one was available in this place. "It's gibberish," I announced a moment after I had scanned the incised pattern around the edges. "Just lines."

"Use your eyes," he retorted, not looking at me then. "You used them before, in the water. Now use them for the earth."

I sighed heavily, sounding childish even to myself, before refocusing on the amulet. The lines swam and danced as I concentrated, finding myself begging for something to happen.

I was about to shove it back into Cadfael's pocket when the lines stopped moving and seemed to congeal into a recognizable pattern. "The battle maiden will come," I heard myself say, my voice not my own, "and join her prince. A new world is born from their union."

"Yes, Alfild," he sighed, emphasizing my name. "Keep reading." He seemed to be letting up on the pressure on Du's wound and this was somehow encouraging to me.

"The maiden and prince are of one light, forever bright when joined, forever dark when apart."

Cadfael stood then and moved to my side. One blood-covered hand plucked the amulet away and the other cupped my chin, forcing my gaze to

meet his. His swirling, ever-changing eyes bored into me, his honey-spice breath teased my senses. He was so close, I thought, his body so warm and strange, the power thrumming off of him. My eyes closed slowly and I wanted to sink into the ground, sink into him. “Alfhild,” he breathed, “as you go, so go I.”

“Just . . . give me a second,” I said for the third or fourth time. Du had stopped groaning and his harsh breathing seemed to fill the clearing. The twinkling lights were dim, hiding behind leaves and blades of grass, some of them huddled into constellations of delicate bodies, darting down to brush against the cat-like man occasionally, leaving shards of opalescent glimmer on his skin. “I need a minute here.”

“We don’t have one,” Cadfael responded sharply, his tone making me jump. He had shoved the amulet back into his pocket, the intense expression on his face gone and replaced by worry and agitation. “Du needs help that Hoelle cannot provide! And these damned pixies,” he waves his arm and sending a flurry of them skyward, “are going to be the death of us all unless we get moving!”

“Leave me here then! You have the damned amulet, you have what you broke into my house for! Let me go back and you can take him to get help!” I didn’t realize I was sobbing until I heard my voice break.

He came towards me, face set, and I swung wildly, my fingers cracking as I hit his chest with poorly formed fists.

“Stop it. Let go!” He didn’t even flinch, lifting me easily over his shoulder so that my bare bottom was up in the air and my head hung down his back. “Let me go!”

“You can beat me senseless later,” he growled. “Right now, you’re drawing so much attention we might as well leave Du for dead and flee overland.”

I gasped, mostly from his harsh words but also because he shifted my weight then, letting me slide down his hip until my feet touched the crunchy grass. “We’re not so far from Hoelle’s . . . maybe she can do something to help him!”

Du quivered in the pale light of the wee folk, his breath rough and loud. I could see dark streaks of blood drying on his limbs and back as he lay twisted on the ground, the dancing lights lending him a ghoulish cast.

“Hoelle’s healing won’t help him now,” Cadfael said tightly.

“The Host,” several voices caroled in my ear, tugging at my limp, sweaty hair as they strove to get close to me. “The Host can help him.”

“The Host?” I repeated, feeling decidedly dizzy. “How far is the Host?”

“All around us,” Du muttered weakly, groaning as he rolled onto his back. “She knows, she sees,” he breathed, the words so quiet that I thought for a moment I must have imagined it.

“I don’t know . . . I don’t see . . .” My words seemed to fall on deaf ears; neither Cadfael nor the glowing, tiny people said anything to me. The leaf-woven shift itched and I realized that I didn’t care. I just wanted out of this place, out of the deceptive beauty of it all, and somewhere safe and warm, somewhere, I added mentally, with pants.

“Not you,” Cadfael said after several moments of silence. Mabd.” Bending, he took Du up in his arms and gently lifted him. The injured man groaned again but did not otherwise protest this action. His voice smooth as butter and rich as cream, Cadfael said something in his lyrical, native tongue and three of the glowing orbs broke away from the scattered group to hover before his nose.

He spoke so quietly I couldn’t hear him, which didn’t matter because I couldn’t understand him, no matter what that was that had happened with the amulet. One of the orbs bobbed up in front of my face and I caught a glimpse of dark brown hair twisted into a bun atop a small face so perfect that it was breathtaking.

“That’s Rose,” Cadfael informed me, already walking towards the thick stand of trees we had just left. “Follow her, no matter what. If you lose sight of me, Rose will keep you safe.”

Rose gave me a cheery wave then proceeded to dart after Cadfael and his twin orb guardians.

“Hey!” I found myself calling after them all. “I can’t go that fast!”

Tripping, I hurried to catch up with them, following the pale pink orb. Twigs snapped under foot and something caught on my shift but I didn’t slow down. Once I glanced behind me and thought I saw the shadows of the forest move and shift as if they were alive; this was enough to make me swear to myself that I would not take my eyes off of the orb before me, darting between the thick branches and vines overhanging the path.

Cadfael’s dark shape was barely visible, a shadow on the darkness itself. Du’s breathing wasn’t audible from my position but I knew he was in bad shape. *Just roll with it*, I heard him say in my head. *Roll with it*, I repeated. *Rolling away . . .* “Rose,” I called softly. “Slow down!”

“Can’t,” the voice came back, soft but clear. “Got to keep them in sight. Hurry up!”

“My legs won’t go any faster,” I panted.

My body needed rest; it ached in ways I hadn’t thought possible and I found myself growing more and more accepting of the oddity around me. If I had been dreaming, I thought, I wouldn’t be hurting. You never get hurt in your dreams, I reasoned. This must, as obscenely strange as it was, be real.

“Rose, please!”

I could practically hear her sigh as she looped around, executing a series of intricate turns mid-air before hovering in front of my face. “Please what?” she sing-songed. “You’re not on the throne yet, miss, and I’ve got no reason to obey you. Just him!”

She twirled and dipped down low, skimming the grass before swooping upwards. She circled around my back and finally lighted on my shoulder, her feet barely registering as pressure to my addled brain.

“Cadfael is strong-willed, especially when it comes to Mabd,” she said with a trace of agitation. “But he’s kind to us pixies, more kind than others of the host. More kind even than the shining ones!” She paused and then cleared her tiny throat. “It’s not my place to be sayin’ this, miss, but he could not have brought you back a moment sooner! When we heard he had found you, that you’d been right there the whole time, so close and just . . . just ripe for it . . .” she trailed off in what could only be a rapturous sigh, regardless of my sudden, sickening realizations. She uttered a startled yelp as I staggered but kept on nattering away, about how blessed she felt that Cadfael had chosen her, her among all the other pixies, to guard me, the one he had been searching for!

“Rose,” I interrupted her after about two minutes of this, “what do you mean, ripe for it? What do you mean he was searching for me?” The words on the amulet burned before my eyes. Had it been some trick of an overtired mind or was it something else entirely?

The dark shape of his back, Du’s feet bobbing over his arm, lit eerily in the green-blue glow of the two pixies hovering near his shoulders receded. I hated him suddenly, hated him without knowing him because he had done this to me, kidnapped me and ruined my reality; ruined my ideas of what the world was.

“You are a silly human,” she sighed, fluttering before me just slowly enough that I could make out her wings, faintly green, and looking like the leaves on a rose bush. “You don’t know your own stories,” she sighed, swirling as the opalescent dust fell through her glow all around me as she swooped and darted, almost as if she were trying to distract me.

One of the blue-green orbs broke free from Cadfael and moved in a blurry, quick line towards us.

“I didn’t tell!” Rose suddenly shrieked, her voice surprisingly loud.

The blue-green orb emitted a snort of laughter. “I don’t care,” the male voice retorted. “Cadfael says we need to draw closer together. We’re nearing the bridges.”

The orb bobbed briefly before my face, a flash of black hair and white teeth, and then rejoined the part of the group further ahead.

“You know,” I said after a moment, “twenty four hours ago, I didn’t believe your sort of people existed.” I stumbled over a hummock in the grass, nearly going to my knees before I could catch my balance. Rose swooped in front of my face, her silvery laugh at once grating and comforting.

“Do you now?”

“Nope. Not even a little.” This time, I did go down, my knees folding like paper as I staggered, hitting the ground hard. “Damn it,” I spat, blood welling from my bitten tongue. I heard Rose trilling madly as I pushed myself back up, the hummock I had tripped on shifting under my feet like soft mud, strangely warm and thin. My toes squelched in it and I cringed, hating the feeling.

“Alfhild,” Cadfael shouted from down the trail. “Get up!”

“Thanks for the tip!” I called back. “I was just gonna lay here and nap!”

Rose dodged my hand as I tried to push my hair out of my face, her pink light casting the area around me in an unearthly glow. Glancing down to see what I had tripped over, I recoiled in horror. The hummock was not grass and dirt, the dampness was not mud. “Cadfael,” I said, so softly I could barely hear myself. “Cadfael!”

Rose shrieked, a sound I did not think was possible for someone her size to make. It rang through the darkness and the forest around us exploded to life. Nightbirds took to the sky and lights bloomed into being in the trees as Rose’s screams poured forth. Cadfael, Du in his arms,

crashed back through the woods, the underbrush seeming to reach out and try to grab him. “Oh, gods,” he groaned. “Bron . . .”

“It’s . . .it was . . .” I swallowed, tasting bile. It was a bloody mess, I thought. Entrails, it looked like, and flesh. No bones. All piled up as if someone had whipped the skin off the skeleton and folded it into a neat heap. “Oh, god . . .” I couldn’t help it then. I threw up, staggering away to the side of the trail first, upsetting a handful of pixies who’d happened to choose the wrong bush to hide in.

“Alfhild,” he said quietly, not looking at the mess that was once a life, “it’s time you told me your story.”

“What?” I was still huddled over my knees, my stomach cramping painfully as I dry heaved. “What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Bron was my brother,” he said, his voice flat. “No elf made weapon could kill him. This is the work of human hands.”

“You think I had something to do with this?” I croaked, struggling to my feet. “You’re even crazier than I thought!”

Cadfael’s expression was neutral but his eyes burned with something truly frightening. “Alfhild, this is the doing of *your* brother. I know this like I know my own heart. Tell me about him. Tell me how he works.”



CHAPTER EIGHT



‘M NOT SURE HOW I MANAGED IT, BUT I didn’t open my mouth to Cadfael for the rest of the long walk. Cadfael gave up trying to pry my life story out of me after a relatively short time; Du’s groaning reminded us both of the urgency of this trek.

The blue-green orbs, twins, I found out, named Daffyd and Lugh, danced ahead of Cadfael, occasionally nipping down to rest on Du’s dangling legs. Rose was unflagging, staying near my left ear once we were under way, grimly not responding when the twins would call to her in their small voices.

After what felt like hours, she seemed to give in to some internal debate and come to rest on my collarbone. “They said the other hummock was just a lump of grass,” she offered kindly. “So far, it’s just Bron that’s . . . that’s . . .”

“Dead,” I finished. “Bron, whom I’d never met, is dead, and Cadfael thinks my brother did it.” Silence fell between the pixie and I and we moved on for some small distance, my thoughts blessedly wandering.

The shift itched and I wished for a moment that I had fought harder about getting proper clothing. “How much further?” The night, which had started out as cool and almost crisp was sweltering now, making me pant for breath as we trudged down the narrow path through the ever-thickening woods.

The tiny lights that had dogged our steps had all but vanished, I noticed. Instead of hundreds, there were less than a



dozen scattered through the trees now. “Where did everyone go?” I asked, gesturing to the canopy. “Get bored?”

I looked over at Rose and noticed that her glow was barely registering now. She was just a tiny person, smaller than one of those Barbie dolls, perfectly formed and the color of rose petals from her pink toes to her vibrant red hair. Her wings were still beating at a rate that would make a hummingbird tired, but her demeanor bespoke great sadness and worry. “Rose?”

“We’re on the edge of the host, entering the Court,” she sighed softly. “My people are not . . . we’re not exactly a favorite there. Not unless we’re of that bent.” She shrugged, sending a scattering of that opalescent dust down on my shift.

“Ah . . . of which bent?” Cadfael had stopped ahead and seemed to be waiting without looking back at us, the low timbre of his voice making the words rumble.

“Unseelie,” Rose said, her own tone that of vague amusement, as if she were talking to a particularly simple child. “Some of us are Unseelie . . . though that’s not our word for us. That’s yours. Well, rather, the words of the invaders . . .” She shook her head sadly, tapping me on the ear to signal me to stop for a moment. “It means unholy, you know.”

I nodded carefully, worried about dislodging her. “I know. I remember the stories . . .” I blinked back sudden tears at the memory of the woman who had told me those stories, clearing my throat softly and motioning for her to continue.

“Cadfael is prince of the Unseelie Court. You,” she paused, her gaze shifting ahead to make sure said prince was still not looking back, “are to be his bride.”

“His what now?” A tight fist of some unnamed emotion gripped my stomach and I fought the urge to laugh. “What romance novel did that come out of?”

I blinked as Rose suddenly leapt to the air before my face, her now-slight glow so close that it hurt my eyes to try and focus on her.

“Hey! No hitting!”

Her tiny hands rained blows down on my face and head, the angry jangle of her own language like so many bells in my ears.

“Rose!” Cadfael had turned by then and was watching the goings-on with something akin to amusement. “Rose! Do not abuse our guest!”

She burst into a staccato trill of bells and the look on Cadfael’s face shifted. For one moment, in the glow of the twins’ light, he looked extremely tired, extremely, beautifully, ancient.

Then the expression was gone and he was simply annoyed. “Enough. We’re at the gates. It will all be revealed inside.” His gaze settled on me, cold and imperious. “And whether you like it or not, you will tell me about Gulliver.”

I bit my tongue, holding back an angry retort. Instead, I inclined my chin and gave him my best ‘go to hell’ look, which he returned in kind. Rose made a beeline for Cadfael and I followed perforce, feeling alone without her presence nearby.

“We’re entering the Unseelie Court,” she informed me, her voice taking on a hushed, almost reverent tone. “Few humans have ever seen it and come through unchanged. You’re lucky. No fairy dew have you imbibed nor have you had our bread and salt. You’re not even pixie led . . .” She shook her head as if this was the most egregious thing a body could be.

Cadfael turned his back on me once again and began murmuring softly in his rolling language, his body swaying gently, though whether it was from sheer exhaustion, Du’s weight in his arms, or some meditative state, I couldn’t tell. The darkness seemed to shimmer before us and a low, sensual female voice rose from the ether. “You’ve tarried long among the humans, my son.”

Something about the voice sent sharp shivers up my spine. It sounded like darkness itself, like moonlight and starlight and the black between them made manifest in sound.

Cadfael simply sighed, his posture stiff as he shifted Du's body to lie more comfortably in his arms. "Du needs healing, Mother. Will you unveil or must I do it for you?"

"The girl is nervous," the voice said as if Cadfael had not spoken. "That's . . . amusing."

As if a switch had been flipped, the woods exploded into light; a golden glow flooded the space around us and the trees disappeared, becoming human-like forms, some with wings, some with horns, some with a combination of both and some with neither. A great hall stretched out around us, the walls seemingly alive with light muted to a bronze-gold glow. Faces more beautiful and terrible than anything I could name peered down at us from a gallery that ran around the hall as more bodies pressed in close. There must be hundreds of people here, I thought. Each one dressed finer than the next, fabrics that must surely cost more than I had earned in my entire life fashioned into gowns and robes so sumptuous that it made my lips part in wonder. I felt ugly, the pixie-made shift I wore so much rubbish, no matter how cunningly made.

"Cadfael, she's ignorant of the truth, isn't she?" A woman moved towards us, her eyes dark as coal as she looked on me. Everything else about her was snow white, so pale it made Hoelle look like the poster girl for Coppertone. Her skin shone with some subtle sheen, as if she were fashioned from ice and diamonds. Her hair, braided intricately and falling past her hips, shone like silver as she drew to a halt before me. "Alfhild, called Lorelei" —somewhere in the crowd, a feminine voice huffed in agitation— "you are an insult from the gods."

My ire, needless to say, was up. Cadfael's hands were too full to restrain me but I could tell he wanted to from the sudden shift in his posture and the look of pained consternation that lit up his face.

The three pixies all seemed to inhale in anticipation as I straightened my spine and took a step towards this woman who had the black eyes of a reptile. I wanted to unleash every ounce of verbal venom I had, call her every name I knew of and probably make up a few more, but somewhere, deep in the recesses of my mind, my grandmother's voice bubbled up. One of the stories she'd told me, more of a piece of folklore, really, admonished what to do if you were ever fairy-led.

Before I could stop myself, and despite my deep wishes. I bowed my head and clasped my hands over my heart, saying clearly, "I thank you for your hospitality and the consideration of your people. I have been treated most kindly for a human and I will return the favor to you one day, if time allows."

Where the hell did that come from, I wondered. From the look on his face, Cadfael was wondering the same thing.

The woman laughed, a sound that seemed to start from low in her belly and tumble its way out of her lips, a sexy, feminine sound that bore no trace of girlish artifice. Her eyes changed as she looked on me, becoming less cold and reptilian but no less black and unfathomable. "Still dumb," she said, laying cool fingers under my chin and forcing me to meet her gaze. "But we can work with it."

Pitching her voice to carry over the crowd, she commanded them, "Continue with the revelry! The prince has returned!"

She turned back and motioned to Cadfael to follow her.

The gathering did not so much erupt into revelry as simply rejoin conversations that had been abandoned on our arrival. They shifted to allow us through the throng but they did not pay us any more attention than if we had been there from the get go.

The twins and Rose trailed him and I followed perforce, strangely calm. I felt as if I had been in an accident and survived, that eerie peace that descends at such moments filling me and making everything seem rational and normal.

After a few minutes of labyrinthine maneuvers, we arrived at a small alcove hidden behind an ornate gold and jewel-toned tapestry. I slipped in my turn past the covering and inhaled deeply of the cool, herbaceous air, scented as it was by some incense I could not see.

Cadfael laid Du down on a low bench that seemed carved from marble and covered in velvet cushions, stepping back out of the way so his mother—that idea seemed strange to me then, that he not only had a mother, but it was this woman who looked no older than he—could sit next to his injured companion.

“Redcap,” Cadfael said sharply. “It beset him in the gorge outside Hoelle’s hut.” He jerked a thumb in my direction, adding, “One of them took a few bites from her, but not even enough to refresh its cap.”

The woman, Mabd, looked up at me and raised a brow. “You must taste awful,” she stated flatly, returning her attention to Du.

Softly, she began a chant that I did not understand, but my body recognized. I could feel it inside me, this recognition, rising like smoke and burning like a fire.

I could see thousands of faces in my mind’s eye, human and not, bending and twisting in rhythm with the chanting, flame flickering in bonfires long burned out. I burned from the inside out, not realizing that I was moving in time with her voice, my eyes closing as her hands descended to touch Du’s wounds.

I felt the pixies brush by my face, touching me and whispering in their tongue. I was lost, my awareness of the present only marginal. Thousands of years seemed to open before me and I could see my mother, my grandmother, and everyone before them in a line back to the time before

time began. It was so much that it became a blur, a million voices chanting and a million bodies dancing.

A soft keening sound threaded its way through everything and I knew that it was me; I was crying with the intensity and pain of it all. Cool stone pressed against me and I realized I had fallen. The images stopped and I opened my eyes, panting, my body aching.

Cadfael and Mabd looked down at me.

“Alfhild,” Cadfael said carefully. “What just happened to you?”

“I take it back,” Mabd put in. “She’s not useless. She’s a bit frightening.”

“I,” my voice did not shake as I spoke, “am not frightening. What the hell did you just do to me?” I demanded. I stood, shaking as if I had run a hundred miles, Mabd staring back at me as if I had grown a second head. “What the hell did I just see?”

“Hoelle,” Cadfael said to his mother in a tone one would use to discuss the weather, “made her See. She removed the veil from her eyes.”

I found myself the recipient of a cadre of similar looks, from Rose up to Du, whose eyes were hooded in pain.

“And that means what to me? Stop speaking in code,” I said tersely, aware that hundreds of beings were just on the other side of the curtain, some of them likely listening in.

“It means the film that blinded you to our world is gone now,” Cadfael explained without a trace of tension. “It means that something inside you that has been asleep for a very long time was awakened.” He smiled tightly at me, the heat that had been in his eyes earlier replaced by exhaustion. “You read our words, speak our tongue, understand us.”

I nodded slowly, suddenly very tired myself. “I need to lie down. Is there somewhere I can rest? Please?” I added, remembering my manners belatedly.

Mabd and Cadfael exchanged looks which could only be described as significant. They seemed to be having an argument using only their eyes, Mabd's brows going up as Cadfael's lowered.

He sighed, she smiled, and then he turned to me.

"Follow me. Mother will see to Du. Rose," he said, as the glowing pink orb, now back to full brightness, hovered before his face, "you and your brothers can return to your lands or you may stay here. It is your choice." He ducked beneath the pixies' dangling legs as they crowded together to make their decision, and offered his elbow to me.

Too tired to argue chivalry, I slipped my grubby, sweaty, bloody arm through his. "Lay on, MacDuff," I sighed, already imagining a thick, downy mattress fitted with lush sheets and soft pillows, or a flowery bower like something out of a faerie tale. I had to bite back my laughter at my choice of wording. *I'm in my own faerie tale*, I thought. *I hope I don't miss work for this . . .*

"I knew him, you know," Cadfael said suddenly as he pushed the curtain aside, easing us out into the throng of revelers. "MacDuff, that is. Shakespeare wouldn't have anything to do with this court. I blame him for our bad reputation, really. Well," he paused, pulling me back when I would walk into a dancing couple, "him and the *bean Sidhe* . . . No one is quite sure how to deal with them."

He looked so concerned, so thoughtful. The absurdity of it all hit me at once and I had to laugh. Faeries, pixies, a dress made of leaves . . . I couldn't help it. I was loud, I knew, because of the sudden frown he threw me and the startled twitches of those nearest us. "I'm sorry," I gasped between giggles. "I'm just so tired"

Cadfael nodded and resumed threading us through the crowd, moving towards the far wall where another door lay concealed behind a tapestry, I assumed.

Party goers greeted him, calling his name and waving or slapping him soundly on the back. Some even nodded and smiled to me, their eyes sweeping down to take in my outfit and disheveled state.

No one commented, though, and soon we were ducking behind a tapestry depicting some epic battle, done in muted colors and shot through with fine gold thread. A narrow staircase spilled down before us and I gasped anew, the view dizzying. “The living quarters are below,” he explained, “for safety. My people have long lived in the ground, in the womb of the earth . . .” He trailed off, and for a moment I thought he was blushing. “Shall I go down first?”

“Most guys aren’t nice enough to ask,” I muttered, wondering if it was my tiredness or something else bringing out the double entendres. He didn’t seem to notice, though, and just murmured something noncommittal, the glow rising from his flesh lighting the way in a pale greenish cast. The steps went straight down and were barely wide enough for us to walk even single file. “Dissuade intruders?” I asked, feeling distinctly claustrophobic.

“Like your lot, we come in all shapes and sizes,” he replied, not sounding the least phased by the narrow confines. “This particular staircase was originally made for the servants of old, smaller elves and the like.”

He paused as the steps began to curve to our left, the worn indentations in the middle of the stone risers making me feel as if I were about to pitch forward and take him down with me. “This part of the court has been in my family since time began, it seems. Before I was born, before my mother was even thought of.”

He stared up at me intently, his position on the steps for once giving me the height advantage. “It’s special for many reasons, Alfild. It is important not just to my family but to all of us, to the world entire. It is the seat of our power, it is the center of our universe.”

Something in his voice sent sharp chills down my spine and I found myself unable to meet his gaze. I looked down, instead, at his hands and found they were gripping my wrists, his fingers burning against my skin like bands of fire. The huge group of revelers above was the farthest thing from my mind as his breath ghosted against my throat, warm and teasing and entirely unintentional, I was sure. "I . . . I feel like I'm going to fall," I whispered, unable to speak any louder.

Cadfael's grip tightened for just a moment, enough to make a flame burst to life in my belly, but he let go and exhaled slowly, almost shakily. "These do take some getting used to, even for some of us."

He turned carefully and resumed his trek downwards, with me following as closely as I could manage. It was only a few more steps, I found, before we fetched up in a hallway wide enough that I didn't feel like I was being slowly suffocated. Several wooden doors, bound in dark metal, lined the halls, but there was one larger than the others.

Cadfael, once more holding my arm around his, led me towards it, the massive double doors oddly inviting after my evening. At a word barely spoken they swung open, revealing a room dimly lit by brass braziers and a low fire in a massive hearth. The floors, I noticed as he led me across the threshold, were smoothly polished wood, lacking any sort of rug or other covering. A large trunk, black with age, supported a stack of thick blankets at the foot of a bed so large that four could have easily slept abreast and still had some sprawling room. The canopy gracing the bed itself was a deep green, like late summer foliage, and was tied back with rope that seemed to be made of braided copper but soft as silk.

"You'll sleep here," Cadfael's voice broke my wonder, making me blush furiously at being caught gaping. He was watching me, his eyes piercing as he followed my movements around the chamber in my initial exploration of the space, watching my fingers move over the wooden and stone walls.

His expression was that of a man wanting approval but too afraid to ask for it. “There is a basin of water and a cake of soap if you wish to wash. I’m afraid that a bath will be nigh impossible tonight.”

“I guess the servants are tied up with the party,” I said, unable to meet his gaze. I caught a glimpse of him in the mirror over said basin and I had to suppress a shiver. He was staring openly now, his hands fisted at his side as he leaned against one of the thick bedposts. I looked away before he could catch my eye in the reflection, unsure of what he would see in my face if he did.

“Yes,” he replied, clearing his throat. “There’s a shift set aside for you in the trunk,” he added, his tone suddenly bright, too bright. “And some buskins for your feet.”

“Thanks.” I turned to face him again, clasping my hands in front of me patiently. “Well . . . I guess . . . good night then.” My stomach rumbled and I winced. Food, I thought, would be very welcome, even some ice water.

“Um . . .” The sound seemed strange coming from him, so graceful and strong. “The thing is, Alfild . . .”

The pieces fell together. The room, devoid of feminine touches, the privacy, the rich carvings on the trunk and bed . . . all fit for a prince. “This is your bedroom, isn’t it?” I asked calmly, not sure whether to be outraged or polite. Relax, I told myself. How many times have you let Jackie take your bed and you took the sofa when she’d had too much to drink? After a brief pause, my interior voice felt the need to point out that there was no sofa in the room. “There’s no sofa, is there?” I heard myself ask.

“No . . . what? No,” he shook his head, frowning. “Yes, this is my private room. It’s the safest in the court, aside from my mother’s.” He took a step towards me, his hands held out in a placating gesture. “I’m not going to take advantage of you, Alfild, but you are expected to share my room this night, your first in Sidhe.” He offered a tentative smile then, his posture tense as he stopped just out of my striking range.

“Do I have the option of refusing?”

“I’m afraid not.”

I took a deep breath. The bed looked soft and warm. The basin of water was cool and clear, the soap scented with herbs and resins. “I get the left side.”

“That’s my side!”

“Tough tits.” I turned my back to him, adding, “Close your eyes or something. I’m not doing this with you watching.”

He sounded relieved as he spoke then. “I’ve seen nudity before, Alfhild!”

“Yeah, but not mine!” I paused, the shift already over my hips. “Wait, have you?” The idea made me blush all over, hot and aware of my body.

“No. I would not look on you as a potential lover without your permission.” He sounded muffled and I thought he had covered his face with his hands.

In for a penny, I sighed to myself. “Good. You start talking, I start bathing,” I ordered. “Time for you to share, pixie boy.”

“Sidhe!” he corrected sharply.

“Whatever. Start talking.”



CHAPTER NINE



VERY LONG TIME AGO, IT SEEMS, when things first started to get bad between the Sidhe and the humans, some of the powerful courts tried to forge stronger bonds between the worlds. This was a time when magic was not hidden in buildings of stone, in statues carved of wood and paint.

“All over the world, our courts gathered in sacred places, places where it was easy to travel between the realms, and places where magic was freer. They all hoped that something could be done to keep the worlds joined, but a new power was at work.

“The Humans grew jealous and suspicious of the Sidhe, and all of the work of the families, the royal courts of both worlds, could not undo what was being done.

“They began to hate the all magical beings. They grew jealous and suspicious and all of the work of the families, the royal courts of both worlds, could not undo what was being done.

“Hatred grew up like weeds, blossoming across the realms. Wars became commonplace and the courts began to fall. After a time, the Sidhe were forced into hiding. Magic was rewarded with death and those humans who showed friendliness with the Sidhe, or an understanding of the other realms, were treated as criminals, and nothing could undo what was done.



“Some of the Sidhe learned to hate the humans, but others loved them still and craved their nearness. The court of the Sidhe became divided and they fought between themselves, brother to brother, parent to child. The humans who knew the Sidhe still feared the Sidhe who hated them, feared their darkness and anger, deeming them unseelie or unholy.

“They did not remember what it was like in the time before time, that they needed the darkness to have the light. The seelie court became favored and, as the hatred became superstition, celebrated as populated by beings of light and goodness from children’s stories and vague memories.”

“Why did you come for me then?”

The room was dark, the fire and braziers burned low to bare embers. It was warm in the stone chamber—surprisingly so. Cadfael sat on the edge of the large bed, far from me, and I lay tucked beneath thick blankets pulled up to my chin, my eyes wide in the dimness as I stared at his still face. “What does any of that have to do with me?”

“Not all people hated the Unseelie,” he said after a long moment in which I thought he had fallen asleep. “Some people remembered us, sought us out. They kept us alive. They knew we were not the creatures of legend who ate human young. They remembered the time before time, deep within themselves.

“When the dark times were at their deepest, the most powerful of this ancient human court came to the most powerful of our court. He was dying, he knew. He had been poisoned through the machinations of man with the help of the Seelie, given their knowledge of charms and guile to slip the nectar into his libation.”

He breathed deeply, remembering the story or the event itself, I was not sure.

“He offered the king the thing he valued most in the world, the most beautiful jewel the world would ever know. He brought forth his daughter, offering her to the court as a bride for the king, a vessel for the Unseelie.”

“He tried to trade his daughter for an antidote?” I sat up. “That’s disgusting!”

“You misunderstand,” he sighed, resting his forehead against the bedpost. “The poison was not some simple tincture, some arsenic or strychnine. It worked in him for years, tearing him apart, rendering him useless and, at times, insane. He knew it was only a matter of time before it took him entirely, pains and fever dreams becoming a constant reality rather than an occasional annoyance.

“His daughter was wise in the ways of the Sidhe. She had been taught well by her mother and grandmother. She knew how to live amongst the fey folk, how to be a Sidhe bride. But our king refused.” He opened his eyes then and turned them on me, pale and baleful in the dark, his glow diminished. “He healed the human king but with a bargain. Blood of his blood would join blood of the Sidhe. They would keep the bond between the courts, they would keep it secret and keep it alive over the years until such a time came as the right child was born.”

The shift I had been given to wear for the night was soft as down, but at the moment, it seemed like sandpaper on my skin. My entire awareness had been sharpened to one point, one keen image in my mind. “Because of some dead guy I never knew, who didn’t want to die . . . I’m the payment for some bargain he made with one of your ancestors?” I blew out a harsh breath I did not know I had been holding and shook my head. “No freakin’ way.”

His sudden presence overwhelmed me. He was across the bed, kneeling next to me and his arms around me before I even managed a decent sob. He smelled like burning leaves and was so solid and real and warm that I just let myself feel for a moment, let myself be there, and be held.

He did not let his hands travel but rather kept them firmly on my back, between my shoulder blades where my spine ran curved from my sudden anger. When his voice came, it was whisper-soft and delicate, while

masculine all at once. It brushed through my hair and sent a frisson through my body. “When you were born, there were whispers throughout both courts that you were whom we had been waiting for. There were rumors, signs from the seers and spies Mabd sent above. I ignored them, for the most part. I was young—not by your standards, of course—but young nonetheless. I had better pursuits to follow than these whispers which seemed to come every few decades. I had grown so tired of hearing your name—of hearing of Alfhild of the Seven Snows—that I had learned to be deaf to it. It was not until three years passed without mention of your name or your family that I noticed. It was another year before I asked on it. It was then that I found about your parents. Then I found out about Gulliver.”

Sniffing once to clear my senses, I reluctantly pulled back, trying to see his face in the dark and barely succeeding. “Seven snows?” I frowned a bit, feeling rather than seeing him smile. “My last name is—”

“Here, you are called after your birth. The night you were born, seven snow storms converged over your home. From what I have been told, that was unheard of. The Sidhe believe,” he paused, and then sighed like a man about to embarrass himself, “some of us have control over elements, the older ones, the ones who were there in the time before time. Hoelle claims to have seen your birth and she is among the oldest of us all. She is the Snow Queen, you know.”

“The . . . um, no, I didn’t know that.” I thought of the woman I had met what seemed like ages ago now, the color of winter storms and sparkling ice. “Hoelle . . . she’s a queen?”

“Of sorts,” he said, pulling me closer. I didn’t fight him. I leaned into the embrace then, resting my head against his shoulder and feeling the quick pulse of his unearthly body against me. “Some call her Mother Hoelle, some once called her Hel. She was worshipped for millennia, but now, so few know her in her true form. So few know any of us. But we

survive. We exist.” He sounded so fierce then that I didn’t know if he were trying to convince me or himself.

“So I gather . . .” I hid a yawn, exhaustion creeping through my veins, tempered with a dull, aching hunger. “Why are you so hot about Gulliver?” I asked around another yawn. “I didn’t even dream that his reputation reached this far.”

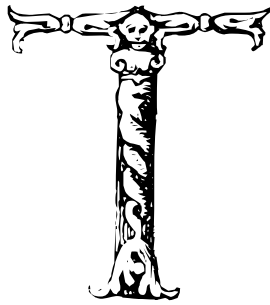
“Gulliver.” Cadfael spat the name as if it left a bad taste in his mouth. He held me almost too tightly for a moment, and then pushed me away so that I fell back against the stack of pillows, not violently but in a defiant gesture. “He is the cause of the current unrest.”

“What unrest?” Sleep was claiming me now. I could barely keep my eyes open as Cadfael slid from the bed, his soft footfall like a heartbeat on the wooden floors. “Everything looks fine to me.” I was not sure, but I think he snorted. I could not tell if the blackness before my eyes was the darkness of the room now or my own eyelids. “How’s it Gulliver’s fault?” I murmured, the words a great effort.

“Sleep, Alfild. We’ll talk in the morning.” I couldn’t even protest as the bed dipped down on the far side again, the sound of the heavy draperies falling closed around the bed a subtle thud in the quiet room.



CHAPTER TEN



THE FIRST THING I NOTICED AS I CAME awake was the smell: rich and warm, like caramel and rum. Then, I noticed it was still dark. The bed was holding me like a lover and I didn't want to move. I stretched, giving in to a whole-body-luxuriation in the opulence of the fine sheets, reaching towards the headboard as I groaned in satisfaction. My stomach ached, the pain gnawing at the corners of my comfort. I would give anything, I thought, for even a glass of ice water and a piece of toast. Reluctantly, I pushed the sheets and blanket down and sat up, rubbing the sleep from my eyes. The dimness inside the canopy was green-tinted, a bright light struggling to get through the thick fabric and casting forest-colored shadows on everything within.

“Alfhild?”

Cadfael's voice made me jump, clutching the blanket in surprise. I had not forgotten where I was but, almost, who was with me. “Yeah?” I pressed back against the pillows as the curtains at the foot of the bed parted. Cadfael was busy tying them back, not looking at me. He looked newly washed, his hair still damp and held back with a black ribbon. His shirt clung to his shoulders and back as if he had not dried completely before dressing. A bath would be nice, I sighed inwardly. Maybe I can bribe him to bring in a tub before I die of starvation. “What time is it? It feels late.”



“By your reckoning, it’s just after eight in the morning,” he replied, still not meeting my eyes. “By ours it’s . . . well, let’s just say it’s between eight and nine AM.” He disappeared from my line of sight for a moment only to come back carrying a large wooden tray, a slight smile curving his lips as he set it at the foot of the bed. “Breakfast?”

I surged forward only to stop myself before I was halfway down the bed. “I can’t eat this,” I said quietly. “You said so yourself. Eating the food, drinking the drink of the court will bind me here . . .” My stomach roiled loudly in punctuation.

“Never say I didn’t do anything for you,” he retorted, rolling his eyes heavenward. “Rose and her brothers went above during the gathering last night and brought back some food you can have.” He pointed. “Something called a Twinkie, Cheetos, those are parsnips which they insisted humans eat raw but, thank you very much, I know better, bread, an orange—that was a sight to see, those three carrying the orange in—and those, I believe, are blackberries.” He paused, his eyes scanning the tray before lighting up in memory. “Ah! And this!” He reached down and produced two bottles of orange juice with a flourish. “I had to help them bring this through the threshold. It was just too heavy . . .”

I couldn’t help it; I laughed aloud at this purloined bounty obviously carefully arranged by someone who had experience preparing food for someone much more royal than I would ever be. The Twinkie was the centerpiece on a bed of Cheetos. The parsnips, boiled and dotted with butter, were in their own bowl of polished silver to the right while the orange had been section and arranged in petals to the left. The berries were in their own silver bowl, sprinkled with sugar and oozing juice. The bread had been sliced into soldiers and arranged around the edges of the tray, standing guard in their toasted silence. “This,” I gasped around my mirth, my eyes leaking tears, “is wonderful.” I covered my mouth with my hands, trying to stop laughing and failing. Cadfael’s incredulous look did

nothing to stem my giggles, only fuel them. “I’m sorry,” I wheezed, gulping air to calm myself, “I just . . . I don’t know! It struck me as so silly all of a sudden, all of this!” I waved my arm to indicate the chamber, the court, the entire experience thus far. “And now y’all are having to shoplift fruit and junk food to make sure I don’t keel over on you!”

Cadfael’s stony silence was deafening, my gasping giggles dying as he looked down at the tray in all seriousness. “I guess,” he said slowly, running his finger along one of the bottles of juice, “now is not the time to tell you that there are also several large jugs of water, boxes of granola bars and assorted other sundries that you might need to survive—and that a poor man in Surrey called the police to report seeing three balls of light and a large, ugly woman walking down the street last night?”

I stared open-mouthed at him for a long moment before I saw the slight crinkle at the corner of his eyes. “I guess so,” I managed before laughing again, so hard it made my ribs hurt. Trying to breathe, I asked “Why would he call the police about a large, ugly woman?”

“The pixies needed help so they asked a friend of the court. A troll. She’s nine feet tall,” he informed me around his own laughter, “and looks like she’s made of stone!”

This made it worse. I fell back onto the bed, clutching my sides as I tried not to howl. Cadfael was beside me then, before I realized he had climbed into the bed. We were both laughing, gasping and giggling between gales, occasionally crying out “Twinkie!” or “Stone troll!” The latter, I must admit, more him than me.

I don’t know how long I laughed and cried at it all, but soon enough I was staring up at the canopy, noticing for the first time the intricate silver design woven into the fabric, and catching my breath.

Next to me, Cadfael was giggling softly under his breath, his hands beneath his head. “Alfhild,” he said softly, making me turn to look at him.

We were close and I knew what was going to happen but it still surprised me when it did. He pressed his lips against my forehead so gently it felt like butterfly wings brushing my skin. He kissed my nose next, smiling as he did, then he paused, our lips centimeters apart. I couldn't focus he was so close, so I closed my eyes, feeling his own gaze still on me. What did I look like to him, I wondered? Did I look like the other humans, lacking in the glow that everyone in this court seemed to have? Did I look clumsy and thick? Ugly? Or was I beautiful in my differences?

My breath caught in my throat as his hand moved to my elbow, not holding me in place but just touching me, making me open my eyes. The kiss was sudden when it came, despite the lingering prelude. He was not insistent, just firm, claiming my mouth with his. I did not hesitate, as I thought for a moment I might, to kiss him back. He sighed against me, sending a quiver of something warm and new through my belly, down my limbs. I felt warm light bursting through me as he shifted closer, his hand moving to my shoulder, then the back of my neck as he threaded his fingers through my tangled hair.

My hand was on his chest and I did not remember putting it there, just feeling his heart beneath my hand, the heat of his flesh through his shirt as his tongue darted out to taste my lower lip. I gave into the impulse, parting for him and letting him deepen the kiss, not caring that I was in my nightclothes, not caring that I needed to bathe or that I was starving and thirsty. It all seemed to vanish for those seconds we were joining, like the world had become a pure, golden thing and we were the center. With a tiny groan low in his throat, a sound that made something deep in my core twinge in recognition; he pulled away, pressing his forehead to mine for a moment before sitting up, smoothing his hands over his trouser legs as he glanced up at me. I did not know what I looked like but he was distinctly discomfited, cheeks a dull red with his blush as he cleared his throat a few

times. “I’ll leave you to eat,” he said thickly. “When you’re done, ring the bell at the foot of the bed and someone will come clear your tray and bring the hipbath.”

I nodded like an idiot, my voice lost somewhere in the miasma of feelings lodged in my chest. It was not until he reached the chamber door that I found it again and forced the words out. “Where are you off to?” I asked, my voice squeaking at the end and making me wince. “I mean, what am I supposed to do when I’m done with everything? Just wait here?”

He did not turn to face me but paused with one hand on the doorframe. “I need to gather some of our sacred items. You will demand proof about Gulliver and I want it to be ready at hand. When you are done with the bath,” he paused and I wondered if he was having a very male moment or if he was just trying to figure out what to tell me to do, “ask Lorelei to take you to the library.”

“Lorelei?” I called as the door shut. He did not return to reply. I vented a long sigh, the pain in my belly making itself known again. “Okay, okay, I get it,” I muttered, reaching for an orange segment. “I’m rolling with it.”



The woman who came in with the tub was beautiful. She was beyond beautiful. She was perfection in every sense of the word, from the golden glimmer of her hair to the pale shell of her toenails as she padded across the floor towards me. She wore a simple white gown girdled with a gold belt, a golden comb tucked in at her waist. She smiled at me and offered a slim, long-fingered hand the color of alabaster. “The hipbath is difficult if you’re not used to it,” she explained, guiding me to the tub. “Especially getting out of it.”

“Um . . .” I hesitated. My shift, despite its intricate white embroidery and smocking, seemed dowdy next to the clean lines and rich fabric of this

woman's gown. "Could you, um, turn around? I don't want to get naked in front of you, no offense."

She raised a perfect brow and shrugged, turning her back on me. "I hear you have called yourself Lorelei," she commented, her voice a shade arch. "My name is Lorelei. I am THE Lorelei, to be exact," she added, sounding a bit more forceful than before.

"I changed my name, sort of," I admitted, tossing my shift onto the bed and eyeing the deep tub warily. "I didn't want to be found."

She turned then and I saw her sweep an assessing gaze over me, seemingly satisfied with what she saw because she smiled smugly at me then.

"My great grandmother's name," I explained into the silence, bracing myself against the side of the tub and trying to swing a leg over the high side without appearing pornographic about it.

"A word to the wise, Alfild," she said coolly, moving to take my arm and steady me as I slid my foot into the hot water of the tub, "we are a jealous race here. We do not take kindly to that which is ours, even a name, being used without our permission." She smiled at me sweetly then, her pink lips parting to reveal two rows of perfect, pearly teeth.

"Got it," I sighed, sliding into the warmth of the water and feeling it leech the ache from my muscles. Her cold hand on my shoulders made my eyes snap open and I found myself staring into her deep, brown eyes as she glared down at me. "Hey! That hurts!"

"I don't think you do understand," she said softly, her voice low and tight. "Be careful what you take, Alfild. Down here, you are not protected, no matter what Cadfael will have you believe. He cannot keep the ties between our worlds open perpetually. Soon enough, *you* must be the sacrifice or we must shed blood for you. I think," she said, releasing her painfully tight grip on my shoulders, "you know which I would prefer."

“I have an inkling,” I replied sharply. “You know,” I added, grabbing up the cake of soap someone had placed on the edge of the hipbath, “I remember your story. You lost love, didn’t you? So you drove men to their deaths on the rocks.” I looked up to find her staring at me with a carefully neutral expression on her face. “Like the Greek sirens, isn’t it? But instead of singing, you blind them with your beauty?”

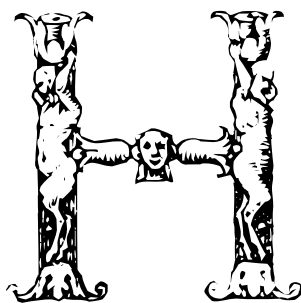
For a moment, I thought she was going to strike me or try and drown me, but she drew herself upright and, inhaling deeply, burst into tears. In a flurry of gold and ivory, she fled the room, the door slamming in her wake, the faint trace of her watery perfume lingering as I sat in the now-cold bath.

A tiny white orb zipped over from the hearth, lugging a canister of water, the rising steam obscuring its features. The pixie poured the water into the bath and jangled at me in their own tongue.

I just nodded and smiled weakly. “I know,” I sighed. “I get that a lot.”



CHAPTER ELEVEN



EY!" I TWITCHED THE THICK RED fabric out of the hands of the tiny pink orb. "That hurt!"

Rose and a cadre of tiny, sparkling pixies were swooping around me, carrying the heavy fabric as they moved, and wrapping me into it like a toga.

"Stand still," Rose ordered. "I cannot pin you into this gown if you keep moving like that!" She jabbed at me with the a golden fibula, topped with a dark red stone. "You cannot wear one of our shifts about the court. Mabd would kill you." She jabbed at me again, this time thankfully not drawing blood.

I had the feeling that she did not mean Mabd would simply be angry with me.

Rose and a cadre of tiny, sparkling pixies were swooping around me, carrying the heavy fabric as they moved, wrapping me into it like a toga. "Cadfael is waiting for you in the throne room. You cannot go in looking like a . . . a . . ."

"Human?" suggested a tiny voice from somewhere near my knee.

"Thank you," Rose replied coolly. "You cannot go in looking like a human."



I bit my tongue so hard I think I tasted blood then but I did not snap at the tiny pixie as I sorely wished to; instead, I closed my eyes and tried not to think of that scene in *Cinderella* where the animals are dressing the princess.

“How does your brother make his way in the world?” Rose asked suddenly, flittering closer as I opened my eyes to stare at her. “How does he provide for his family?” She hovered in front of me, as the other pixies continued doing their jobs.

“He . . .” I blinked rapidly, trying to focus on her as the movement played havoc with my perception. “He’s a real estate agent, an estate agent here.” I had to look away. My eyes were watering with the effort it took to focus on her. “He buys properties and sells them to people who want to build housing or business.”

Rose moved closer, her small hands coming to rest on my face as she forced me to look at her. Her wings had slowed considerably and now she was easy to see, but the fury coloring her features had not abated in the least. I felt silly admitting it even to myself, but she scared me in that moment. “What places, Alfhild? What places has he bought and sold?”

I hesitated before reeling off the list of names, both stateside and in Britain. “And he’s going to expand into the rest of Europe next year. He has plans for Asia,” I added, not sounding as prideful as Gulliver might, just reciting facts.

Rose nodded, folding her arms across her narrow chest. “If you are so addlebrained as to not realize the significance of those places,” she said with more than a hint of haughtiness in her tone, “then I think Cadfael has chosen poorly!”

“He did not have a choice.” Lorelei stood in the doorway to the hall, a pale slip of a woman. She seemed somehow reduced, less than she was before. No longer pure feminine anger, she was like Hamlet’s Ophelia before the crazy kicked in. Like a lily, I thought, a drooping lily, as she

moved across the floor towards me. I wasn't sure, but I thought she might have been leaving damp footprints as she crossed the stone floor. "Cadfael wouldn't choose someone like her, you know. Not when he'd made promises." She looked at me with baleful, dark eyes, still as beautiful as before but now missing something ineffable. "Cadfael and Mabd are waiting for you in the throne room. They request and require your presence posthaste." She glanced at Rose, who was putting some finishing touch on my gown with tiny flourishes. "You know it is not your place to tell her such things. Cadfael will have you for that!"

"I won't let him," I hurried to add before Rose could squeak much more of a protest. "I'll tell him I made you do it." I glared quickly at Lorelei. "What's your problem? I thought you just had it out for men, or did I get the story wrong?"

She tossed her golden hair over one shoulder and inclined her chin in an expression of pure superiority. "What I once was, I am no more. I lost any claim to innocence and guile long before you were even thought of, Alfild of the Seven Snows. Think me a simple ghost if you like, think me a siren, but Cadfael knows I am much more than that." Her smile was exceedingly predatory and sensual. She did not say anything else as she turned and drifted from the room, her feet making soft slapping sounds on the roughhewn floor.

"It's because I made her cry, isn't it?" I asked into the silence. "Oh, god, this is high school all over again. Pretty blonde bitch is going to stuff me in a locker . . ." I sighed and closed my eyes, groaning softly at the first twinge of a backache. "Fine, Cadfael isn't coming. Where's the throne room?"



I was glad for Rose's escort. I never would have found the room on my own, even if I had written down her the directions. She led me through a

labyrinth of corridors, all dark stone like Cadfael's bedchamber but some shot through with glowing veins of some mineral or lichen, some sparkling with clear quartz-like rock. All of the halls were cool, like caverns, and all had doors leading off into various rooms.

One hall we raced down (Rose did not seem to know the meaning of "slow down, I'm tripping on this damned dress!") echoed with sobs and another smelled redolent of iron-rich blood. This particular hall way, Rose whizzed through so quickly that I thought I had lost her until I reached a T-junction and saw her pink glow to my left. She shushed me when I tried to ask what that was about and I decided not to press the matter further.

We rounded another corner and I drew to a halt in surprise. Beings lined the hall on both sides, forming long queues, all facing massive, golden double doors set with precious gems that shone so brightly I had to squint to see Rose amongst the shine.

"Stay close," she whispered, darting back to murmur in my ear. "And don't let them touch you!" She moved to fly before me, close enough for me to see but far enough that I would not run into her should she stop suddenly. A sound like a crashing wave moved through the lines and I realized it was a whisper building to outright conversation, voices talking about me, judging from the looks I was getting. Creatures beautiful and horrifying were staring openly, some pointing as Rose led me down the suddenly overly long hallway towards the doors, which themselves were slowly swinging open, a sliver of light growing ever wider with each passing second. Hands reached out as if to touch my skin, my face, but Rose shot back, skimming across each outstretched limb in a blur of lightening speed, leaving scored flesh in her wake.

Yes, I decided, my eyes unblinkingly wide, I think I'm afraid of her a little. Howls of annoyance went up as she led me through the doors and they were shut behind us by two twisted, small men wearing red cloth

caps, though not like the horrible ones worn by the creature that had attacked me the night before.

“My Lady Mabd, Queen of the Sidhe, Enchantress Who Rides the Night Air, She Who Sees Far and Wide,” a male voice sing-songed, sounding thoroughly bored with the titles, “I present to you Alfhild of the Seven Snows, of the line of Danaan, affianced to Cadfael of the Sidhe.”

I was frozen in place, the herald’s words heavy in my thoughts. Rose had fallen back and I could see now that Mabd had been holding court with several beings, all tall like her, all glowing like Cadfael. They turned to regard me with no small amount of open disdain, as if I were a piece of refuse on the bottom of their shoe.

“Cadfael,” I said hoarsely, not knowing what else to say. Tiny hands pushed me forward and it was like a trigger. I bowed low, carefully spreading the skirt of my gown as I did so.

Mabd didn’t say a word to me but after several long moments, I rose and found her looking down at me appreciatively.

Cadfael sat beside her in a chair made of bone, antlers interwoven to form the seat, legs, and back; he was dressed in some dark finery: a cloak that seemed to absorb light rather than reflect it, dark trousers and heavy boots that were graced with silver buckles. The fine lawn of his shirt was as white as any snow I had ever seen and made the darkness all the more sinister.

Mabd, beside him in a silver throne studded with black stones that seemed to swirl in the light, extended her hand towards me. Hesitantly, I approached, noticing that her gown was barely-there, something of a gossamer-like fabric that showed her pale skin through the folds. Cording of leather held it in place, it appeared, and her night-dark hair fell below her hips as she reached out to me.

“I—”

“Your presence has been anticipated for many years,” Mabd cut me off. “Since before you were born, in fact. Cadfael tells me he has apprised you of the basic details of your history, of your purpose to us. Lorelei also has let me know that the pixies,” she paused and her lip curled distastefully, “have rushed to tell you about Gulliver. It seems you are not as smart as I thought you were last night,” she added, a cool brow arching. “This is unfortunate as it will take so much of our time to educate you. Cadfael,” she turned to her son, who looked both bored and annoyed, “are you absolutely sure about this? Seven generations is nothing to us. I would be more than happy to wait until a creature less irritating and more toothsome presents itself.”

“I am *sure*, Mother,” he replied softly, barely loud enough for me to hear.

With a gesture, Mabd dismissed the group that had been in the chamber when I entered. The herald moved forward with a spindly wooden chair, something that looked like it should have come from Hoelle’s hut and not this fine court. “Tell me, Alfild, do you know what a redcap is?”

“Um, kind of,” I replied honestly, distracted by the dress, which was itching me terribly. “They’re like a troll of sorts, right? They dip their caps in the blood of their victims. They fight all the time, they eat human flesh . . .”

“Close enough,” the queen sighed, giving Cadfael a significant look. “Check on Du, please. I’m sure he’s ready to be up and about by now. I’d like to have a word with Alfild alone.”

Cadfael looked as if he were about to protest but instead stood, offered his mother a half-bow, glanced sidelong at me, and disappeared behind the queen’s towering throne.

I heard the soft hiss and snick of a door opening and shutting across thick carpet, and then I was alone with the queen. Well, alone save for the herald, the two men at the door, and an unknown quantity of pixies.

“My son is brave in battle but weak when it comes to home truths,” Mabd informed me without apology. “He has dallied long enough in explaining the entire problem to you. I will spare the monotony and not rehash last night’s charming conversation in his bedroom—don’t look so offended. It’s my court, I’m the queen, and I can eavesdrop if I choose.”

She smiled thinly at me and something told me that she knew all about our kiss, as well. I hoped I wasn’t blushing.

“You are descended from the Tuatha di Danann. Does that sound familiar to you, Alfild?”

I felt like I was back in school again, called up before Sister Immaculata for some infraction. Automatically, I lowered my eyes and murmured “Yes’m. They’re the ancient gods of Ireland. We learned about it in my college folklore studies class. And my grandmother . . .” I paused, frowning. “I’m not Irish.”

Mabd groaned, a defiantly unladylike sound, and rose to her feet. She was not so far away from me as to sweep towards me but I could tell she wanted to, that she was in need of some grand, dramatic gesture to seal her appearance as a much put-upon queen.

“Focus, child, focus. We’re talking about you at the moment, not some long dead sack of bones that couldn’t be buggered to pay proper homage!” She grabbed hold of my shoulders and shook me slightly then, in a manner I was sure was meant to be bracing but set my teeth rattling. “It’s just a name! You humans are so tied to names and titles!”

“Pot, kettle, black!” I spat, jerking free of her grasp.

Mabd suddenly seemed to fill the throne room. A rustle of sound made me think that the herald and pixies had gone into hiding behind the tapestries and thrones as the queen herself took over my line of sight. The room seemed darker, as if the light were being drawn from it, and the temperature dropped so that my breath fogged before my face.

Her eyes dark and glittering, Mabd leaned in close. Her breath smelled like roses, I thought almost frantically, roses and cold.

“Alfhild of the Seven Snows, child of Danu,” her fingers closed on my face, cradling my chin and squeezing my cheeks so hard I gasped in pain, “you are stupid. You are blind. Hoelle in *her* blindness sees more than you!” She shoved me so that I fell back, hitting the stone floor with a smack, my hands stinging and arms and tailbone screaming in pain. “Hoelle gave you eyes to see, ears to hear yet you are barely even trying!” She stalked to her throne, flinging herself onto the black cushions with an aggrieved growl.

Somewhere, deep in the recesses of my mind, my grandmother’s voice scolded me. Didn’t I remember anything she taught me? she asked as Mabd walked towards me.

I thought I heard a tiny sob from behind the tapestries and saw a flash of silver by Mabd’s side as she neared.

Mabd is ancient. Warrior queen, battle raven, fierce and terrible . . . “Crap,” I breathed the moment before the back of the queen’s hand met the side of my face. I was becoming quite adept at falling on stone floors without sustaining grievous injury.

“Your brother is of the Seelie court. He is not human, you ignorant fool. He is their prince, waging battle not with weapons but with lucre, using methods older than time to crush our court!”

“Mother!” Cadfael’s thunderous voice echoed through the chamber and it seemed that, with that simple word, the golden light that had been withdrawn in Mabd’s anger came back, illuminating everything. He stood on the dais, in the spot Mabd had just vacated. Behind him, slightly hunched but looking none the worse for wear, was Du. Both men looked angry and tense, the cat-like man curling his fingers into claws while Cadfael seemed to crackle with an energy I could not see but filled the space between us like lightening.

Mabd straightened, looking entirely unapologetic for striking me down. “We have a short time to enact this, Cadfael, and your dalliances have done nothing to help.” She glanced down at me and sighed, almost theatrically. “Oh, do get up. I hit you; I didn’t murder you!”

She reached down and jerked me to my feet with one quick motion, nearly wrenching my arm from its socket in the process. She looked between me and her son with her black eyes, her brows creeping up as she drew in a long breath.

“What do you mean?” I asked before she could say much else. “Gulliver is Seelie? He’s from Wolverhampton. Our father married my mother when he was twelve. He’s not,” I said with as much force as I could muster, “a Seelie or Unseelie or anything other than a plain old jackass.”

I jerked the red fabric slipping down my shoulders back up to cover my bare skin, Cadfael’s brow quirking at this action. I thought, for a moment, that his gaze flickered to my lips and I felt my face heat at this shiver of a memory but I refused to let myself give in to the urge to giggle and stare back at him.

Mabd was looking at me, not amused but at the same time not angry, not like a few moments before. “You people are insane. That’s all there is to it.”

“Alfhild, when you were twenty human years, what did Gulliver do?” Du’s voice was so soft that it surprised me.

All eyes turned to him, Cadfael inhaling sharply as his friend’s gaze fixed on me.

“He tried to claim you, to own you, didn’t he? You were a woman grown, you had things he wanted, things he needed . . .” His lips curled into a smile that was neither cruel nor pleased. It was, simply, sad. Sad for me, I realized, and I was overcome with the urge to be sick, wretchedly and totally, right there on the fine floor and gown, before these beings of light and magic. “It’s all known down here, Alfhild,” Du continued, his voice a

sliver louder. “Time passes differently here. Your story has been told to the young ones for years, shared amongst our people—they cannot fathom a crime such as that committed against you by that prince of the Shining Court.” His appellation for Gulliver lacked any hint of respect but had no small amount of venom.

“Shut up,” I husked. “That’s not . . . why I changed my name. That . . . no one knows. How . . .” I was shaking so hard that my legs gave way. I went to my knees on the floor, my hands coming up to cover my face as the memories swamped me. Gulliver, slipping into my room at night, his hands and mouth on me, muffling my screams, holding me down . . . I had never told anyone about this and neither, I thought had he.

He most likely still had the scar on his groin from my bite mark; he still had the deep gouge in his arm from my nails. I broke his nose, I broke veins. No one knew but us, I thought.

In a reedy, high voice, my panic barely in check, I poured out, “I changed my name to avoid reporters. I didn’t want to be associated with him, not after he bought that land in Sweden. Not after they found the bodies. He was never actually cleared but money . . . money fixes everything, doesn’t it?”

A warm hand pressed against my back and I stiffened, but did not fight it. “How did you know about him?” I demanded, uncovering my face and finding Du staring at me with his yellow orbs. “Who told you?”

“We see many things down here,” Mabd said softly. “We have seen you since before you were born, Alfild. Nothing we can say will be believable to you, not unless you choose to believe.” She was kneeling in front of me then, the queen of all Sidhe, and touching my face, making me look at her. “You have Hoelle’s eyes to see,” she continued slowly. “See us. See this all. Know what we know.” Without warning, she leaned forward and pressed her lips first to my forehead, then to each eyelid. I parted my lips to protest, but she closed her mouth over mine and breathed. My body felt as

if it were alight with a million fires, my nerve endings screaming in surprise and shock. She leaned away and glanced up at Cadfael.

“Alfhild,” he said quietly, his voice a caress on my senses. “What do you see?”

I blinked once, twice, three times and it all exploded into light before me. Faces, transparent as those in Hoelle’s hut and solid as Cadfael’s beside me, filled my vision. My mother, my grandmother, all stretching back as they had been when Mabd chanted the evening before, but this time they were focused on me. A bright white light rose behind them all, like some painful sunrise, blinding me. My sight became just pure white color, the light drowning out all the faces, all the sound. Before I could panic, a woman’s face rose from the light and her eyes opened to find mine. Her lips moved, soft and red, and then, as soon as it began, it was over. My vision cleared in a blink and the faces were gone. My lungs ached and I realized that I was holding my breath. “What . . .”

“You have seen Danu,” Mabd said bluntly. “And She has blessed you.” Silently, I followed her pointing finger and looked down at my arms. I was covered in a silvery sheen, faint and shimmering like the glow surrounding the Sidhe. “Now you see your mark as we do.”



CHAPTER TWELVE



RINK IT CAREFULLY,” DU SIGHED.

“The water for you is limited. There’s a moratorium on trips above ground until the conspiracy theorists are distracted by something shiny.” He watched me as I took a long, gulping draught from the bottle of water, his brows drawn together in concern. Apparently, my hiccough of nerves in the throne room had been deemed a fit and I was confined to chambers. I didn’t have the heart to tell any of them that it was not even close to a fit, just a bit of an episode. Seeing that Cadfael was otherwise occupied, namely in a low-voiced, heated conversation with his mother on the far side of the chamber, Du leaned in close and whispered conspiratorially. “Mabd always did have a thing for the theatric. See, I could’ve saved everyone a world of trouble if they’d let me do this my way.”

“What was that?” Cadfael asked from across the room, pitching his voice to carry. “Just leaving her a note tacked to her front door, like you suggested at the Bel fire? Or maybe,” he added, not looking away from his mother as his voice took on a decidedly angry tone, “just drugging her on a thimbleful of poppy juice and awakening her on the throne.”

“It was not,” Du informed me with a small bow, “my finest hour.” He looked back at Cadfael, “But I was referring to sitting her down like a reasonable creature and telling it to her flat out



rather than this mess,” he waved an arm, taking in the chamber, the Sidhe and me. “Everyone’s family tree is a bit twisted, Alfild,” he said solemnly. “Yours just happens to make a rather fine knot.”

I snorted, an unladylike sound, but I didn’t care. “I think you’re the one with the most sense in this place,” I said, staring into the depths of the plastic water bottle. “If you’d done that, you’d have saved hours of trouble.” I shot a sidelong glance at Mabd and Cadfael. “I know I didn’t start well but you know, it’s amazing what a little rational conversation can do to convince a person.” I set the bottle down carefully on the tiny brass tray proffered by one of the pixies, who, I decided, functioned as the servants in this place.

“Let’s cut the bullshit, okay? I get that I’m some sort of important thing here. Fine. Give me a Messiah complex. I get that you think my half brother is some big bad. He’s a jackass and I wouldn’t cross the street to pee on him if he were on fire.”

This earned a choked sound from Mabd and a distinctly stuffed expression from Cadfael. Du merely looked on benignly. “Let me tell you what I see.” I took a deep breath, stamping down the part of my mind that was trying to tell me what I was about to say was impossible and insane.

“According to y’all, some long dead ancestor of mine promised his daughter to a prince of your court in order to keep the relations good between our groups, right? Skipping ahead, skipping ahead, skipping ahead . . . Here I am.

“My half brother . . .” I paused and blew out a breath, rolling my eyes heavenward. “In a supreme Jerry Springer meets Southern Gothic twist, is some prince of your enemy’s court. So far so good? Good. He’s doing some crap above that’s destroying your court below. Am I on track?”

I was pacing now, the voluminous skirt of the gown gathered up in my hands so I could walk without tripping or mincing. Not waiting for an answer, I hurried onward.

“So Heckle and Jeckel here decide to come up and see me sometime, yadda, yadda, yadda, kidnapping.”

“The portal malfunctioned,” Cadfael muttered, his face coloring. “Someone tried to close it from the outside as I tried to make it through. I was rendered unconscious in the process.”

“And pantsless?” This earned a sharp laugh from Du, who was quickly silenced with a gesture from Mabd. “The point remains, you kidnapped me to this place, and above people are going to be looking for me. Gulliver,” I let the name hang for a moment, “is going to be looking for me. He’s my only surviving relative other than some distant cousin in the backwoods of Louisiana and if I’m declared dead for whatever reason, he inherits my property.”

This drew a collective, sharp intake of breath from all present and I felt, for a moment, totally in charge of the situation. “That house has been in my family since before anyone can remember. The property has always been there and no one has ever tried to touch it until Gulliver came along.

“Now, I’m not as stupid as Mabd thinks. I can put two and two together and get five just like y’all can.” I gave up trying to hold onto the dress and just let the skirt puddle at my feet as the shoulders hung limply down my arms, threatening to expose what little excuse I had for cleavage. “The portal in the rosebush, the fact the rosebush is always green and growing . . . Sidhe magic protects the place. If what you say is true and I’m marked, my family is marked, then that place is important to y’all.”

The tiny idea that had been germinating in the back of my mind burst into full bloom. “It’s your safe portal. It’s the one place you can cross in and out of without notice or fear of harm!”

“Well . . . sort of . . .” Cadfael rocked back on his heels, looking oddly pleased and I wondered if it was because I figured it all out or because I’d missed out a detail. “There are a few safe passages but the one on your land . . . it’s the oldest. It leads directly into our world with no stops.

Your home is the guardhouse, as it were. None shall pass and all that.” He smiled, a blinding expression on his fine features, and glanced at his mother. “I told you she wasn’t stupid.”

“I believe I called her an idiot,” Mabd corrected. “Now, Alfhild of the Seven Snows, you think you have this all sorted out. What do you think we want you here for?”

“Ransom?” I hazarded. “That’s all I can think of. I mean, even you people can’t expect me to marry someone I don’t . . .” The door swung open behind me and an openly sobbing Lorelei walked in, holding a shimmering nighttime confection of a dress in her arms as if it were a child. Pixies followed, carrying a veil. “Oh, hell no . . .” I didn’t have much of a chance to argue as the pixies set to work stripping me of the voluminous gown I had been wearing, a blurry cloud of light and sparkling dust obscuring my proportions from politely disinterested onlookers. Conversation ceased until the veil had been settled over my hair—thankfully not like a wedding veil, but more like a simple headcovering.



“I had thought you would have figured it out by now.”

“Yeah, surprise.” I was glad to be out of that court gown and into something more sensible: a long—but not trip-inducing—black and silver dress made of something that felt like cotton. The sleeves did not threaten to fall off my shoulders and everything seemed to be modestly covered, making me feel a bit less garish. Scrubbing idly at the silvery sheen that seemed part of my skin now, I sighed. “So . . . I’m supposed to be a faerie princess now?” I raised a brow and shook my head. “This is stupid. Why doesn’t someone just kill Gulliver?”

“You, a human, are suggesting murder?” Du shifted from his spot on my bed, padding towards me with an incredulous look on his face. “It must be the lack of food or something.”

“Or lack of caring,” Cadfael suggested, leaning against his bedpost. “We cannot eliminate the threat without unleashing the entire Seelie court on us, and at the moment we are in no place to fight them.” He sighed and passed a tired hand across his eyes. “This isn’t a game, Alfild. Already, above, you have been reported missing. We can try and charm people, enchant them so the investigation moves slowly, but Gulliver is throwing money around left and right and your friend . . . the blonde? Jackie? She’s shouting to everyone who will listen that I have murdered you.”

“Murdered . . . by you? She doesn’t know you!” I frowned, my brows drawing together. “Oh . . . oops.” I had told her what he looked like, I remembered. A pretty detailed description too. “Well, it’s not like you’re going to just go walking down the main drag, you know.” I shrugged helplessly. “What can we do then?”

Mabd smiled, not a pleasant expression on her knife-sharp features. “Hoelle is coming to the court posthaste. She’s bringing the bones.” This drew a deep gasp from Du and Cadfael both. Fixing me with an appraising look, Mabd added, “You were foretold in the bones. That is the only reason why I did not throw Cadfael to Jenny Greenteeth for being mad.”

“Your vote of confidence lifts me up, Mother,” the faerie prince sighed, making me giggle suddenly. He could seem so modern and archaic at once that I was not sure how to take him, or if I should even try to understand.

He shot me a look that I couldn’t define, adding, “It does you credit to recall that it was not my choice to seek Alfild out, but rather Aerten’s, as she’s the one who foretold it. You know what happens when you don’t listen to her,” he finished with a delicate shudder.

“All of this aside,” I broke in, my voice—much to my inner delight—firm and without a trace of nervousness, “tell me what needs to be done.”

I'm here for a reason, not just to marry this guy," I jerked my thumb at Cadfael. "I can't see what that'll accomplish other than give some divorce lawyer a terrible headache in a few weeks."

"You'll do it?" Du asked excitedly, taking up one of my hands in his. "You'll marry Cadfael then?"

"I didn't say—"

"Lorelei! Ring for the herald! Announce the banns!" Mabd burst into motion, sweeping past me on a waft of woody incense and rich amber. "This needs to be done before daylight!"

"GAH! Wait!" I clutched at my head in frustration, the Sidhe in the room already babbling away in their own tongue, drowning me in words I didn't know. "Cadfael, I never agreed . . ."

"Mother will hear what she wants," he sighed, suddenly close to me. "Just . . . what was that Du told you? Roll with it?"

"I'm dizzy from all this rolling," I muttered. "Look, I'm not going to marry you. I was just asking what good it would do, you know?" I ducked a zooming pixie and groaned. "It's like talking to a brick wall down here."

"Alfhild . . ." His hands were warm on my face, tilting my head so I would have to look at him. "Come with me. Just come away with me and I will tell you how we can end this thing." He looked so earnest, so sincere, that I didn't question him. I nodded mutely, and a tiny smile flittered across his lips. He took up my hands then and, with a silent glance at Du, who nodded, he led me from the room. Mabd was too wrapped up with some gesticulating conversation with Lorelei to notice immediately.

"Tell me," I began, but he shushed me, making a slicing gesture with his free hand, the one that was not entwined with mine. We went just two doors down the corridor, into a dark room that was dank and musty, a vague tang of bitter metal underlying it all. He let go of me and for a moment, I felt lost in the dark. There was a sound like stone on stone and

in seconds, an oily light filled the room, greenish in cast and emanating from a torch held in Cadfael's hand. "What is this place?"

"The entrance to the dungeon," he murmured, taking up my hand again. "There's someone below who can tell us all we need to know."



CHAPTER THIRTEEN



S EVERYONE DOWN HERE A SIZE TWO?"

The stone walls brushed my arms and hips as we made our way slowly down, the slime mold rubbing off on me in viscous green and gray strands. I could feel it, cold and damp, through my sleeves. I tried not to gag. Cadfael didn't seem to notice; in fact, he seemed quite adept at avoiding the stuff altogether as he carried a sickly green light ahead of me.

"We're not a large people," he admitted with a diffident, careful shrug. "I get very uncomfortable visiting the giants, myself. So much space." I wasn't sure but I thought he might have shuddered a bit at that. "Now, please, be quiet. You can pass well enough for one of us in the dark, your skin the way it is, but once you speak, or if you get too close to the light, they'll know."

"Who is this *they*?" I whispered, a knot of fear in my stomach threatening to loosen in an embarrassing way. "Does this *they* eat humans or somesuch?" I paused, Cadfael mere feet from me at the bottom of the steps. "Or worse?" I could imagine far worse than being eaten, I decided. Eaten, you die sooner or later. Worse, you linger . . . maybe forever.

"Just please, do as I say," he groaned, sounding more put upon than I thought he had the right to. "And don't," he added, pointing a commanding finger at me, "think of doing something softhearted and stupid!"



I didn't have time to be offended. A low groan was rising from the dark before us and it seemed to be moving closer. A subtle stench, growing stronger with each second, began to creep into my awareness and trigger my already tetchy gag reflex.

"God, what is that?" I breathed, my fingers moving to cover my mouth almost without me noticing. It was like dirty sweat socks left to marinate in a vat of urine and pus, I thought, not doing myself any favors.

"Prince," a thick, sucking voice rasped, sounding as if it burbled up through swamp mud. "Is today the day? Today you kill me?"

"I promised you that you will live," Cadfael replied in a voice I had yet to hear him use, one that was commanding and blunt. "You're nearly at the end of your chain, Riordan. Come no further."

"Why are you threatening him?" I fretted near Cadfael's ear. "He sounds beat up enough!"

"Silence, Alfild, please."

A shuffle and hiss stopped whatever words were coming out of my mouth. In the oily light of the torch, a dark shape was resolving itself into something vile, something disgusting.

"Prince," it slurred, "kill me. I beg of you." Deep yellow eyes lit on me and I had to try hard not to cringe. Flesh hung in ribbons from a frame that seemed ravaged by more than time. Hunched and soft, the form tried to straighten but could not. "I have no more to tell."

It seemed to lean in toward us and I couldn't help it. I yelped. I jerked back, tripping over the hem of my gown and staggering as I tried to catch myself before I fell. Again. "Al—" Cadfael cut his own words short. "Get up," he ordered. "Riordan, you know the drill. Back." He took a few steps towards the rotting thing, brandishing the torch like a sword. "Tell me again about Gulliver. Tell me what you told Du." His voice did not shake but for some reason, I knew he was fearful.

“There is nothing,” it hissed back. “Nothing. Gulliver is loosed on the upper realms. He is free from censure.” It coughed, and something wet splattered on the stone floor. “Prince of the Seelie, seeking his blood. He wants it, he needs it . . .” A sharp indrawn breath made something rattle and the dark shape lunged, rattling and snapping a chain to its breaking point. “Lying Sidhe! She is human, she is meat!”

It was salivating, flecks of spittle hitting Cadfael’s coat and flying in the torchlight. “Her skin lies to me, her scent is true! She is of Danu’s blood but she is a human, a liar!” It lunged again and the chain groaned under the assault. I was scrambling backwards as fast as I could but the slimy floor impeded me, making my feet slip for purchase as I backscrabbled for the stairs. The thing was howling now, a sudden and wrenching noise that made me cry out in some sort of primal response to another creature’s pain. I could see it like lights rising from its skin, the pain and hurt, the sheer frustration at being made to stay here, at the silver chains binding it. Cadfael’s arm swung out and he back-fisted the thing, sending it scurrying back, snarling and snapping like an enraged beast man angered.

“Go. Now. That chain isn’t as strong as I thought,” he breathed, hustling me towards the narrow staircase. “This is not going well . . .”

“Really? Cause that seemed just fanfreakingtastic to me,” I snapped, hitting my knees on the steps. “Damn it!”

“Go,” he hissed. “Go go go go go!”

I turned my head to snarl a response, but found myself staring into deep golden eyes, something dark and dripping closing over my mouth.



“This is disgusting . . .”

“I told you to go,” Cadfael muttered from somewhere beside me. “But you didn’t.”

“Shut up. Just . . . shut up.” I pushed myself up, horribly aware of the squish and slip of something organic beneath my hands. “It’s all over me,” I groaned.

“It’s ghoulish leavings,” Cadfael informed me, sounding particularly pleased with himself. “Our only source of information has escaped—”

“If you say ‘thanks to you,’ I’m going to kick your ass,” I growled, making it to my feet with no small amount of effort. “What happened?” I tasted bile in my mouth and felt as if I had been pummeled all over by stones. “And what, for the love of all that is good, is that stench?” I gagged, the smell filling my senses and making the inside of my mouth taste foul and thick. “Oh, god . . .”

“Rotten flesh,” Cadfael replied matter-of-factly. “If you’re done with the theatrics, we can go above. The alarm has been sounded—the ghoulish took down one of the guards. I’m betting that Mabd,” he added without hesitation, “is not happy with you.”

“You’re a real ass, you know that?” I swayed on my feet and raised my hand to push the hair from my eyes, frowning as I saw I still glowed silvery in the dark dungeon. “Today sucks.”

“Riordan was not always a ghoulish,” he said quietly, taking my elbow to lead me back up the narrow stairs. “He was once, as his name says, the king’s bard. He . . . fell into Mabd’s poor graces and is now bound to his current form until he makes amends. Which,” he added, tugging me along so that I had to trot to keep up, the feeling of an impending fall making the back of my neck prickle with anxiety, “is why he was in the dungeon!”

“Ghoulish . . . they eat dead bodies,” I said, sounding, as near as I could figure, sick. “Was he going to eat us?”

“We’re not dead, are we?” Cadfael shot back, shoving me ahead of him into the barely-lit antechamber, the large and mostly empty room just above the dungeon proper. “He is likely running back to the Seelie Court. I doubt,” he added, his frown plain even in the pale light of the torches,

“they will receive him with open arms. He has told their secrets, revealed their machinations. He will die before the next star-rise.”

I don't know which bothered me more: the fact he seemed entirely unbothered by this notion or the feeling he seemed complicit in this, by the nonchalant way he talked about Mabd's curse and the likely outcome. “Why . . . what the hell could he have told you that would get him killed?” I asked, my throat suddenly dry. I knew I looked no better than the benighted Riordan in my slime-covered garb but Cadfael did not look on me with the disgust I believed I warranted in this state.

“He told us—Mabd, Du and I—about Gulliver. We did not,” he said a bit more loudly, cutting me off, “torture him.”

Remembering the clank of the chains and the dank, disgusting nature of the dungeon, I glared at the faerie prince. “We must have very different definitions of torture then.” I glanced at the door behind me and leveled my glare back at Cadfael. “Why is your room so close to the dungeon? So you can work late hours and not have to go so far to bed?” I tried to affect a haughty countenance but I think the best I managed was looking mildly constipated.

“My room,” he said calmly, pacing towards me, forcing me to step back and find myself pressed against the wall with the cold stone and slime making my skin crawl, “is where it is because it is safe. I do not, by-the-by, have to answer to you at this point.”

“What does that *ow!*” My world exploded into a starburst of pain as the wooden door slammed open, hitting me square in the face. I'm fairly certain I unleashed a torrent of words not expected of an alleged future princess of the realm.

“Alfhild!” Cadfael surged forward and his hands were on me, a shred of cloth in his fingers dabbing the blood from my nose. “Are you in pain?”

“Oh, I'm freaking orgasmic!” I snapped painfully. “Oh, ow!”

“Some women,” Du’s unashamed voice retorted, “can be after such pain.”

“Shut up,” I cried, my face throbbing and setting my teeth on edge.



“Alfhild, it’s not broken,” Cadfael announced after a careful palpation of my nose. “Just very swollen.”

“Faaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaantastic . . .”

Du made an impatient noise and swatted at Cadfael’s arm. “Mabd took a bit but she realized you and your, ah, blushing bride were missing. She’s on the warpath already and Riordan escaping is not going to help matters.” He shot me a look which, through my tear-filled eyes, I decoded as being annoyed. “We’d best get you both cleaned up before Mabd demands heads to roll.”

Cadfael began to argue but thought better of it. “Tell Lorelei to get fresh garments for Alfhild. The Snow Queens are in the antechamber, correct? Ask Hoelle and Annis to come see me in my *personal* throne room.”

My head reeled. “*Black Annis?*” I was being tugged along by Du, his incredulous snort ringing in my ears. “I remember that story . . . She eats kids!”

“She’s a very nice old lady,” Cadfael insisted once we were out in the hall. I could hear the chaos above us and ahead of us, voices and footsteps all searching for Riordan, putting the court on lockdown. “Just don’t let her riddle you!”

I didn’t have a chance to ask what he meant. Du was shoving me back into the bedchamber, slamming the door behind us. We were alone; not even a pixie sparkled in the corners of the room.

“Look, Alfhild,” he said rapidly in a pacific tone, “I know this is all difficult for you and you don’t know what to make of it. You’re only getting

tiny pieces of the story from each of us and each bit is more fantastic than the last, right?”

I nodded dumbly, transfixed by the cat eyes staring at me.

“It’s only going to get more difficult, I’m sorry to say. From here on out, things are going to move fast. We . . . may have miscalculated. Your disappearance has set Gulliver aflame in the above world. He’s wreaking havoc in subtle ways that humans would not recognize but are resounding in the Sidhe realm. Already . . .” He paused and swallowed hard before continuing. “Already pieces are dying. He’s cut off access and cut through the ley lines in some spots. He’s using very ancient powers, things that we do not dare meddle with. Even Mabd is wary of the ancient ways. We were gods once,” he added in a rush. “Some of us, anyway. These powers are older than them, older than humanity . . .”

“Du,” I breathed, not caring now that I was slime covered and bloody, “you’re babbling. Take a breath . . .” I did so myself, not realizing I had been holding it in for so long my lungs ached with the effort. “Now, tell me what I need to do.”

My world seemed so far away, like it was a dream itself and this was my new reality. I thought of Jackie and wondered if she thought me dead or just missing. I wanted to cry for her, for my home, for myself, but I did not. Instead, I found myself listening intently to Du and envisioning his words.

“You’re already halfway Sidhe,” he murmured, indicating the silver glow rising off of me. “Only one who is part of us can read our words and speak our tongue. All it took was a nudge to that secret part of your powers, Alfild. Just a tiny shove and you were open to us. And now, now your mark of Danu is showing brightly.” He smiled a tad guiltily at that. “You are not fully Sidhe but nor are you fully human. You never were, Alfild of the Seven Snows.” He reached out tentatively and laid a hand on my shoulder. “There is a war coming and many will die.”

“Is it . . . is it because of me?” I could not help the question and it came out in a rush, the words running together into one jumbled slur.

He inhaled deeply and pursed his lips, eyeing me judiciously. “Not,” he finally said, “in the manner you believe. But you are at the center of it. Gulliver covets what you have and what you are. And you, until yesterday, were guileless and without knowledge of this. Now you are complicit in our plans, one way or the other.” He smiled ruefully, looking down at his feet. “Cadfael will send you back above until the battle is won or lost. He will want you gone from this place because here you will surely be exposed to the worst of any realm. You are more in danger here than above since the moratorium on travel and we can protect you above . . . we can set guards who will recognize Seelie in disguise.” He was babbling again and I did not stop him. “If you stay here, you will need to take up weapons. You will need to be ready to defend yourself and the court. And . . .” he trailed off. “Alfhild, when he says for you to leave, leave. If we survive, he will come for you again.”

Silence fell. I could not even hear the distant shouting and stomping of angry footsteps inside our shell of stone. I had not expected the idea of leaving to hit me like that, in the chest like a fist. I had expected to be happy, maybe a hint of remorse, but happy. Instead, I found myself shaking my head, backing away from Du. “No . . . if this is my fault, I’m going to stay!”

“Alfhild, please,” he sighed, rubbing a tired hand over his face. “Cadfael must be able to lead an army. He cannot lead one if he’s worried about you!”

“I can fight!” I lied. “I used to fight with Gulliver all the time! I know how to use a gun!” I was babbling myself now and I did not care. “Let me stay!”

“Alfhild, be reasonable. I’m asking as the leader of the Cait Sidhe, for you to return to the safety of your home. On my honor, you will be safe there and protected.”

“Just leave? After all of this? You want me to just . . . just go?”

“Lass, you’re shaking,” he sighed, reaching to enfold me in a friendly embrace. “We will not abandon you. This is just for a short time. It is a small wait.” He smiled, patting my shoulders sadly. “Please?”

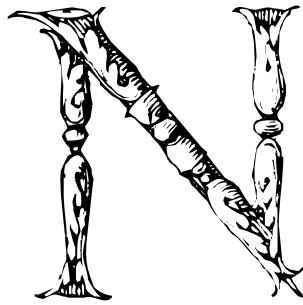
“Du, I don’t know you well but I like you. And . . . this place scares me and makes me angry but it feels so . . .familiar. It enchanted me,” I laughed hollowly. “I can’t go if this is my doing.”

Du sighed heavily and set me at arm’s length. “I was worried you might say that, lass.” His eyes narrowed and he reached for my face, cupping it in both of his hands. “I am truly sorry . . .” There was a sharp pain behind my eyes and I felt as if I was falling, his hands sliding from my face as I tumbled backwards. In my darkness I braced, expecting to hit stone yet again, but gasped as I felt something soft and familiar.

The darkness cleared and a scream of surprise caught in my throat. I was home.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN



O . . . NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO
no . . .” It was dark outside, my alarm
clock by the bed proclaiming it to be
somewhere in the vicinity of three AM. I
wasn’t sure what day it was but I
suspected it to be Tuesdays. Tuesdays
never started out well for me. I was still wearing the slime and
filth covered gown, my skin still shining oddly in the half light of
my room, and the stench I had complained about earlier seemed
to be rising from my own person.

“Oh, god,” I groaned. “Okay, first things first . . .” I tried to
clear my mind of any and all worries but found myself thinking
of one thing: the Sidhe. My fantasies were never so detailed, I
thought, marching myself into the bathroom with its cube of a
shower positioned at the foot of an old fashioned claw foot tub.
The dress hit the floor with a sodden thump and I turned the
water on as hot as it would go.

I barely remember getting under the needle-sharp stream,
scrubbing with soap and sponge though I do recall how rough it
felt on my skin and the drowsy jasmine scent that made me
think of Mabd. I don’t remember getting out of the shower,
dripping wet because I forgot my towel and padding naked into
my bedroom. I was in a fog, thick and sorrowful, until a shrill
scream cut through me like a knife.



“Lorelei!” I was tackled to the ground, a sobbing, sharp featured woman atop me, screaming my name. I caught my breath, my body tensing for a fraction of a second before I realized who she was. As best I could, I shifted beneath her to breathe and patted her face gently.

“Jackie,” I said firmly, “Jackie, calm down!” I wriggled out from under her, every bruise and sore muscle I had sustained in the past night or so making itself known. Jackie’s cries had brought people running and, as I knelt naked on my bedroom floor, I noticed the two large men in the doorway. One was a police officer, judging by the looks of him, and the other was Gulliver in all his centerfold good-looks glory. My half brother’s eyes bored into me with all the hatred I could imagine, making me want to hide under the bed until he went away.

“I assume you’re the missing sister?” the police officer said, sounding thoroughly bored. “Where’ve you been?”

I tugged the sheet off the bed behind me, pulling it around me like a toga as I stared at the two men, batting Jackie’s hands away as gently as I could. “I . . . I got lost when I went out for a walk. I just now found my way back.” I swallowed hard, my face coloring with my lie. Jackie and the officer did not seem to notice I was shining with a silvery sheen, but Gulliver was staring at me openly, his nostrils flaring like a hound on the scent trail of a wounded animal. “I went out for a walk and got lost on the moor,” I extemporized, looking down at my knees. The moors were hazardous unless you were well versed in the sort of outdoorsy things that I only had a vague inkling towards.

I could play the dumb female role well; I’m Southern and I’ve found that, if you thicken your accent and act shy and contrite, men will forgive you anything. “I’m sorry for worrying everyone,” I added, glancing up at Jackie. “I forgot to take my phone with me and . . . well . . . I’m sorry!” The tears that were trickling down my cheeks were real, my artifice becoming reality.

Gulliver raised a cool brow and, in a voice that was so devoid of emotion that he could have been talking about anything from a rock to some crap on the bottom of his shoe, said “Thank god my sister is safe. I was so worried I could hardly sleep. It was all I could do to get here from Athens before they declared you dead.”

“There was blood,” Jackie said in a near-whisper, clinging to my hand. “It was on the bathroom floor . . .”

I rolled my eyes, embarrassed. “Um . . . that was a bit of an accident,” I replied, clearing my throat as I struggled to my feet. “You know . . . that time and all . . .” I didn’t know where the blood had come from but I knew that if they analyzed it, it wouldn’t be mine. It was the best thing I could think of to get Jackie off my hand and the incredulous look off of the officer’s face. He made noises about calling in to report the situation, and disappeared down the dark hall, no doubt heading for the kitchen to make said call.

“Why did you report an intruder?” Gulliver asked softly, not moving from his spot by the door. “There’s a recording of you on the emergency line.” He shifted subtly, just enough for me to notice and think him more threatening than before. “Did you decide to go walkabout after someone broke in?” He glanced at Jackie, his expression shifting to displeasure. “Jacqueline, go get us some tea. I want to speak with Lorelei,” he said the name like it burned his tongue, “alone.”

Reluctantly, Jackie nodded, giving me a quick hug before following the footsteps of the officer down the hall. I could hear her sniffing even after she vanished from sight.

“Gulliver,” I said as nonchalantly as possible, “I’m sorry for worrying you.”

He was across the room and had my wrists in his hands before I could draw a breath. His grip crushed me and I swear I felt the bones grinding against each other as he bent closer, his eyes like fire.

“Let go of me!”

“You are touched.” His voice shivered across my skin as his grip relaxed just enough to allow movement. He slid his fingers down my forearm, his eyes never leaving my face. “I smell the Unseelie all over you, their vile stench seeping from your pores. Did he touch you, Alfild? Did he fuck you?”

I couldn’t breathe and, for one moment, I was fairly certain I was going to faint. *You lied to me, Du*, I thought bitterly. *You can’t protect me while I’m here but*, the thought flashed into my mind even as a feeling of despair grew in my belly, *if Gulliver is here, then he isn’t hurting anyone in the Unseelie Court.*

“What are you talking about?” I didn’t have to fake the quiver in my voice. Gulliver’s face was like stone and, for one brief moment, I could have sworn he shone as Cadfael did and I had begun to. “I got lost on the moors . . .”

“There’s ghoulish slime all over this place,” he spat, shoving me away. I managed to catch myself before I fell, but he was towering over me now, menacing in every sense of the word. “You were always such a stupid girl, useless for naught but breeding,” he continued, his voice low and almost tender. I don’t know what he was going to do or say next because a flicker of movement caught my eye. We both looked towards the door at the same time, me with curiosity and him with annoyance. The flicker resolved into a pale pink blur and, before I could react, Gulliver was screaming, holding his head and spinning away from me, staggering towards the bathroom door.

Rose bobbed in front of me briefly and I caught a glimpse of a wicked smile and blood on her lips, then she was gone, shooting upwards to hide in the light fixture, her glow paling to be almost unnoticeable.

“What the hell is going on back here?” the officer demanded from the hall as he ran back to us and skidded to a halt in the doorway of my room.

“He’s got a headache,” I said hastily, dropping to sit on my bed. “He’s . . . he’ll be fine.” I passed a hand across my tired eyes and wished for nothing more than a nice, deep sleep at that moment. “Do I need to answer any questions or anything? I’d . . . I’d really love to go to bed about now.”

Gulliver’s howling had become muted cursing, drawing the officer’s attention to the door.

“Can someone take him out, please? I want to be alone.”

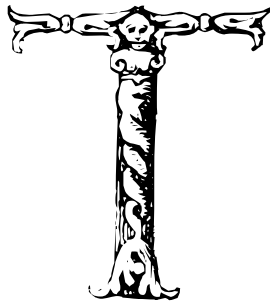
The officer wavered. “You’re an adult and were gone for less than twenty four hours according to the report . . . There’s really not much to file on this.” He shrugged. “I’ll take your brother by hospital if his head’s so bad as all that,” he added, heading for the bathroom door.

Gulliver chose that moment to emerge. One hand was clutched above his eye and I knew that Rose had bit him there, repeatedly. The thought made me smile just a bit, but I managed to hide it in a cough, covering my mouth with my hand.

Gulliver snarled something at the officer and, in a flurry of panicky words from Jackie, they all finally left.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN



HE SNICK OF THE FRONT DOOR locking behind them resounded like a gunshot in the suddenly too-quiet house. I knew I wasn't alone but the old place had never felt more lonesome.

Most of the house had been around before the Elizabethan era but the front hall had been remodeled after a fire in the Regency period. It was the only place that didn't have cold flagstone floors or dark walls that seemed stained with the years. I stood for a quiet moment on the old wooden floorboards, one hand pressed against the wood and plaster wall and the other pressed to my forehead. "Rose," I finally called. "You can come out now."

After a pause, two balls of light zipped over my shoulder and came to hover in front of me. Rose was one of them but the other, I didn't recognize.

"This is Daffodil," she said, answering my unasked question. "She's my little sister."

Daffodil bobbed up and down, the pixie version of a curtsy, I surmised.

"Don't you worry, Alfild. We're not the only things that go bump in the night about here!" she laughed, the sound making me smile. "Gulliver won't be entering your home again," she added, her glow dimming slightly.



Daffodil seemed equally serious, the golden cream color of her glow wavering before turning white like a lightbulb's shine. "We cannae keep him from your property entire, alas, but we can keep him off ye."

Her thickening accent spoke volumes. They were here to protect me, I thought, these tiny, fierce beings. They were here to die for me. "Thank you, Rose, Daffodil. Thank you. I'll . . ." I paused, racking my brain for a memory. "I'll set you out some cream and honey and fresh bread before I go to sleep." The pixies giggled happily and shot towards the drawing room, leaving me alone in the foyer once more. With a deep sigh, I turned and made my way to the guest bedroom near mine, reluctant to sleep in the room where this whole mess seemed to have begun. Sparks of color lit my path and I smiled faintly. I was surrounded, I thought. Under the vigilant watch of the universe's tiniest soldiers.

The room was cold and musty from disuse but I didn't care. Somewhere, people—beings—I knew were dying, and it was my fault. I felt a pull in my chest, something deep and sorrowful, making me curl in on myself as I lay in the cool-sheeted bed. I might sleep, I thought, but I would not rest.

"Lorelei." The voice was soft and warm. It made me think of my mother and, even in the edges of sleep, I wanted to cry. "Lorelei . . ." My mom, I thought, would not call me Lorelei. She wouldn't have to. There was a quiet sigh, and then the voice was louder. "Alfhild. Get your ass up!"

My eyes snapped open and I inhaled sharply. "Jackie," I groaned. "God . . . what time is it?"

"Noon." She shoved open the heavy, ancient curtains gracing the guest bedroom, letting the weak and watery winter sunlight in to taunt me. "You've been asleep for a day and a half," she added, sitting on the edge of my bed with a tired smile. "Gulliver's come and gone a few times but he never gets much further than the gate . . . It's kind of weird," she

continued, shoving a bed tray at me gently. It was laden with a real breakfast, no sign of Twinkies. I kind of missed the Twinkies.

Hiding a yawn, I struggled to sit up. I felt a bit sick, as oversleeping can make you feel, and stiff all over. I was glad I had showered before crawling into bed. A day and half with that crud all over me would have made for one hell of a stench. “You haven’t been here the whole time, have you?” I asked, taking up one of the croissants and proffering the other to her.

“Someone had to feed the kitty,” she said around a bite of the bread.

I paused mid-chew. “I don’t have a cat,” I replied. “Maybe it’s a stray.” I knew better though. I could practically hear the pixies giggling.

“Noooooooooooo . . . it was asleep on the hearth when I came in yesterday to check on you. Big, unneutered tom cat, this one. Beautiful coat, though. Like a calico but not . . .” She took another bite of the croissant and frowned. “Maybe you should get him fixed, Alfie.”

I choked on my mouthful of breakfast, grabbing for the orange juice as Jackie shot forward to pat me on the back a little more roughly than I might have liked. “No,” I managed. “I think . . . he’s fine the way he is. I don’t know where he came from,” I added in all honesty. “Maybe he snuck in behind you one morning.”

A twinkling of light near Jackie’s head made me hold my breath but no pixie showed itself as my best friend moved the tray away from my legs. “Your color is all off, honey,” she sighed, her mind flitting from topic to topic like a butterfly. “You look . . . gray.”

I didn’t have to glance down at my skin to know the silver sheen was still there. “Oh? Like . . . Tin Man in Wizard of Oz gray?” *I have to tell her, I thought. No, what if Gulliver gets hold of her? Or what if she thinks I’m crazy and calls the doctor on me?*

“No, he’s silver. You just look washed out and underfed,” she decided, tugging on my hands to get me to my feet. “I’ll help you wash up if you can’t stand on your own, then we’ll finish breakfast!”

I let her lead me on legs shaky as a newborn colt towards my bathroom. A day and a half, I thought. Below, that could be ages. Cadfael could be dead down there, the court in ruins. Du might not even know.

“Jackie, I just want to sit down, okay? I showered before bed the other night and . . .” I took a deep breath, extricating myself from her grasp and leaning against the doorframe. “I just want to take some tea and sit on the back patio.”

Jackie looked like she wanted to argue, but thought better of it. She shrugged and slid past me, muttering about something to do with insanity brought on by lack of proper food, and left me propped on the doorframe. I took several deep, steady breaths, and then tested my legs. They were shaky but I wasn’t going to collapse any time soon, I decided. It felt good to be up and, while I still felt hung over from too much sleep, I was going to be okay, I figured.

Carefully, I made my way down the hall to the door leading onto the back patio. It had been a servant’s entrance until my grandmother’s time. After that, they had added in the concrete pallet and the lawn furniture. It was really too cold for me to be outside without a coat on, just wearing my fuzzy socks and old flannel pajamas, but the early days of winter were tolerable for short periods of time and the back yard was sheltered by the tall brick fence that had been put in sometime during the last days of the Regent’s reign, when the land had been parceled off and reduced to the present lot size.

I eased out onto the patio, shutting the door firmly behind me before shuffling over to the wrought iron chair. It was cold, even though my flannels, but I didn’t care. I needed time to think and, love her though I might, Jackie was not conducive to quiet meditation.

A slick and furry body rubbed against my legs, large paws pressing onto my knee, and I smiled faintly. “Du, if you’re in there, give me a sign,” I muttered.

The cat, almost solid black with just a hint of orange around the ears and paws, settled around my left ankle and bit me there sharply. I swear he winked at me.

We fell into a companionable silence; me staring at the bricks in the fence and him purring in a way that I knew I should consider suggestive but just could not make myself do while he was a cat. Something, I thought, was off. Something was different.

“Du,” I sighed, “I can’t be here. I know you think it’s the best thing but I just can’t be here. Not when things are happening below because of me.”

Du snorted, a kitty-sneeze, and bit my ankle again, harder this time.

“Be nice,” I scolded, “or I’ll let Jackie get you fixed.”

“Who’re you talking to?” the woman in question asked, shoving the door closed with her hip as she trundled out a tea tray with a steaming pot of the brew on it. “Ahhh . . . so he is yours then. He’s adopted you.”

I muttered a noncommittal murmur as she set up the tea cups and plate of cookies, The-Cat-Who-Might-Be-Du thrumming happily on my foot the entire time. He bore a scar, almost hidden under his fur, along one shoulder.

This, I decided, was most certainly Du. I didn’t know if he could read my mind or not but he must have picked up on something because he suddenly became even more affectionate, almost apologetic in his head butting and loud purring. “Jackie,” I said carefully, wanting to appear casually interested and not on the verge of panic, “who reported me missing?”

“I did,” she admitted after a guilty sip of her tea. “You didn’t call me like usual at eight, so I decided to come check up on you at lunch. I cancelled the meeting with the publisher and headed straight here from town.” She paused, looking down at her hands for a moment before meeting my gaze earnestly. “The whole place was locked up tight so I used

your key under the rock . . .” Her voice broke and she reached up to dash tears away before they could fall, “It looked as if you’d been killed!”

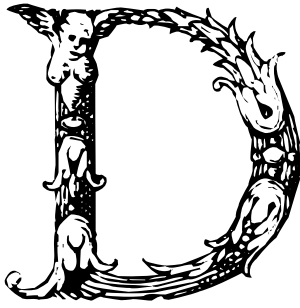
I tuned out, the hitch in Jackie’s well-meaning voice making me want to cry myself. I could not shake the images my brain was concocting of bloody mayhem, limbs and wings torn asunder. I only noticed when Jackie’s voice trailed off into a surprised ‘huh.’

“What is it?”

“Looks like that rose bush of yours finally died!”



CHAPTER SIXTEEN



U.” I POKED THE FURRY BEAST gently with my toe. “Du, wake up or I swear to whatever god you choose that I’ll put a floppy pink bow on your neck and parade you around town in a baby carriage.”

The cat shifted and stretched, rolled to his feet favoring me with a disdainful look.

“I mean it!” I glanced over my shoulder to make sure I was still alone and was relieved to see Jackie still snoring away on the sofa.

The fire crackled beside me and Du turned his face away from me to look at the shooting sparks. I had no idea where the pixies had gone to but I had made sure to leave a plate of bread and cream and some shiny coins out for them, out of Jackie’s sight.

“He’s not dead,” Du’s voice came softly from the cat. I stared, and then blinked to clear my eyes as if that would help. The cat’s mouth moved as if it were trying to speak and the emergence of a human voice from a feline throat was almost too Disney for me. “If that’s what you’re most worried about,” he added, the words almost a purr.

“You know what I’m worried about,” I whispered back, bending low and scratching behind his ears, trying to keep up appearances in case Jackie awakened. “Take me back, Du. Now. Tonight.”



I took a deep breath, trying to ignore his incredulous look. “I’ll take my own supplies so y’all don’t have to. I’ll go get dressed now and I’ll leave Jackie a note.”

“Alfhild,” he said softly, his muscles rippling under my hand, “Gulliver has cut off access from this port. The pixies and I are stuck here until it changes.” He sighed and stood, padding away from me and towards the dark hall leading to my bedroom.

It had been six hours since I had seen the rose bush and its brown, withered leaves and dried twigs. Six hours since I was certain of the extent of the damage below. It had been like walking on a bed of nails, waiting for Jackie to finally settle in for the evening, waiting until I could get Du alone.

Now I was going to have to play along, I thought bitterly, and go with Du. I followed after another quick glance at Jackie, meeting Du in my proper bedroom. He had jumped onto my bed and was busily shedding on my white comforter, his luminous eyes fixed on me intently as I shut the door behind me. “The Snow Queens will come soon,” he said in his so-soft voice. “The ancient ones can still cross the barriers. They were there before the walls of man and Sidhe.”

“Du,” I said after a hesitation, “this is going to be a long talk. Could you please look human? Or Sidhe? Or less feline? Please?” My head was already starting to ache and it was not even five minutes into the conversation. “I can’t argue with you if you look like someone’s pet.”

Du uttered an indignant snort and the air around him began to shimmer like a heat mirage. It seemed as if my vision blurred but it was him, his entire form changing into something I recognized as humanoid. It lasted all of three seconds but it seemed to stretch for an eternity as he became what I knew.

“Better? Good. The Snow Queens are older than the world itself,” he said matter-of-factly. “They’ll be here before noontide tomorrow and they

will tell you what you may and may not do.” He shrugged a tad sheepishly. “Mabd ordered it so.”

He coughed delicately and rose to his feet with characteristic grace. His wounds of earlier were mostly healed, an amazing feat to my human mind.

“You must rest and be safe, Alfild,” he continued as if it were the most natural thing in the world for him to be tucking me in, leading me by my elbow to my bed and pulling back the thick comforter with a slight smile.

“Du, listen to me good, right? I’m not going to sit around on my ass and eat bonbons while this is going on. I can get to Gulliver and make him open the port.” I pushed him away gently, already heading for the dresser where I kept my jeans and warm sweaters. “Is it cold there? Or is the weather always so as nice as it was the other night?”

Du wasn’t talking to me, just standing on my rug and watching me sadly.

“Oooooooooookay,” I sighed when he didn’t respond. “I’ll layer.” I knew, in some tiny and logical part of my mind, that I was manic, pulling on thick tights, then jeans, then reaching for my bra and tank top on top of the dresser. I suppose it was the white knight fantasy in reverse; instead of my prince coming to me, I would go to him. I would save him and the Sidhe, somehow, some way.

“Alfild,” he broke my train of thought with his tone. “If you try, Gulliver can get to you. Only the dwelling is protected. The grounds are not. He waits, Alfild. He waits for you there. If he takes you then you are in the hold of the Seelie court!”

He was across the room in two long strides, grabbing my upper arms with enough force to bruise. He pushed me into the dresser, knocking over perfume bottles and random knickknacks as he pressed in close. “If they take you, they will use you. They will torture you, abuse you, and make you into a quivering shell of a human. They are not your fantasy faeries!

They are not sweetness and light!” He shook me once, his eyes flashing as he shoved himself away from me and began pacing.

“Gulliver waits. He’s not stupid. He’s the most intelligent Seelie I know, in fact. And he will not hesitate to destroy you utterly. You are less than nothing to him, to any of them! You are human and your race is pressing out ours! What do you think he’d do with you, Alfhild?” He whirled about to face me, looking more beast than man in that moment.

“He won’t kill me,” I replied tightly. “Anything short of that, I’ll be fine.” I was dressed, lacking only my boots. I was almost ready.

Du shifted back to his cat form, following me as I made a beeline for the kitchen, grabbing my backpack off the hook in the hall as I passed. As quietly as I could, I began throwing granola bars, bottled water and anything portable I could eat into the sack, Du circling my ankles the whole while. My boots were next, easily slipped on and then I made it on silent feet almost all the way to the back door.

“Sweetie?”

Damn it. “I’m going for a walk, Jacks. I’ll be back . . . in a bit.” I didn’t stay to listen to her protests. I couldn’t. She’d do a good job of convincing me, I knew. “Um, take care of Du, kay? He’s sneaky.”

“Oh no you don’t!” She followed me out into the yard, oblivious, it seemed, to the growing cold. “What the hell are you doing? I’m going to call the doctor,” she threatened. “You’re off your trolley!”

I stamped around the rose bush, peering into the bare branches, muttering for someone, anyone to hear me. “Jackie,” I sighed, poking into the bush with a careful finger, “I’m not crazy. I’m just . . . involved.”

“Come back inside,” she pleaded, huddling in the curve of her own arms. “Please! It’s cold as a well digger’s arse out here!” She hopped from one foot to the other, not seeing the colorful flashes of light darting near her head. “You’re having some weird stress thing and you need to rest

before you catch your death of cold or somesuch!” She bounced more, her teeth chattering audibly now.

“Jackie, go back in! Take the cat with you—he doesn’t want to be part of this!” I was nearing desperate. How did you open the portal? There had to be some trick, some little twist. Then it occurred to me. I was the key. I was the twist. “Call Gulliver,” I said suddenly. “Tell him I want to see him. Now. Tell him Danu demands it.”

“. . . what?” Jackie shook her head, blonde curls tumbling down into her eyes from their precarious pin atop her head. “Who’s Danu? And Gulliver? You *are* insane! Come on!” She grabbed for me but missed as I practically danced out of her reach. I knew how, now. I knew how to cross through. Du had disappeared into the shadows near the porch but I could feel his glare on me like a knife. Gulliver would take me through. He would get me behind the lines, as it were. It was all a matter of timing . . .



“It’s almost dawn,” Jackie groaned. It had been so long since we had first come out that I no longer knew if it had been hours or minutes passing. The damp cold had finally seeped into my bones and everything ached, even my skin.

“Did you call him again?” I demanded through clenched teeth. “Did he say he was coming?”

“He hasn’t answered since the first call, hon. And he said he would be here when the time is right.” She plucked at my sleeve sadly, her sigh mournful. “You’re worrying me terribly, Alfie. Please. Come inside. Let’s go wait for him indoors.” She tugged on my arm again and this time, I let her pull me a few feet. “There’s a girl . . .”

Rose jangled into existence in front of my face, her bright pink glow nearly blinding. Jackie gasped and dropped my arm, her life long loathing

of insects springing into action as she began flailing wildly. Rose dodged and darted, her angry voice like falling silverware on flagstone.

I could see the pale yellow glow of Daffodil hovering fretfully some distance away and I edged towards her, leaving Rose to ably deal with Jackie's panic attack. "Daffodil," I called softly, my steps light on the crunching winter grass. "It's okay . . . I'm not going to panic on you, I promise."

She fluttered closer, her wide eyes flickering between me and the commotion behind me. "What's gotten you two so upset?" I knelt down near the shrub she had been hiding in, holding out my hand as a platform for her to rest on. After a bobbing hesitation, her tiny feet touched my palm and I blinked at how cold they were, like little blocks of ice.

"Gulliver," she said shrilly, panic more than accent causing the grating in her voice. "He's here! He's outside, around the house!"

"Pixies never were the quickest, mentally," the man in question intoned behind me. Jackie and Rose had fallen silent and I could feel Du wrapping slickly around my ankles, a growl rumbling through his chest. "What they lack in brains, though," my half brother continued, "they make up for in physical speed." He smiled in the near-dark and held out a hand. "Alfhild. Or rather, it's Lorelei here. I keep forgetting."

I raised a brow, refusing to let my sudden bowel-cramping fear show. This man had killed people. I knew this for a fact, no matter what the courts said. This man had killed people who stood in his way. He was not human himself, and he had no love for me. Less now, I added mentally, that he could see me as marked. "I want to know why you're doing this, Gulliver. Why are you closing off the court?"

"What is she talking about? What are you talking about?" Jackie was at my side, pressing close as if she could protect me from Gulliver. She glared at him as if she could bend him to her will through sheer anger.

“My poor sister is most addled,” Gulliver purred. He lowered his hand, his eyes never leaving mine. It occurred to me then that the dark color was false, that his eyes were like Cadfael’s, swirling in a kaleidoscope of color. Was it glamor, I wondered? What did he really look like under that perfect façade? “I think she needs to see a doctor, Jackie. Why don’t you go call one?”

Blessedly, Jackie agreed soundlessly and ran for the house, leaving me with the Sidhe folk in my own yard.

The briar patch, I thought. Just like the briar patch. “Gulliver, I don’t know what’s going on. I—” I choked, lowering my eyes as if I were about to cry. In truth, I was too scared to cry. “—I don’t know what to do . . .”

“You’re so weak,” he sighed, his smile curving into something distinctly predatory.

I could see his shimmer now. I had eyes to see, I thought, and ears to hear.

He reached for me, his fingers skimming my cheek and chin, and I could feel the power humming in him, see a pale silver-gold shimmer rising from his skin in the pale moonlight. “You’re not as clever as you think, dear sister. You want me to take you through the veil, into the Seelie Court. You want your white knight to rescue you. Cadfael, charging through the gates and taking you from harm.” His voice had taken on a sing-song cadence, obviously mocking me.

His fingers made their way to my collar bone and it was all I could do not to jerk away, gagging in response to his loathsome touch.

Gulliver’s eyes searched my face and seemed satisfied at what he saw there. “No, little Alfhild, my darling little snow drop. You’re not a heroine in one of those insipid romances. You’re a pawn. You die, Cadfael moves on. If he survives the Seelie court.” His smile was gone now, his lips a hard, thin line in a granite face. “I know you harbor grand illusions, you

and those terrible little pixies of yours, but I must say it heartens me greatly to see the human race still plodding along in their hopeful trance.”

He grabbed my left wrist then, his fingers so tight I gasped. I could feel them biting into me with a force no human could match and I knew that, if he wanted, he could easily crush my bones.

“Come along then, little sister, since this is your heart’s desire,” he mocked.

“Gulliver,” I said with a hint of a squeak in my voice, “I’m not trying to trick you.” He was dragging me towards the brown and crunchy rose bush; I could feel the grass and dirt of the yard sliding beneath my boot heels as I dug in, resisting him as fear finally started to make sense. Du clung to my leg like a limpet, his claws piercing layers of denim and nylon as he drew blood in his desperation. Maybe, I reflected, my heels leaving ruts in the soft soil, this is a bad idea.

“Hey!” Jackie burst into the back yard, the old wooden door banging off the brick exterior of the house. “Let her go! Gulliver, I called for an ambulance! Let her go!” She practically flew to us, streaks of colored light following her at shoulder level, the tiny noise of screaming pixies, cursing and fussing, clear in the darkness.

She grabbed hold of my half brother’s arm and tried to pull him away from me, losing her grip and falling back, twisting so that she landed on her hip in the grass. “Ow! Gulliver, what the hell are you doing?”

He no longer bothered to hide his true nature. His eyes danced with color, gold flecks moving through a miasma of greens and blues; his skin seemed carved of light, barely muted to a tolerable level, glowing like a small moon in the pre-dawn hours. His lips barely moved but I heard him clearly. I knew the words to be Sidhe, the curling and angled script of the fey folk, but Jackie did not. “Stupid woman,” he hissed at her, “your death will be quick.”

Before I could scream, Du had detached himself from my leg and was in the air, leaping at Gulliver. “Get Jackie away!” I heard him order, and then all hell broke loose.

A blinding light seemed to explode from Gulliver’s hands, quick as a wink but making everything blur. Jackie screamed, a shrill and near bloodcurdling sound, and I heard Du hissing, spitting like the cat he appeared to be.

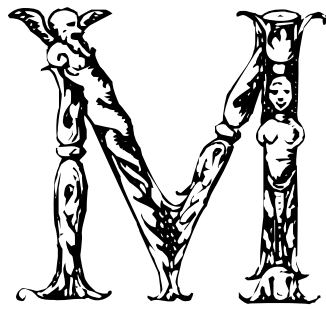
Gulliver’s hand tightened on my elbow and something bounced off my throat, burning as it tumbled down the front of my jacket. I did not have time to cry out as Gulliver pulled hard, swinging me into his body and lifting me off the ground.

I kicked out, trying to hurt him, but I heard Jackie’s muted sound of pain as I made contact with her stomach instead.

Du was yowling, the feline noise mingling with a more human growl of anger as thick brambles snapped and cut around us. Gulliver spoke a word that was older than time itself and it looked as if the ground opened beneath our feet, but it was not the earth opening at all. I could feel my yard beneath my boots, the crunch of it and the slip of the wet grass. Blackness was swelling around us, opening at our feet, and I felt tiny hands gripping my neck, claws in my arm, and heard Gulliver shout something incomprehensible as the blackness exploded and a sense of normalcy returned.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



OVE,” GULLIVER ORDERED, releasing my arm and giving me a shove forward at the same time. We were in some hall, longer than a football field and lined with narrow alcoves like an old cathedral. It looked as if it were carved of shimmering white stone and ornamented with gold and silver.

As I stumbled forward I realized, what I took to be statues in the alcove, were beings. They watched as Gulliver herded me forward, Du dropping from his perch on my leg to prowl ahead of me. He was limping, and he was missing some fur near his shoulder, prompting me to try to carry him and earning a sharp blow across my back for the trouble.

“Keep. Moving. Let the Cait Sidhe walk. He can shift any time he wants to and heal just fine.”

“Hit me again and draw back a nub,” I snarled. The faint hissing I’d heard upon arrival had grown to a sound akin to waves on the shore. It made my skin crawl as I realized it was voices, whispering as we passed.

“Threaten me again,” my half brother smiled, walking in step with me, “and you will be naught but a smear on the steps for Cadfael to slip on in the morning.”

He nodded aside to someone and surreptitiously smoothed his jacket, looking oddly out of place amongst the flowing gowns and old fashioned clothing of the statue-like beings around us.



“You still think you can have your little rebellion down here, Alfild? Do you still think your little plan can work? Will Cadfael come for you? Will you kill me in my sleep?” He smiled, and I wanted to claw his eyes out.

“Let Du go back,” I said calmly, refusing to look at the hissing beings or even directly at Gulliver. “Let Du and Rose go back to the Unseelie Court.” I heard a sharp intake of breath from somewhere on my right and Gulliver glared quickly past me, a warning to whomever it was. This unsettled me more than I could explain—that even he felt the need to defend me from this creature.

“I had planned on it,” he said pacifically.

“Alive.”

He paused, and then grinned. “Ah, you learn fast how to deal with Sidhe, little girl. Alive it is. And, even though you did not ask, in good health.” He stopped in his tracks and held out a hand towards Du. On my neck, Rose was practically vibrating with fear. In a blink, both the Cait Sidhe and the pixie were gone and I felt utterly naked, completely alone.

A tiny chill wormed its way up my spine and my feet refused to move even though Gulliver was reaching for my arm again. “Where did you send them back to? What part of the Unseelie court?”

Gulliver raised a brow. “They are alive, they are healthy . . .”

“For how long?” My voice cracked then but I did not look away as his gaze became angry and he grabbed my upper arm, pulling me close to him. “What part of the court, Gulliver?”

His teeth bared, he leaned in close, like an animal about to attack. “To the Snow Queens,” he hissed. “The Queens of Death where life is forfeit.”

I twisted and threw myself downward, causing his fingers to slip their grip. He barked out a curse as I caught myself, stopping before I hit the floor and breaking into a hard run, my boots pounding the shining stone floor.

The hissing voices burst into a cacophony of silvery notes and it looked as if the walls came alive with statue-like figures and starbursts of colors. I had no idea where I was running to, other than “away” as the cold air gripped my lungs, sending jolts of icicle-pain through my limbs and torso.

Each breath clouded before my face as I ran, the hall seeming to stretch forever; Gulliver’s fingers plucked at the back of my over-shirt and I screeched like a loon, fear overrunning common sense as I tried to run faster, my joints screaming in protest as my boots slapped against the hard marble floors. A sharp tug sent me flying backwards, lifting my feet off the ground and spinning me in the air like I was a leaf. I could not even gasp, the air being pressed from my lungs by some unseen force as I hung in the air over Gulliver.

The pale rainbow of faces swirled around me, taking on more solid forms as delicate, opalescent wings formed out of nowhere and bodies resolved themselves as individual from the gold-white mass of light that filled the room. My head lolled back on my shoulders as spots began to dance before my eyes, my lungs and throat burning and screaming for air.

“Gulliver,” a strong, distinctly female voice cut through my near-unconscious haze. I fell, not hitting the floor but instead being caught in a web of strong arms. I could feel elbows and fingers, sinew moving over muscle, as they passed me along a row of Sidhe. They glowed golden, I noticed as I gasped for air, filling my lungs despite their aching protest at my efforts.

I was moved away from Gulliver—I could feel that like I could feel my own skin. I knew without looking his exact location just like I could, I found, detect where each individual Sidhe was in the room. Eyes to see, I murmured, not realizing I had spoken aloud until I reached the end of the living conveyer belt.

A tall, fine-boned woman stared down at me, her pink lips curled into a smile. She was not, by any means beautiful but she was striking. She

radiated power and looked like the sun, glowing and warm. She looked like Danu, I realized belatedly, or at least the vision of her I had seen in the Unseelie Court.

“Alfhild,” she said softly, stepping back as I was lowered and made to stand. My legs buckled but I did not fall, delicate hands bracing my back. “Why do you fear us so?” the woman sighed, her smile not quite falling. “You’ve been cut from the Sidhe for far too long.”

She smelled like jasmine, I thought hazily. Jasmine and roses and apples. She radiated warmth physically and emotionally; Gulliver seemed like a dirty, broken thing when compared to this Seelie, I realized in wonder.

“Eyes to see,” she said quietly, her strong, soft fingers reaching up to brush errant strands of hair from my face. “You said the words yourself, child,” she laughed sweetly. “I did not take them from your mind.” Her fingers pressed a bit harder against my temple, not painfully so but enough to send off warning bells in my mind. “You’re not so far removed as I thought,” she murmured, her flower petal eyes searching my face for something she apparently could not find. “Your eyes,” she added, more to herself than to me, “and your skin . . .”

“Appearance alone does not Sidhe make,” Gulliver’s sharp tone broke between us. “If it did, silly groupies would have swollen our court to insane numbers by now.”

He appeared behind the woman. “This one thinks she’s clever,” he added, his lips twisting into a smirk. “Harbors that silly, human, white knight fantasy,” he continued, reaching past the golden woman to touch my other temple. “I sent her companions back to the Unseelie.”

“I know,” she said on a springtime sigh, the smell of green and growing things moving with her breath. “You have awakened the ice,” she said cryptically, in a tone that seemed at once proud and chiding.

“We can put her below,” Gulliver mused, his fingers moving down my cheek, making me shudder in revulsion.

I could not pull away. Hands at my back kept me in place, holding me still.

“It would be a nice little game for Cadfael, finding her in the caverns before the troopers do . . .” He bared his teeth in a mockery of a smile then, laughing as he saw the uncertainty flash in my eyes. “What do you think? Maybe let her have her little fantasy before we need her undivided attention?”

The golden woman, whose name I still didn’t know, smiled ever more sweetly at me. “I think that’s cruel, Gulliver. Tell Gobannon to ready the chains for our guest.” She patted my face kindly, like a mother or sister might, and turned away, pressing a hand to Gulliver’s chest. “You have done well, my love.”

Finally, my voice forced its way out of my throat through thick strands of disbelief. “What the hell are you going to do?” I demanded, proud of how even and smooth my words sounded. “Use me like bait to get Cadfael here? Guess what? You don’t need me. You started a war with the Unseelie and they will fight you whether I’m here or not. I’m not his bride—I refused—so he has no reason to save me.” I don’t know why I added the last but something in the back of my mind prodded me, telling me it would be important to these two.

“Oh, really?” the golden woman said. “This is news to me.”

“Intelligence runs slow in times of war,” Gulliver pointed out. “No doubt your spy is on her way here even now with the information.” He glowered at me like a little boy being told he could not have his toy back until after he had done his chores.

“Or maybe your spy just sucks,” I opined, smiling as sweetly as the woman had.

“Iseult,” Gulliver said sharply, cutting off whatever the woman was about to say, “the snow queens will not be far off once the Cait Sidhe and pixie are discovered. We should do this now and have done with it.” He glanced at me, looking suddenly worried, but only for a fraction of a second, just long enough for me to notice and feel a spike of nervousness grow in my belly.

The golden woman nodded and dropped her hand to her side, skimming her fingertips down my cheek as she did so. “You speak truth, Gulliver.” She looked up, past me, and nodded to someone. “Ready Alfhild for her appearance,” she ordered imperiously, all traces of warmth gone from her voice. “We have barely an hour in mortal terms. Hurry or you will be forfeit.”

Hands tightened on me again and I felt my feet leave the floor, my voice going cold in my throat at a glance from Iseult. I stiffened, trying to fight being moved, but found myself bound as if in invisible chains, my arms and legs held still and straight as I was carried behind Gulliver and Iseult through one of the alcoves formerly occupied by the shining Sidhe currently surrounding us like so many silent golden angels.

The narrow doorway opened into a room just as bright as the hall we had just abandoned, though less fine and grand. It was a simple square floor plan, nothing interrupting the shape of the place. I was set on my feet again and Iseult stood to my right, her hand close to mine as if she wished to hold it.

Gulliver strode past us, walking straight ahead to the wall mere feet away. He pressed the palms of his hands to the stones and uttered a word that human ears had not heard in centuries. The mortar between the stones began to glow and he stepped back, looking smug. “You’ll find the accommodations here vastly different from those in the Unseelie court,” he informed me with a familiar hint of derision.

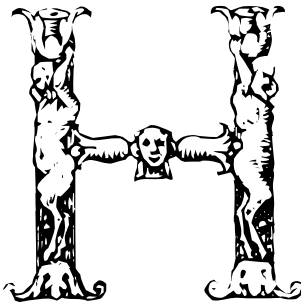
The wall was dissolving, it seemed, revealing an opulent chamber with appointments in jewels and heavy, rich fabric. A smell like burning wood, tempered with rich soil, seemed to drift from the chamber. It was not unpleasant, just unexpected. I leaned forward unbidden, drawn to this chamber like a moth to a flame. I felt the hands on my back again and willingly, I let myself be urged into this secret room.

Gulliver and Iseult stood, watching me with knowing smiles that curved their lips into scimitar grins. “Alfhild,” my half brother said with a slight hitch in his voice that I mistook for sadness. I paused, just past the line in the floor where the wall had been. “Alfhild, my sister, the keeper of things secret . . .” He reached for me, his fingers stopping inches short of my chin. “You are not as clever as you think.” With a soft hissing noise, the stone wall reappeared between us.

I stared for a long moment, trying to piece together what was going on and failing miserably. My brain was in a pleasant haze, as if I had drunk just a tiny bit too much champagne, and no amount of squealing warning from my deeper senses seemed to concern me.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



HELLO?" MY VOICE SOUNDED foreign to me, the simple word tasting heavy and thick on my tongue.

"Nice of them to send me company," a tiny voice sighed somewhere behind me. I turned slowly and my eyes lit on the draped bed, the green and gold silks shining dully in the light emanating from the walls. Something moved on the bed but I could not quite make it out, the drapes shifting and fluttering as if being brushed against by unseen hands and limbs. "And such a pretty one, too."

"Hello?" I repeated, the first worm of uncertainty roiling to life in my stomach.

"You said that already," the voice giggled, sounding neither male nor female but very young. "Stand still. Let me look at you!" The curtains billowed out and I had the impression of a female body pressed against the silks as they moved.

A ghost, I thought wildly, a spirit of the dead, separated from their mortal body; oddly, the thought did not bother me as much as I thought it should, but given the previous few days I suspected such things would not bother me for a very long time.

"Don't look so scared," the being chided. "I won't bite. I haven't the teeth for it even if I wanted to!"

I felt fingers touch my face, weightless and skinless, just like air had been solidified and was brushing my lips and chin.



“So sad,” the voice continued. “Such a wasteful thing, that Gulliver is.”

“I’m not . . . I’m not afraid of ghosts,” I said haltingly, the invisible fingers moving over my throat now and along my collarbone. The touch was firm but delicate, teasing the sensitive skin between my throat and my breasts. “I live in a haunted house.”

The fingers stilled somewhere near my shoulder and a trilling laugh sounded before my face, a puff of breath eerie coming from the empty space before me. “You think me dead?” I heard a snuffle and the fingers left my skin; I felt strangely bereft. “I suppose that’s to be expected from one of those vile Unseelie but you . . . you’re Gulliver’s kin! You should know a sylph when you see one!”

The air shimmered before me and for a moment, I saw the silvery outline of a woman, shorter than I, and visible only because of the sparkling shine of her arms and face.

“I’m here to see to your needs,” she added, becoming entirely invisible again.

“My only need,” I replied, racking my brain for information on sylphs and coming up woefully short, save for the fact they’re some sort of air elemental, “is to get out of here.” I turned a full circle, my eyes skimming over the walls and ornate gilding on the molding. “Let me guess . . . only one of the Seelie can open this?”

The sylph pressed close to me, ethereal breasts and stomach against my arm and hip. It was more than a bit disconcerting, her breath on my neck as her unseen fingers pushed my hair away from my ear. “No,” she murmured in a teasing tone, “not that at all.” I felt lips touch my cheek and I had to stifle a gasp as she drew on my skin a bit. “You have to know the words.”

“And,” I edged away, wondering if she would cling like a limpet or let me go, “I suppose you don’t know them?”

“I’ve been in this chamber for four thousand of your human years,” she sighed, the drapes on the bed moving again, letting me know she was climbing back into the silken cocoon. “I know them. I just cannot speak them.”

I groaned, the haze dissipating slowly from my brain. In its wake, I felt as if my mind had turned to oatmeal. “Look, whatever is going on here, I need to be out there,” I jerked my thumb at the wall which was recently a door. “I need to be out in the open.”

“Claustrophobic?”

“No . . .” I trailed off. I didn’t want to go too much into my plans because I didn’t know the nature of this sylph. She was in the Seelie court, in this chamber for, as she’d said, four thousand human years. For all I knew, she was some sort of human-eating sylph or worse.

I was suddenly very tired, my knees and feet aching from the hard run on the stone floor, my back aching from trying to shoulder my backpack earlier and failing miserably. My sack of supplies was somewhere out in the main hall and I was starving. Apparently, it was obvious because the sylph moved behind the drapery again, letting it trail over her head and shoulders as she came towards me.

“You hunger,” she crooned soothingly. “I can feed you.” I couldn’t tell where she was but I moved anyway, stepping back, my eyes scanning the room for any sign of her, some flutter of movement or breath of air that would indicate her proximity. “Hello there,” her voice purred near my ear, making me jump. “You’re a twitchy thing, aren’t you?”

“Leave her alone,” a familiar, comforting voice ordered. Cold air crept up my legs, twining around my limbs like a living thing. My skin crawled with gooseflesh as icy fingers skated along my spine. “You know better than that.”

A woman’s form appeared beside me, covered in ice crystals.

The sylph's mouth curved into a frown, beautiful in the shimmering sparkle of the frost that formed her. The cold air seemed to enfold me like a shroud. I could not move away from it or through it.

"Alfhild, stop fretting. You annoy me when you do that." The cold air seemed to swirl around me like an icy tornado, taking form out of the air, pulling moisture from everything it could until it began to form its own crystalline shape.

Mother Hoelle, her blind eyes turned towards me, stood before us, her hands clasped before her and expression akin to boredom, like she was waiting for a late bus or something.

"You," she said to me in a voice that reminded me of my old headmistress, "are a constant thorn in my side, since before you were born." She shifted her attention to the crystal-formed sylph and sighed. "Get out of here. You can do your job later. For now, we're needed in here and you're not. You know your part as well as I do." She straightened her spine and raised her pale brows. For the first time I noticed the two women behind her, similarly pale but one was quite tall, her head nearly touching the ceiling, her pale hair gold in tint. She looked down on me with a combination of disdain and annoyance, the tiny, rounded older woman at her side busy with picking some sort of lint from her light gray skirt and muttering to herself. "Alfhild," Mother Hoelle sighed, her ice-like appearance becoming slowly more human in tone and composition, "you are very lucky the story is so complex."

"What?" The cold was not abating but my own shivers had stopped. The sylph was either silent or gone—I couldn't tell which—and the three women who appeared as if from nowhere were giving me assessing looks.

"Skadi, did I not tell you?" Mother Hoelle smiled, the sound of a thousand snowflakes racing along her words.

The soft-bodied older woman snorted, her crooked fingers claw-like as she reached for me, gathering up a double fistful of my hair and tugging. “She,” Annis announced loudly, “is not what we were told.”

Skadi, her melodious voice not as loud as I thought it might be, rolled her eyes heavenward. “They lied,” she pronounced. “Now can we do this or do I need to remind you both of the wee pixie and the Cait Sidhe?”

“Du! Rose!” My heart squeezed painfully in my chest and I took a step towards the giantess. “Are they . . .” I could not say it; saying it might make it true.

“They aren’t dead,” Mother Hoelle said sharply. “Now close your lips and pay attention. We are here against Mabd’s wishes. We’re here,” she said with the briefest of hesitations, “against the wishes of all. You deviated from the story, Alfild of the Seven Snows. We’re not supposed to be here, not yet.”

“Then where are you supposed to be?” I snapped. “I risked my life to get back here!” Skadi smiled grimly but remained silent. Annis simply snorted, looking away as I jabbed a finger at Mother Hoelle. “I’m going at this blind, no offense, and apparently I’m supposed to be following some script no one’s been kind enough to let me see!”

“Close your lips, child,” Skadi ordered. “We came because we are indebted to you and we are your guardians. Cadfael does not yet know you have returned. If he did, he would open the gates of the Unseelie court and surely get every last one of us killed in his efforts to save your thin hide.”

She picked me up easily; she was not so large as to hold me in the palm of her hand but she could support me between two fingers, dangling me by my shirt so that my feet were off the ground by over a yard.

“I can take her to the mountains with me,” she said as if I were not there. “The sylph will do for now.”

The three snow queens seemed to reach some mutual, silent agreement and nodded as one.

“The sylph will do *what* for now?” I asked, trying to sound calm considering my current position.

“She’ll serve as distraction enough for our purposes,” Annis replied sweetly, a hint of ice in her voice. “Go, then, Skadi. Take her while we deal with the sylph. Gobannon is on his way and he does not take kindly to being tricked.”

My body stiffened; it was as if I had been plunged in ice, my lungs burned and eyes sparked in pain as the room began to spin around me, identifiable details blurring into a swirl of color and sensation. I felt Skadi’s hands on me still but at the same time, I did not feel whole. I felt as if I were part of the colors, part of the cold air.



And as soon as it began, it seemed, it was over. I was being set on the floor, my world reeling around me nauseatingly. “Drink this,” her profound voice ordered and a warm mug was pressed into my hands, smelling of herbs and earthenware. “It will keep your dinner down rather than on our floor.” As I hesitated, she sighed gustily and added, “This is no Sidhe trick, Alfild. I am not of their blood.” Despite my slight doubts, I felt compelled to obey.

Greedily, I gulped the brew, tasting ginger and something herbaceous and rich. It nearly made me gag, the unusual taste of it, but I managed to finish it before anything dire happened. Gasping for breath, I handed the mug back to Skadi. “What did we just do?” I asked roughly, breathing out ice crystals with my words.

She didn’t respond immediately, but rather bent over a low burning fire that looked negligible next to her bulk. She stirred a cauldron hanging there twice, nodding in satisfaction at whatever she saw in its depths.

Silently, she motioned me closer and I found myself standing on steady legs almost before I realized it. I walked slowly across the hard packed earthen floor, the dusty-dry smell of old things and fires long burned out growing stronger the further I moved into the large room. It seemed as if this place was just one open area, surrounded by white walls hung with copper pots and pans, bundles of dried herbs and sachets hanging from high beams overhead, the space obviously made with someone Skadi's height in mind.

I stopped just out of her reach, the aroma rising from the cauldron making my stomach rumble; it smelled like bitter orange and cinnamon shot through with butter and cream. She smiled at me then, an open expression that made her face light up with a beauty that left me breathless. "Look," she said quietly, tilting the cauldron towards me bare-handed. The liquid inside swirled hypnotically, the smell so tempting that I reached towards it as if to scoop a fingerful of the stuff up and pop it in my mouth.

"No!" she admonished me sharply, "It's not food! Just look!"

"Tease," I muttered, craning my neck to peer into the dark pot and trying not to smell the warm, sweet odor. "What am I looking for?"

"Use your Eyes," she said on a sigh, the capitalization obvious. She shook the cauldron a bit, keeping the liquid moving, and glared at me.

"Got it. Use my new and improved Eyes." I closed said eyes for a moment, giving in and taking a deep breath before opening my lids to focus on the substance in the cauldron. "What am I supposed to be looking for?" I asked plaintively, the swirl in the vessel drawing me down. I felt as if I were floating, falling, and then, just like that, I was still.



The Unseelie Court was in an uproar. The brilliantly clad Sidhe I had seen on my first arrival now looked disheveled, some of them bloody, all of them pale and angry. A male with an injured wing whipped by me, not even seeing me, and lit near the throne at the head of the hall.

Mabd, clad entirely in black, her starkly white skin glowing brightly even in the gold light of the room, bent her ear towards him, rocking back in her seat a moment later. She arched her throat, her hands gripping the arms of her throne, and a keening cry erupted from her chest. It was mournful, grief embodied, and it silenced the entire chamber. Obviously in distress, she pushed herself up out of her throne and a rainbow of pixies erupting from the folds of her gown as she made her way slowly, shakily down the steps of the dais. “They have broken the barrier,” Mabd howled, her voice like the cold north wind. “They have slaughtered innocents!”



I gasped as the swell of the communal outcry began to wash over me, and I found myself back where I had been, kneeling next to Skadi and staring into the fragrant cauldron, swirling with life. “I’m getting really damned sick of these warnings in liquid,” I finally said, my voice thick with something I couldn’t identify.

“You get used to it,” she shot back, tilting the cauldron so that it hung properly again. She stood, the crown of her head brushing a low hanging bundle of something green and bearing pale purple flowers. “Stand now,” she ordered. “And have more tea.”

I did as I was told, trying to piece together the visions I had been given over the past day or so. Skadi pressed another mug of tea into my hands and pushed me down as gently as she could into a normal-sized wooden chair.

This brew was different than the first, less earthy and sweeter. I sipped it slowly, staring unseeingly into the flames beneath the cauldron. The visions, including the coin, had all been centered on war, on some strife. Even the vision of the feast with the black-veiled woman had been tinged with some unnamable tension.

“Am I in the Unseelie Court now?” I asked finally. “Is this part of it? Can I see Mab?” I wanted to see Cadfael, for some reason. Hours ago, it seemed, I wanted nothing more than to never see him again, to have him arrested for breaking into my house, to have him sent away somewhere that I would never even have to think of him as long as I lived. Right then and there, though, I wanted, I *needed* to see him. My lips burned with a warm light as the memory of our one kiss skittered across my forebrain before seeking refuge deep in my subconscious.

“This is beyond the two courts of the Sidhe,” Skadi informed me, reaching to bank the fire as a strong wind buffeted the house. “You are in the between lands, child. The lands where the living and the dead exist as one. We are all immortal here. Those of us who make homes here anyway.” She slid a sideways glance at me as if expecting something. I blinked, suddenly realizing what had been niggling at the back of my mind.

“Du and Rose,” I said flatly. “They were sent here. Where are they now? I want to see them. It’s . . . it’s my fault that they’re here.” I set the mug down on the thick wooden table and stood, flexing my fingers and finding them stiff as if with disuse. “Please,” I added diffidently as Skadi raised one light brow. “I just want to know that they’re okay.”

She nodded judiciously. “They live, if that is what you are asking, but Iseult and Gulliver overestimated their favor with us. We accepted the wee ones but we did not keep them long. They were returned to the Unseelie court with a messenger.” She took a sip of her own tea and glanced up at me with a slight smile. “You can see them, too, if you wish,” she trailed off suggestively, with a slight motion towards the cauldron.

“No,” I replied quickly. “No thank you. I take your word that they’re fine. This messenger though . . . what’s the message?” I asked as a thousand variants on ‘Alfhild fucked up’ scrolled past my mind’s eye.

“None of your concern,” she replied smartly as the wooden door on one curve of the round home banged open, letting in a gust of cold air and snow but no one I could see. The door slammed itself shut and the snow swirled to form first Mother Hoelle, then Annis. The cold air was drawn away from us at the table and formed their bodies, flesh tones and features forming from the ether. “She’s seen the disarray,” Skadi informed them shortly.

Annis grunted, heading for the wooden table with a limp on her left side. Mother Hoelle nodded, hanging her gray and silver cloak on a wooden hook near the door. “And?” the blind woman asked after a few moments of fussing with the fabric.

“And,” I replied before Skadi could, “she’s just as angry as before. Do you people *ever* talk in anything but half riddles and knowing glances?” I raked my fingers through my already-messy hair and closed my eyes. “I am so tired of all of this!”

“When you were born,” Annis intoned from her place by the fire, “it snowed seven times in one day. Seven distinctive snowstorms in your part of the world, where just one is unusual enough. Seven snows for seven sorrows,” she finished, poking at the firewood with the tip of a long branch, sending up a shower of sparks.

“Seven snows for seven deaths,” Skadi added, her eyes on the flying sparks as they cooled and fell to the earthen floor.

“Seven snows for seven births,” Mother Hoelle finished, her cool fingers pressing against the back of my neck. “We saw your birth in the ages past. We knew you were coming.”

Skadi nodded, her long, fair hair tumbling over her shoulders like a wave. “You were foretold.”

“Way to give a girl a Messiah complex,” I muttered, feeling my cheeks redden and my knees start to turn to jelly. “It’d be nice if someone foretold me what I’m supposed to be doing here. Other than running around like a chicken with my head cut off, that is.” I looked at each of them in turn, realizing with some distant part of my mind that the chill air of the room no longer bothered me. Instead, I felt as if I were in some sort of suspended animation, frozen in this shell of a home.

The snow queens looked at me speculatively.

“Well?”

“You know you were chosen as bride for Cadfael,” Mother Hoelle began slowly. “You are the bridge between the worlds, a child of Danu, that long lost race that once settled these lands, the children of the goddess, the Tuatha di Danan.”

“Yeah,” I sighed. “I’ve been told that.” The silver shimmer on my skin still shone brightly, if I looked at it just right, a constant reminder to anyone who, like me, had eyes to see. “This means I’m part Sidhe or something?”

“It means you are a child of Danu,” Skadi put in tartly. “You are not Sidhe. Much.” She looked down at her lap and a smirk settled on her lips. “Unless you ask Cadfael.”

“Did it occur to anyone that I might not want to be someone’s wife?” I began pacing the room, aware of the three sets of eyes boring into my back as I did my first turn. “What if I’d been a lesbian? What if I’d been . . . I don’t know . . . what if I’d been a nun or something? Huh? This whole doing what you like without a by-your-leave might have worked back in the dark ages but lemme tell you something . . . it’s not going to fly now!”

“Alfhild, this was written before you came into reality,” Annis sighed, sounding tired beyond time itself. “We only see what is shown. We do not create the truth.”

Mother Hoelle shot her a harsh look. "So says you," she snapped. "By saying it, we create it. If we did not relay the tale, would it be true?"

"Gah! Please! No philosophy!" I groaned, covering my ears with my hands and leaning heavily against the wall. "I just want to know what I'm supposed to do. I thought I was supposed to help the Unseelie court fight the Seelie. I thought I needed to help stop Gulliver. Well, damn it, I'm trying but it's going to be impossible without some sort of direction here!"

"Not all wars," Annis rasped, "are fought with weapons of steel and the spilling of blood. Some of them are fought with things far more painful, far more devastating." She stood and shuffled towards me, her hand disappearing into the voluminous folds of her skirts. She stopped within a few feet of me, and for one shocking moment I saw her as she truly was, breathtaking, horrifying, and beautiful. She lifted her hand from the fabric and, looking like the gently rounded older woman again, she held out a small charm on the end of a fine gold chain. It spun dazzlingly in the firelight, a black stone shaped into a perfect sphere that seemed to burn with a deep fire. "Hold this to your heart at all times," she ordered, reaching to slip it over my head. "It will help win this battle that is to come."

I stared at her, feeling the cool weight of the charm settle between my breasts as she stepped back, joining Skadi and Mother Hoelle. "What kind of fight is it going to be then?" I asked with a hint of tiredness in my own voice. My stomach was rumbling again and I guessed it must be sometime near breakfast for me. "No weapons of steel, no spilling of blood . . . Bows and arrows? Poisons?" I shook my head, suddenly very sleepy. "What's going to happen when Gulliver finds out I'm gone?"

Gentle hands settled under my elbows and I was being led away, towards a shadowy spot in the back of the house.

"The sylph owes us," Skadi murmured, turning back the thick comforter on a low bed. "She is you, for the time being. She knows the

words to say, the actions to take. It will be a bit yet before Gulliver discovers the deception.”

“Won’t that screw things up for you all?” I murmured through a yawn as I knelt, then laid down in the bed. It was like being wrapped in a fluffy cloud, I thought, the fragrant bedding being tucked around me. “What’ll he do to y’all when he finds out?” I know I didn’t imagine the sudden dip in temperature at my words.

“Nothing,” Mother Hoelle assured me. “He cannot harm us. He is just Gulliver.”



CHAPTER NINETEEN



“ALFHILD.”

“Ten more minutes,” I mumbled, sinking deeper into the soft mattress. I had never slept so well in my entire life, I thought blissfully. It would be a sin to leave bed so soon.

“Alfhild, child, wake up. You must flee this place. Gulliver has discovered the truth sooner than we thought possible.” Skadi shook me as gently as she could which, given her size, was enough to send me tumbling from the bed. “My apologies,” she breathed, sounding nothing like the confident woman of just hours before.

“What?” The key words ‘Gulliver,’ ‘flee’ and ‘truth’ had set off my internal alarm. I kicked myself free of the blankets only to find myself shivering in the brightly lit space. Despite the roaring fire and my layers of clothing, I was as cold as if I had been naked in a blizzard.

The three snow queens were radiating a white light and Mother Hoelle had a flurry of snowflakes following her wherever she walked as she flung herself around the house, throwing items into a large rucksack. “What’s happening? Is he coming?”

“More or less,” Annis said with a yawn, stirring the fire as she had the night before. “The sylph was not as true to her bond as we had been given to believe, but it is no matter. She is an elemental, not an immortal.”



There was something about the grim nature of those words that led me to believe it was best not to question what had happened to the spy in the chamber. These women were the holders of life and death, the old mothers who spun out the world in the time before time. It was not, I decided, a good idea to fuck with them.

“Where do I go?” I asked, taking the bag Mother Hoelle shoved into my hands. “How do I get there?”

“The Unseelie Court will protect you but the only way there from here—” Skadi shook her mighty head. “You will die.”

“Great,” I drawled, a bowel-gripping nervous panic rushing through me. “So stay here and die, or go out there and die? Wonderful.” I looked at Mother Hoelle, uncertain but hoping she would be the one to answer me. I was not close to her but was somehow comforted by her presence since she was the only one in the room I had known for more than a handful of words.

Her opaque irises were glittering as if with the snowflakes that flurried around her legs. “We are the ones who decide who stays or goes,” she said slowly, her hands spreading wide.

Annis looked up sharply, dropping her stick. “Yes.”

I took a big step back from the three women, not liking the way they were staring at me. “Look, whatever it is, just . . . tell me what it is so I can get started. I really don’t want to cut this too fine, you know?” They were advancing on me now, their unified stare almost too much to stand. They were ancient, I knew, ancient before people could name them, ancient before the continents had reached their present formations.

Their power, deep and practically tangible, crackled in the air between them, reaching out to me like invisible tendrils, growing vines of magic wrapping around me and curling into my veins and sinew. I could feel these seeking fingers moving through me inside, touching and seeking something. It should hurt, I thought, but it was almost pleasant. The

tendrils left warmth and joy in their wake, making me smile, then laugh, bowing into the moving magic, going to my knees on the floor.

This is death, I thought, the certainty of it almost too much to bear. The hastily prepared rucksack spilled from my hands, scattering the contents across the hard packed earth, an array of bright colors against the dun and primal tones of the snow queens' home. They stood over me, the maiden and mother and crone, white mist rising from their skin.

Skadi knelt and brushed hair from my eyes and I realized then that I had fallen onto my back. She pressed her fingers gently down and closed my eyelids.

I saw it all as if watching from the high beams with the herbs and copper kettles; I saw Mother Hoelle and Annis gather the spilled goods, straighten my legs and arms so I lay as if asleep. I saw Skadi lift me as easily as I might a kitten and carry me to the bed, laying me out flat.

Mother Hoelle approached with a bowl of water and Annis held some linen. I watched silently as they washed my face and hands with the herbal infusion, then gently removed my clothing and washed my body. It was not embarrassing and I was not frightened to realize what had happened.

They did not speak but moved in a ballet of actions that they had obviously practiced for eons, flowing smoothly from moment to moment, preparing the dead for their rites. Finally, Mother Hoelle removed the newly placed necklace from my person and held it up, dangling it over my chest. I did not notice my less than perfect breasts for once, or any of the other million imperfections I had cataloged over the years.

I'm beautiful, I thought in wonder. I'm a perfectly contained universe, all held together in a fragile web of skin and tissue, moving with other universes through existence, dancing around one another in complete innocence of things like the Sidhe, the ancient ones . . .

Something tugged at me and I frowned. Was I going back? I wasn't sure how I felt about that. I knew danger was near. I could see it in the

faces of the three females standing over my body. I could see it in the tense lines of their lips and the stiff movements of their fingers, so different from the intricate dance of a few moments before.

The sphere spun at the end of the golden chain, moving faster and faster as I watched.

The tugging in my chest began again and, while I did not feel pain, I was certainly irritated by it. I wanted to be left to enjoy this new sensation of being at peace with myself, with everything. I wanted to see what else I could find. Would I be able to find god? Any god? Was I just a ghost now?

The tugging came again, harder this time, and I felt as if I were falling. I saw my body growing closer and I thought, for one equally horrifying and happy moment, that I was returning to it, but then, I realized what was happening.

The sphere loomed large in my sight and I was being drawn towards it. The shining black of its surface engulfed me whole, quickly. I was wrapped in a silken shadow, devoid of all light but I did not need to see anyway. I was not Alhild-Lorelei. I was nothing. I was everything all at once.

I spun in the sphere of night-black shadows and silken wings, spreading out until I touched every particle in the universe. I no longer cared what happened to the solid me, the me that was not graceful and all knowing. I wanted, I decided, this life.

I spun and spun, giddy as a child, until I noticed a pale red light seep around the edges of my awareness. The faster I spun, the brighter the light became. I had no form now, just being, and my being was swirling madly, a veritable dervish of joy and being. The red glow grew until it was all I could see, and I rather missed the black. My spinning slowed and the red faded, but not entirely. "Come back," I whispered, but not truly since I lacked a throat and lips and tongue. "Come back."



I was cold again, falling once more. A rush of soundless voices assailed my ears and I was in pain. I wanted back in the darkness and light. I didn't like this new place. It was painful. I groaned and a gasp answered me, sounding more scared than pleased I was alive enough to make sound. "Is he gone?" I managed, remembering the snow queens. "Is Gulliver gone?"

"*Leannan*," Du's voice came to me. "Little sister," he repeated in a tongue I knew. "What happened to you?"

I felt . . . nothing, I realized. As quickly as the pain had come, it had vanished. I simply . . . was. "Du!" I cried, my voice hollow. "You're okay!" I tried to rush towards him but found it difficult to move, my vision blurry as if I had smeared petroleum jelly over my eyes. "What's going on here? Why can't I see you?"

Du swam into focus, his face drawn and concerned, tears streaking his cheeks. "I failed you," he moaned. "We all did. gods above, what did they do to you?"

"Du, slow down . . ." I squinted, looking down at my body to see what he was talking about. Other than the fact I seemed to be lacking clothes, I didn't see the problem. "I thought you were at the court. What're you doing here?"

He took several deep breaths but did not come any closer to me, even though I could tell he wanted to hug me or at least touch me in some way, something the affectionate Sidhe seemed prone to doing. "We're at the court, Alfild," he replied earnestly. "You . . . what happened to you?"

"Why do you keep asking me that?" I groaned, my voice still hollow but distinctly growly now. "Du, look at me!"

He shook his head, closing his eyes tightly for a moment. He was still blurry to me but so long as I squinted, so long as I concentrated, I could see his face and body language. “Alfhild, you’re dead.”

He was crying, I realized, his body shaking with sobs as he went to his knees on the marble floor of the throne room. He clutched the sphere charm in his hand, the chain dangling from his fingers like a wilted flower.

“Don’t be stupid,” I said tartly. “I’m not dead. They just . . . did something . . .” I trailed off, bits and pieces coming back to me. “They . . . I was washed,” I said finally. “I was so happy . . . everything was one whole . . .” Du looked at me sadly, his eyes wide and wet. “Du, I think I’m going to be sick.”

“A messenger brought this,” he said shakily, holding up the charm. “He met the other one going. He said . . . he said to make sure it got to Cadfael but Cadfael’s been sequestered with Mabd and the advisors all day and night! They found the ghoul, torn to shreds on our border. The redcaps don’t touch ghouls and it had to be the Seelie and oh, gods, Alfhild!” He reached for me then and I felt his hand move through me, an altogether unsettling sensation that made me want to scream. “Who did this to you? They’ll be put on the pikes!”

“I . . . I . . .” I shook my head, or what passed for my head. “Du, I need to sit down.” I paused, wondering how much I should allow myself to freak out. “Can I sit down?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted, still shaken but sounding less tearful. “I need to tell Cadfael you . . . I . . . I don’t know what to tell him!”

“Tell who what?” the man in question asked, emerging from a door hidden behind a tapestry. “Whatever is the matter, Du? You should be in bed!” He stopped just short of Du, following the Cait Sidhe’s gaze. “Oh . . . oh . . .” Cadfael staggered back, hitting his calves against the steps of the dais and collapsing down, sitting heavily as he stared at me. “Oh, Alfhild . . . no,” he breathed. “What happened to you?”

Du silently thrust the sphere at him, his gaze never leaving me, making me feel a bit like some perverse lab experiment.

“I don’t think,” I suggested as calmly as I could, “that I’m actually dead.” I tried to smile encouragingly, the feeling familiar but I was not sure if I was doing it right, lacking a body and all. “I think I’m just . . . separated.” I was inwardly amazed at how calm I was about the whole thing; the woman I was a mere handful of days before would have been shrieking like a harpy, I was sure. Now . . . this seemed as if it were just one more problem to overcome.

Cadfael tore his stunned gaze from me and focused on the sphere in the palm of his hand. He opened his mouth to speak but could not, shaking his head instead. “This is Annis’s. I recognize it from the horde.” He closed his fingers over it and inhaled deeply. “Alfhild, what happened?”

I sighed deeply, relaying as much as I could remember, including the sylph but leaving out the origin of the entire problem, my plan to return to Sidhe by tricking Gulliver. Best leave that, I decided, for another day when tensions weren’t so high.

“You seem dead but I think there’s a trick to this.”

“It would be nice if they would have told me before . . . you know,” I sighed, making a gesture to encompass my non-corporeal form as I tried to sit down but found myself drifting decidedly downward, my feet slipping through the stone floor without feeling. I was about eye level with Cadfael’s knees before he stopped me, holding out a hand in a negligent gesture. “Um . . .”

“You’re sinking,” he pointed out needlessly. “I don’t think that’s a good idea . . .”

I stared up at him, wanting to say so many things, most of them ending in ‘you,’ but I found myself rising again, this time to finish hovering a few inches above the stone floor, my toes pointed downward as if I were

straining to reach the ground. “Okay, before I add this to my therapy plans, just what the hell is going on here?”

“The Snow Queens,” he said carefully, not quite meeting my eyes, “have done something.”

“Vague yet unclear . . .”

“I’m afraid I can’t say anymore than that,” Cadfael sighed. “All I can do is tell you that all they do is done for a reason. They control life and death, not even Lorelei can lead a sailor to doom unless they allow it. You are their child, Alfild of the Seven Snows. They won’t let you go so easily. They won’t offer you as a sacrifice to appease Gulliver’s appetites.”

“Oh, no . . .” The thought bit me hard and would not let go. “Rose! The pixies! They’re still above!” An awful image of their tiny bodies, crushed like insects, sprang to my mind. All I could think of was what Jackie would do if she saw large, winged things in the house. “Cadfael, we have to save them!”

“They are fine, Alfild,” he sighed. I realized for the first time that he was not uneasy meeting my gaze; he was staring at my inert body on the bed behind me. I let my attention drift to the corporeal form of myself and felt, for the first time since this odd separation, ill. An icy knot formed in my belly and I wished like hell that I could vomit. “It’s best if you don’t look,” he suggested, finally tearing his gaze away from my seemingly dead form.

“Yeah,” I sighed. “So I’ve noticed.”



I wasn’t sure how much time passed between Cadfael’s departure and his return with Mabd, just that it was so dark in the chamber that I thought maybe, just maybe, I was actually dead and all that stuff they tell you about an after life is a lie.

I was disabused of that notion when the massive wooden doors swept open ahead of the Unseelie queen, her black dress billowing around her ankles like a storm cloud as she strode towards me. I sat up and felt a slight tug to my being, like someone or something was trying to hold me down. “Ow,” I hissed, the feeling not at all pleasant.

“You are either extremely stupid,” Mabd pronounced, “or a genius of the first order.” She paused, giving her son a pointed look. “Now I called her stupid, Cadfael. Now you can complain.”

“What,” I coughed, feeling suddenly very heavy and thick, “are you talking about?”

“You drank Skadi’s brew,” she pointed out, folding her arms across her slender stomach. “Even though you had been warned about taking food or drink here.”

“Whoa, wait!” I was having trouble breathing, my lungs feeling like they were cramping as my spine stiffened and arched. “I didn’t drink or eat in the Sidhe world! I was in between! They said so!” I clawed at my throat, feeling as if it had suddenly burst into flames. “God, what’s happening to me?” I cried, my voice creaking and snapping. “I think . . . I’m dying!”

“No, you goose,” Mabd snarled. “The brew is wearing off. And surely you’re not so addlebrained as to think accepting sustenance from the Snow Queens was a good idea?” She sniffed and looked away, giving Cadfael the fish eye. “But in this case, your idiocy worked well. You were brought here safely and you are returning to your physical body.” She nodded almost imperceptibly to Du, who sprang into action, scurrying towards a sideboard I had not noticed before and retrieving a ewer of water and a basin. “Wash the drool from your face. You look like a halfwit.”

I spasmed, my body twisting as things seemed to be trying to right themselves. I had to go to the bathroom, I thought. I had seen the chamber pot in the bedroom but I was not about to ask for it to be brought here. Likely Mabd would insist there was no modesty in the court and continue

berating me while I peed. My lungs had stopped wrenching in pain and now only ached as if I had run several miles. The writhing was slowing, my muscles becoming respondent to my commands.

I was so focused on my recovery that I did not realize Cadfael had come to sit at my head, his fingers smoothing my hair from my brow as his mother sallied forth, condemning me and praising me for drinking the potion Skadi had made.

“Mabd,” I managed to interject when she paused for breath. “Shut up. Please. I need to think for a minute . . . I need to process all of this . . .” I did not argue as Cadfael helped me up, unasked. Surprisingly, Mabd did fall silent but the hard glare in her eyes was enough to tell me I would pay for that later. “I was in the Seelie court,” I said slowly. “I was there, I saw Gulliver with their queen.” I closed my eyes, my vision still blurry and head still aching. “They know that I’m here, that I came to you all.”

“We expected them to,” Cadfael soothed, his hand on my back at once comforting and irritating. “Alfhild, it’s time you were told—”

“It is only because you are to bear my line that I do not put you on a pike in the redcap’s territory,” Mabd said succinctly, cutting off her son’s burgeoning explanation. “On your feet. You have thrown things into deep chaos by returning but how could we expect less from you? The Snow Queens are doing their best to stave off the Seelie but it won’t last. By this time on the morrow—” She gave me a look that made me feel as if I were falling. The eyes peering at me had seen more days than I would ever know, than I could even count. She was heavy with age, with time and space and things I could not define. For one moment, she looked like she could destroy the entire world with a single word, a small gesture. Then, as quickly as it had come, it was gone, leaving me breathless and her angry. “By this time on the morrow,” she pressed on, “most of my court will be decimated. And you,” she pointed an accusing finger at me, “will be responsible.”



“I can’t believe you’re making me do this!” I hissed at Du, letting him lead me rather than fight him. “I don’t know how to do this!”

“It’ll come quickly enough,” he replied, oddly calm. “You are the point of contention here, Alfild, so you must be presented. You must help Cadfael. Prove to all that you’re not a lie, that you’re worth dying for.” He shot me a shy smile in the dark and squeezed my hand gently. The tunnel seemed to stretch forever, cold and damp beneath the Unseelie stronghold. It was a blur, the time between the chamber and here. Somehow I had been given a silvery tunic to wear, made of some thin and flexible metal. I felt like Joan of Arc—not in the heroic sense but in the about to be executed sense.

“I beg to differ,” I sighed. “Tell me again; what am I supposed to do?” We had drawn to a stop at the very end of the tunnel, the passage seeming to end in a blank stone wall. “Du, I’m scared.”

“Just be you, Alfild,” he whispered, the stone wall parting like curtains to reveal a dazzling, blinding white light that dissolved before my eyes. A horde of beings, things of legend and myth, filled the rich green knoll before me. Here, it was daylight. The smell of sweet grass filled my senses, springtime run rampant. A rushing whisper spilled over the crowd and I felt my stomach churn. “Be our princess, Alfild. Cadfael is waiting for you.”



STONE CIRCLES

or, in which our heroine discovers that the Sidhe are every bit as complicated as humans. Just shinier.



CHAPTER ONE



“ARE Y’ALL ALWAYS THIS LOUD?”

Even with my hands clapped over my ears, the roar of the Unseelie court was deafening. It was like an ocean of sound: raised voices, stomping feet, clanging metal . . . If this was breakfast, dinner would kill me.

“Only for special occasions,” Du shouted back over the din. He speared a round, ruby-red piece of what I assumed was fruit and popped it in his mouth with the tip of his knife, grinning at me as the juices from the food squished out between his teeth.

“Charming,” I muttered, staring down at the sad, stale Twinkie and can of root beer before me. If I wasn’t diabetic before, I would be by the time I got done with this mess, I thought.

Their food smelled exotic, the air fairly redolent with spices and shimmering with the heat of the chaffing dishes. My mouth was watering so badly I thought I might drool. Which, seeing how Mabd was looking at me from the head of the table, I suspected I might have been doing already. “Um, I think I’m going to go back to the chambers or something. I can’t sit here . . .”

“You have to!” Du said sharply, kicking me under the surprisingly narrow table. “Cadfael will have a fit! Besides, the snow queens want to see you!”



“Why? So they can kill me again?” I poked at the Twinkie dubiously, wondering about the half-life of the things. My brief experience with the three so-called Snow Queens had been enough to make me wish to never see winter again.

They had, I admitted somewhat grudgingly, saved me from Gulliver and been my own personal Deus Ex Machina in returning me to the Unseelie court, but I had no desire to be in their presence again. These particular goddesses, bringers of winter and death, were not unpleasant per se but I just didn’t want to relive . . .er . . .re-die? . . . that experience. I scooted my chair; it somehow seemed wrong to call the convoluted twist of highly polished wood and glimmering fabric a chair; back just enough to slide out and get to my feet.

Du had stopped chewing and was giving me what could only be described as a cat-like glare of annoyance but I didn’t let that stop me. I gathered my skirts, voluminous things the color of fresh milk and new grass, into double fistfuls at my hips and turned, only to meet a large, immovable obstacle. One that smelled like burning leaves and cold air, a hint of loam and flesh. “Um. Hi.”

“Sit down, Alfild,” Cadfael bit out gruffly.

His hands landed heavily on my shoulders and, I was pretty sure, to the casual observer, it looked like a man about to give his intended a kiss. But the one thing I had figured out pretty quickly about the Unseelie:, not one of them was a casual observer. Each one of them knew what was going on as certainly as if I had told them myself. Even the weird looking one at the far end of the table, head down in roast something or other. Ew.

“This feast is in your honor. You are among f . . . friends,” he stuttered, obviously changing words mid-speech. “Sit down and eat your . . .” he wrinkled his nose. “Dear gods, what is that?”

“A Twinkie from the Nixon administration,” I said lightly. “I feel extremely ill, Cadfael. All of this food is making my stomach hurt. And I

think my pancreas is going to explode if I have one more soda or snack cake!”

He didn't respond except to push me back down—albeit gently—into the sculptural chair I had so recently abandoned.

Du didn't look up, fixating instead on the wide-mouthed goblet of faerie wine before him. Mabd, however, was glaring daggers as her son took his place beside me, his dark form drawing murmurs up and down the long tables.

The great hall was ornately decorated and Cadfael seemed to blend in with the ornamentation, his dark, velvety clothing enhancing the feeling that he was like nightfall, concentrated into a man. His hair fell to cover his face as he bent to eat, the trencher (a poor name for the gold and silver plate but the name that Mabd had adamantly referred to it as) filled as if by magic with a selection of foods from the long rows of serving tables lining the walls.

The whispers dulled to a soft roar and eyes, glittering bright, darted our way, but the feast continued. *This*, I thought somewhat bitterly, *is in my honor*. I felt imprisoned as I picked despondently at the Twinkie, the spongy texture repellant after being surrounded by the feast of the Unseelie Court. *Stop obsessing*, I ordered myself. *Think of something else . . . like the display of the troops earlier*.



As loud as the Unseelie Court was at the feast, they had been doubly so when Du had pushed me out into the open hours earlier, the thick doors of the tunnel below the great hall opening into a surprisingly green, gold, and jewel-toned vista of an open field. The door seemed to be set into a hillside, a tor is what Cadfael had called it, and it swung out onto a narrow platform of wood and stone, almost a balcony. Cadfael, Mabd and a

handful of others stood along the polished wooden railing, staring grimly down at the assembled masses.

Creatures I had only read about or seen in picture books filled the sloping hillside and the flat earth beyond. They seemed to go on forever, standing under the hazy blue sky, stomping their feet and shouting, metal and wooden weapons clanging together with shields. A flurry of winged creatures exploded from the middle of the crowd as Du shoved me none-too-gently forward, and then silence choked all sound for the barest of moments.

I took a breath, too stunned to form a single word. Wings fluttered, a weapon thudded to the ground, then sound tore forth and moved like a wave from the back of the crowd to the front, nearly knocking me back with the force of it all.

I felt disgustingly dirty, inside and out. I hadn't bathed properly in what felt like days, my gown was sliding from my shoulders, wrinkling around my ankles. Even the ugliest creature before me, I thought in some strange amazement, was beautiful. I felt inferior.

"For Danu's sake," Mabd hissed in my ear, "*wave!*"



"Alfhild." Cadfael's voice was low and calm next to me, snapping me back to the feast and out of my memory. "Try and look like you're enjoying yourself."

I picked up the Twinkie and took a savage bite, letting the crumbs and filling mar my lips and chin as I chewed in exaggerated mock-pleasure. "Mmmmm," I murmured. "Diabetilicious."

"Control her," Mabd hissed at Cadfael, "or I will!" Her right hand twitched on the tabletop, near her long, serrated knife meant for cutting the roast whatever.

I swallowed the mouthful of unhealthy snack and glared quickly at her, shifting to smile, tight-lipped, at the bent little man next to me. He was a gnome, I decided, judging from the stack of pillows he was sitting on and his diminutive, wizened appearance. Not sure how one went about addressing what one had only previously seen as garden statuary, I nodded to his goblet and asked “More wine?”

“He does not need more wine,” Cadfael intoned. “Alfhild, behave. They are here to see you and watch how you act. You need to put on a good show, no matter what you feel inside. If we appear weak, it will filter back to the Seelie.” He reached out and I felt his fingers brush my thigh, sending a sharp thrill of sensation through the base of my spine and other places. The blush died before it bloomed on my cheeks, though, when his touch became a pinch. “Now behave!”

“That,” I hissed, “hurt!” I jerked my skirts away like I had seen in the old movies, whenever Bette Davis wanted to make a point or Katherine Hepburn was being particularly scathing. I faced resolutely forward and grabbed the remains of my Twinkie, aware of the myriad of eyes on my every move. Taking a deep breath, I delicately nibbled the edges of the thing, licking at the cream in the middle in as ladylike a fashion as I could muster. *Fine*, I thought furiously, *I’ll polite my ass off!*

“If you are done fellating that snack cake,” Cadfael said suddenly and quite sharply, “you have a duty to perform!” He reached out and took the Twinkie from my hand, dropping it on the ornate charger before me. His eyes were kaleidoscope bright, shifting patterns of autumn leaves as he glared down at me, appearing suddenly angry for some reason as he stood and grabbed my wrist.

“Which is it? Eat and shut up or don’t eat and talk? I can’t do both!” He pulled me to my feet, his grip making my wrist ache as he led me past the head of the table and Mabd’s cold silence to the dais where the thrones stood. I twisted hard, freeing myself from his grasp, and heard a whisper

rustle through the assembled group. Smiling in my best ‘everything is just fine’ fashion, I rose on my toes to whisper in his ear. “I don’t know what’s stuck up your ass sideways but you’re starting to piss me off.”

“Lovely language,” he drawled. “You are truly a princess of the realm.” One of his hands slid along my back and he pulled me suddenly tight against him, surprising me into a gasp.

Somewhere in my thought processes, I still thought of the faerie folk as tiny and sparkling, almost insect-like. Like Rose, the pixie who had apparently taken me on as her personal cause. But Cadfael was far from anything pixie-like. He was solid and warm and smelled of autumn and . . . I took a deep breath, the sharp scents of him quickly overwhelmed by the richly layered aromas of the feast. That was all it took to clear my head.

He raised a brow at me and I swore a smile tugged at his lips. “Now, my faerie princess, you are going to receive obeisance.” He stepped away from me so quickly that I swayed forward, color blooming in my cheeks as I realized how needy I looked. Indeed, a few snickers ran the length of the table and someone shouted a ribald, or what seemed to be ribald by its tone, comment in a language that sounded like a brook pouring over stones.

Cadfael shouted back something in the same tongue, raising his hand in acceptance. I didn’t know whether I wanted to blush or slap him. I didn’t have the opportunity to choose, though, as he guided me by virtue of his hand on my back towards the dais. “For the love of all that is good,” he muttered, his fingers spreading between my shoulder blades and his breath brushing against my ear, sending an unwilling shiver down my bare back, “don’t look so aggrieved! You look like you’re being led to the stocks!”

“Tell you what,” I replied, my eyes on the highly polished wooden throne bedecked with amber-colored stones and woven with vines bearing

dark yellow and orange flowers, “I’ll stop looking this way when you stop pushing me.”

“Sorry, love,” he said, the smile evident in his voice, “but if you won’t walk, I have to push.” He slid his hand across my back, to the shoulder nearest him and then down my arm in a purely possessive, dominating gesture.

The sliver of lust that had buried itself deep inside my belly when I first saw him threatened to bloom into a full grown tendril of need. Annoyance, however, tempered it and kept me from giggling like an idiot and grinning my damned fool head off.

“I am a grown woman,” I informed him, stepping away from his touch and towards the flowery throne. “I’ve had men trying to control me my entire life and I’ll be damned if a faerie is the latest in the line of Y-chromosome bearing twits to try and make me do what THEY want.” I flopped down in the seat, the scent of the flowers heady and seductive in their own right. *Like blooming sex*, I thought somewhat suddenly. *Like amber musk and warm skin and . . .* I paused mid-thought. “You DO have a Y-chromosome, right?”

He raised a brow. “The Princess Elect is ready to receive her obeisance,” he announced, his eyes never leaving my face. “All come forward to pay her homage.” He must have heard my gulp—it sounded as loud as a gunshot in the now all-too-quiet room. “Alfhild,” he murmured, “as each one comes forward, accept the offering and thank them for their service to the throne.”

“Shouldn’t your mother be doing this?” I whispered harshly. “Or you?”

I didn’t receive a response. It was too late.

Du, his feline features bearing no trace of whatever his inward thoughts were, stepped forward and dropped first to both knees, then prostrated himself, stretching his full length before me on the stone floor. He had a

tail, part of my brain registered. Why hadn't I noticed that before? Oh, right. Denial.

"Rise," I squeaked, earning a sharp glare from Mabd, who had taken her place next to me like a living, breathing, ice-cold shadow.

Du stood and flashed me a quick smirk. "Alfhild of the Seven Snows, I bring you the tidings of the Cait Sidhe and our eternal loyalty to both your throne and the Unseelie Court." His voice rang in the high-vaulted ceiling and I looked up, for the first time I noticed the pixies. They had not been dismissed after all, I sighed to myself. They were just hiding, high in the dark rafters, tiny wings silent in the huge hall.

Du seemed to be waiting for something, his dark brows creeping up ever so slightly. He looked down at his hands, then at mine, rocking forward onto his toes.

"OH!" I coughed, embarrassed for a flashing moment, and nodded to Du. "The throne thanks you," I said haltingly, hoping it was official enough. "And we . . . er . . . we appreciate the support of your people against all enemies of the Unseelie Court." I had just made myself one of *them*, I thought somewhat desperately. I just used 'we' in the royal sense! I just implied I was one of these creatures! And I was being handed a bundle stained with what seemed to be dried blood. I had taken it automatically from Du, my mind racing, and only when it was in my hands, the musky odor of time and dust mingling with organic materials overwhelming the sex-dark aroma of the flowers around me, did I realize this was the offering of the Cait Sidhe. "Do I open it?" I muttered to Cadfael, still standing by my side. "Or bury it?"

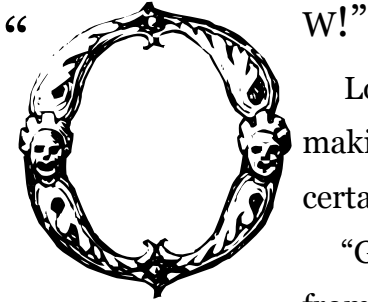
"It's the scalps of Seelie warriors," he said through clenched teeth, his lips never moving from the smile that was plastered on his face. "Du finds it just as distasteful to handle as you do but it is tradition." He pinched my shoulder and I hissed a curse under my breath.

“This symbol of your clan’s valorous conduct in battle for the Unseelie Court is an honor and we will cherish it,” I said, my voice oddly calm and clear, seemingly amplified in the hall. I tucked the bundle against me, settling it firmly in my lap.

Du took this as his dismissal and walked backwards several paces, head bowed, before turning and moving away, out of my line of sight. The queue of beings seemed to go on forever, from a few feet before the dais to the huge double doors at the far end of the hall, spilling out into the ante chamber. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I can do this,” I sighed. “This will be a snap.”



CHAPTER TWO



“W!”

Lorelei’s brush snagged in my hair, making my head jerk back so fiercely I was certain something had snapped.

“Give me that!” I grabbed the brush from her hand and scooted away down the tapestry-upholstered bench that served as a vanity stool.

The beautiful woman’s watery eyes glared at me from behind a fall of golden hair, her neck bent as she picked up the handful of fine wooden pins she had pulled out of my own curls moments before.

“I don’t know what the hell is wrong with you but I’m just about sick of it!” Lorelei had done nothing but cry, curse and sulk since I had arrived. I knew the gist of her story but this was getting ridiculous, even given my recently revised standards for such things.

“Tomorrow,” she said in her faintly accented voice, “I return to my rock for the course of three tides.” She flicked a glance at me and seemed to be considering something before she pressed on, tipping her palm so that the pins fell into a carved, jeweled box kept on the spindle-legged vanity. “By the time I return you shall either be dead or a true keeper of our realm.”

Tucking the strands of gold behind her ear, Lorelei seemed to be buying time before making her next move.



I could see myself in the burnished metal that served as a mirror here and my expression was somewhere between panic and disbelief. It was amazing, I thought, how related the two really are.

“I do not hate you, Alfild, not as I thought I did. Knowing you are kith and kin to the Seelie prince, the one who seeks to rape our court of its power—”

“I’m not even going to pretend to know the entire story,” I cut her off; my voice more gentle than I imagined it would sound a moment before. “Gulliver is not one of my favorite people by a long shot.”

“We know,” she nodded, hesitantly sitting on the narrow seat next to me.

She smelled like cold air, I thought. Wet, like a river, but not unpleasant. She smelled like white flowers and something else, something I could not identify but seemed to be the same undercurrent that I smelled on Cadfael when I was near him.

“There is very little about you that is not known among us, even those so far to the South that they are strange even to Cadfael and Mabd. And those in the cold north that even the Snow Queens do not visit.”

She stood suddenly, pacing from the stool to the hip bath that was waiting to be removed, the once warm water now a soapy, cold pool. Her footprints left dark, wet marks on the thick rug that covered the wooden and stone flooring. She had not gotten in the water, I remembered, frowning. She was dry to my eyes.

“All you need to understand is that the courts are in a place for war once again. It has not truly been this way for centuries and now,” she looked up at me, her lips parted on a breath. “Now you have come into the court and you have set things into motion. The ghoul is escaped from the dungeon because of you. The sylph is in the water again . . . I know. I feel her. I feel her treachery.”

I couldn't do anything but stare, agape at the beautiful creature as her voice became thicker, like she was trying not to cough or choke.

Her eyes had darkened to black pits, almost as if she were missing eyes entirely. Her hair had become dark, like burnished copper, no longer shimmering golden strands. I was not sure but I thought I saw some flecks of green on her skin, like tiny pieces of mildew or pond moss. Then she moved, and the illusion moved with her. She was beautiful again, a gold and ivory figure tinged with ruby on her lips and sapphire for eyes. She held out a hand in my direction, as if she were beckoning me closer, her fingers curling ever so slightly inward towards her palm.

"Lorelei," I said quietly, my voice barely above a whisper, "what else?"

The watery maiden glared at me for a fraction of a second, her hand dropping to her side. "Gulliver needs an heir. You bear Sidhe blood and are strong. You have been touched by Danu and you are blessed for that. No harm will come to a child you carry." She said it with the certainty of a fundamentalist, her eyes widening in that way some missionaries get the moment before pouncing on an unconverted soul. Something in her posture changed, an air about her shifting to something new. "I don't hate you," she added as if this were the most important thing in the world, her tone almost reverent. "I dislike you. I was to be Cadfael's bride. He was to free me from my damnation . . ." She turned her face away from me and let her fingers trail in the now-cold water of the hip bath. "I am not a true Unseelie Sidhe. I am . . .changing. Ever changing."

Officially creepy now, I thought miserably. She reminded me a bit of an aunt I had back in Louisiana; she would get drunk periodically and go on long, melancholic, semi-philosophical rants that left the listener feeling trapped, depressed and more than a little vulnerable and angry.

"Okay, look, I really appreciate this whole attempt at girl talk but I'm a bit tired after this whole altering my perception of reality thing and I kind of want to sleep . . . soooooo . . . g'night!" I tried to sound bubbly and polite

but I think it came out as drunk and obnoxiously perky, like a sorority girl at homecoming.

Lorelei stared at me with a hint of incredulity mingled with something else I couldn't define. Fleeting, I wondered how long I had been gone from my own world and how long it would be before Jackie gave up on me. I found, in that moment, being stared down by the frightening beauty of Lorelei, that I missed Jackie keenly. I needed her to help me make sense of things now, and I was being kept from her by my own choosing.

Lorelei straightened, snapping me out of my flare of self pity, and swept by me with a waft of cold water and lilies and something earthier and more pure than I could imagine. I did not realize that I was holding my breath until the door shut behind her, putting a thickness of wood and metal between the two of us.

I exhaled in a whoosh of relief, feeling some sense of security now that the door was shut. It was purely psychological, I reminded myself. These beings could come and go as they pleased, for the most part. I just had to forget that fact so I could sleep.



I opened my eyes to thick, velvety darkness, the scent of burning leaves and rich earth wrapping around me. For a moment, I thought I was buried, covered in soil and tree roots, then I realized where I was, that I was still in the massive bed in Cadfael's chambers, that I was wrapped in a thick blanket made from some smooth fiber that felt like silk but knowing how things worked down here, likely was bark or moonbeams or something. I stretched experimentally, my internal clock telling me it was still the deep dark of night time, not even predawn yet, and that I had plenty of time to rest before the next new and weird task I had been set, whatever that was. Belatedly, I realized that I was not alone. The tree roots

of my half-sleep became arms and legs, the former around my waist and the latter sandwiching mine in a way more familiar than I might expect. But not, I realized with a start, sleep vanishing from my eyes and thoughts, as familiar as the obvious interest attached to the torso of the being holding onto me like I was his favorite teddy bear or blankie.

“Cadfael,” I said quietly, “if that’s you, please let go.” I swallowed hard, making a deal with myself that if he did not respond before I counted to ten, I would wriggle free and raise bloody hell.

“And if it’s not Cadfael?” the familiar voice mumbled sleepily. “Then what? I can keep holding on?” He shifted, squeezing me tight for a moment before readjusting to a less . . . provocative . . . proximity. “Better?”

Ten, I exhaled my pent up breath and moved carefully, trying to ease out from his somnolent grasp without brushing my breasts against his arm or rubbing anything else in anyway. “It’s too late to do this,” I said as quietly as my voice would allow without whispering as I managed to wiggle my legs free without being too provocative to my way of thinking. “I want to sleep. I spent god only knows how long accepting weird presents and oaths of loyalty from beings I’d only read about in faerie tales and I’m on the verge of malnutrition. Please, for the love of all things sparkly and shiny, let me sleep.”

I had made it to the edge of the bed and was perched there, on my side, precariously. I listened to the steady rise and fall of Cadfael’s breath behind me in the dark room and I barely held back a curse. He had fallen asleep and likely missed the entirety of my tirade. Fantastic. I stared into the darkness for a minute or so more, my body screaming for more sleep, for the release of a dream or ten, and I gave in. Cautiously, I scooted back until I could feel the edge of his warmth seeping across the bedding and I stopped. We weren’t touching but I held no illusions; when people slept in the same bed, it was human nature to turn to each other for warmth, some

long held human trait back from our days in the caves and plains, seeking the comfort of other like beings. I supposed it was the same with the Sidhe. They seemed the touchy sort, liking affection and tenderness even in their angriest moments, the casual brush of a hand or seemingly random embrace. They seemed to thrive on it and I had a feeling that if they were in the human world, most of them would have been arrested or slapped early and often.

Cadfael was snoring softly, something I suddenly found amusing. It was so normal, so human . . . so annoying. I would not be able to sleep next to him now, not even lightly. Between his snoring and his sheer physical presence, I would be awake the rest of the night, wondering if he would be the one to reach for me or I for him, wondering why he was making that weird whistling noise through his nose.

I slid from the bed, immediately missing the warmth as my feet hit the stone floor, finding the one spot not covered by thick rugs. Suppressing a shudder, I padded to the foot of the bed and picked up the white robe left there by Lorelei earlier, tying it over the matching nightgown that hung loosely from my shoulders. I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror and paused, staring. In the dimness of the room, lit only by some luminescence faintly glowing from the ceiling and a single candle guttering in its holder, I looked like a true faerie tale princess. My dark hair hung in a plait over one shoulder, my face pale as the moon over a column of ivory throat. Blinking, I shook the image away, refusing to be drawn into the Sidhe's glamour.

I knew enough to remember that the Sidhe's favorite trick, their best weapon, was the ability to make a person see what they wanted to see, feel what they wanted to feel. I looked in the mirror again and saw myself as I knew to be true. Fast approaching middle-aged, oddly shaped (too small up top, too big on bottom), stringy hair, crooked teeth and too many freckles. "There," I said firmly, quietly. "As it should be."

There was a low bench, almost a divan, against the wall near the fireplace and its orange glowing embers which would serve me well for the night. It wasn't the softest thing on earth or below it, but it would do. At least, I thought as I stretched out, my feet hanging off the end of the thing and my neck already protesting the lack of support, it didn't have room for strangers who smelled like autumn.



“It’s time to wake up,” a warm, soft voice murmured against my neck. Masculine lips brushed a familiar kiss against the soft skin below my ear, making me smile and shiver deliciously. Then my eyes opened and I realized where I was.

“How’d I get back into bed?” I demanded, elbowing Cadfael away none too gently as I hurried to my feet, the sleep remaining in my eyes making the room look blurred and soft. “I was sleeping by the fire . . .”

Cadfael, I noticed with some mild embarrassment and annoyance, was fully dressed in what seemed to be his uniform of dark trousers and dark shirt, a vest of darkest green over it all. I caught a flash of silver and gold on his fingers as he pushed himself into a seated position on the bed, the reddish dark fall of his hair held back from his face by a black cord tied into a knot at the nape of his neck. He looked altogether too pleased with himself, ignoring the flurry of pixies that surrounded me like some bizarre cartoon film princess.

“I carried you. It is not safe for you to be alone.” He slid fluidly to his feet, moving like a stalking animal, his eyes never leaving mine. I felt pinned by the flurry of color moving around me, pulling at the plait in my hair, tugging at the belt on my robe, but they became only distant notions as Cadfael moved closer, stopping just out of arm’s reach.

My breath caught in my throat and I could not speak.

“Things are happening quickly now, Alfild. I thought I would have time to teach you, to train you a little but now it is too late. Gulliver is back in your world again and we have reason to believe he is massing forces. There . . .” he paused, his gaze changing from something almost feral, needful, to cautious concern.

“Another murder,” I said, seeing the words before he could say them. “Like before. Like the ones he was tried for,” I added, blood rushing in my ears like the roar of ocean waves. “Who was it this time? Wealthy land owners? Innocent women?” I felt sick. The reality of Gulliver always did that to me, made my stomach roil in nausea and words clot in my throat with my saliva and breath.

“An old man, someone known to the Sidhe of both courts as a kindhearted and generous soul. It was someone he knew, Alfild, not someone he needed.” Cadfael seemed genuinely upset by this murder, by the death of some old man about whom I had probably never heard of before and never would have at all in other circumstances. “He was a keeper of one of the stone circles. One of the most important stone circles, actually.” He swallowed hard, his throat working as he pressed onward. “You are familiar with Stonehenge?”

“Yes . . . but doesn’t some sort of trust run that? The government or something?” I turned to follow Cadfael’s progress to the hearth as the pixies tugged the robe from my arms. His head was bent low as if he were in deep thought; absurdly, I wondered if he needed a hug, some form of contact to help him move past the grief he was so obviously feeling. Before I could even make myself suggest it, he was speaking again, his tone nearly chastising.

“Francis was not the keeper of Stonehenge. That is just an example of a stone circle, one I was sure you might recognize. The government of your human world . . .” he paused, his lips pressed into a thin line as he seemed to see me as a human for the first time since the rose bush incident. After

several tense, quiet seconds, he continued. “Let us just say that Stonehenge does not belong to the human world and it never has. None of the stone circles do, nor do the tors.”

“Right, the Tor,” I sighed. The pixies had managed to untie the band holding my plait securely and were working out the twists with their tiny fingers, something that felt at once comforting and strange. Cadfael paid them as much mind as I might dust motes. “The Sidhe own it, the humans just sort of live there.” I thought of all the spots the world over where people claimed magical things happened, from miracles to faerie sightings. I had usually dismissed them as folktales, things left over from years gone past. *Time for that to change*, I heard my grandmother, dead ten years now, whisper in my ear. I cleared my throat slightly and returned my attention to Cadfael who, I noticed, had been talking and not noticing that I was spaced out.

“. . . and the problem will come when we reach the circle kept by Francis. The Seelie Court is already trying to stir up more enmity against the Unseelie and we are trying our best to do some . . . what is the word your sort use? Damage control?”

He quirked a brow, looking so out of his element for just a moment that I had to smile.

“What is it that you find so amusing?” he demanded, almost sulking.

“Nothing. You have it right, damage control. Well, I’m not going anywhere until I get some real food in me, something other than fast food junk. If you can’t find some oatmeal or a granola bar or something, send Du with me to the human world for a tiny bit so I can get supplies laid in. I’m almost out of bottled water anyway . . .” I trailed off hopefully, my brows creeping upwards.

The pixies were tugging at my nightgown now and I’d be damned if I’d let Cadfael see me naked. The very idea made my face burn in embarrassment so I turned away, clutching the front of the gown as if my

life depended on it. “Scoot, move,” I muttered, brushing the pixies away with one hand as I hurried to the bed, sitting precariously on the edge of the mattress and staring at the wall opposite, adorned with ornate plaques and tapestries.

“You are not to be out of my sight,” he repeated, his footfall a soft thud on the thick carpeting. “And the human realm is off limits.”

“Not entirely,” I pointed out. “Not if Gulliver can come and go. Not if I was able to make it back and Du . . .” I shifted, turning to face him and finding him a lot closer than I expected. Hello, face full of crotch. Leaning back with a frown of embarrassed annoyance, I continued, “If he can come and go, so can we.” My stomach rumbled, underscoring my need for a trip to the real world, the world where food was edible by everyone and I was not limited to Twinkies.

Cadfael murmured something under his breath and the pixies vanished in a streak of brightly colored light, shooting upwards and disappearing from sight. I had the feeling I was going to be their version of water cooler conversation for some time to come. “Gulliver comes and goes through his own devices. I do not want to expose you to danger by taking you through the remaining route.”

I held up a hand, standing suddenly and pressing my fingers against his still-moving lips. “You keep saying I’m supposed to help you win this war, right? Well, if I’m supposed to be a warrior, then treat me like one!”

I dropped my hand, conscious of his incredulous expression, and stepped around him, heading for the gown that had been laid out on the low trunk at the foot of the bed. It was an odd color somewhere between purple and red and looked, to my eyes, like arterial blood starting to clot.

“I never said warrior,” he pointed out, not moving from the spot he stood in, fixing me with an oddly stuffed look. “I said . . .”

“Cadfael, at this point, I don’t care if you said I was the Infanta of Spain and I had to dance the hokey pokey while buck naked on top of

Westminster Abbey. I need real food, I need water, and I need someone who can translate bullshit to English.”

The dress seemed to take on a life of its own, tangling and twisting as I tried to bunch the fabric to slide over my head. A flurry of pixies rose from the folds as I gave it one hard shake and I barely managed to keep from apologizing. They circled in unison, and, I’m not sure, but I think they shot me the collective finger.

“You’re going to take me to my realm, you’re going to stand there and be quiet while I stock up on necessities and then we’re going to come back here and you won’t hear a peep out of me about doing it again until I run out of real food and real water.”

“This,” he informed me in a tone that reminded me forcibly of my third grade math teacher belaboring a particularly boring point, “would not be happening if you would accept your role and drink of our wine and eat of our bread.” He paused and raised a brow, looking at me as if he could exert some sort of super special mind powers over my person and make me crave faerie wine and faerie toast or whatever it was they ate when they weren’t noshing on wild roast . . . whatever.

“Not happening, buddy.” I finally struggled into the gossamer-like dress and winced as a tiny tearing noise sounded in the lull of conversation. “Neither is this dress. I need pants. Er,” I paused, realizing I had used an Americanism and Cadfael was giving me a bemused look. “I need trousers. I can’t do anything in these dresses other than sit around and look like I’m dipped in meringue.” Every movement I made in the dress, even something as simple as breathing, made the fabric stretch audibly, like super thin paper tearing.

“You are a princess-elect,” Cadfael began, and then sighed. “Trousers it is.”

A swirl of rainbow colored light swooped down from the ceiling and split into two separate clouds of pixies, one hurrying towards me and the

other swirling towards the door. “You have ten minutes. We leave whether you are dressed or not.”

I exhaled noisily as the tiny pixies began pulling at the dress, their minute hands maneuvering the fabric easily, not even beginning to damage it with their ministrations as the garment was removed over my head. I stood, only slightly chilled, in my briefs and bra which were still damp from my hasty rinse the evening before. It was odd, getting used to something like pixies stripping you to your skivvies, but I found that it was actually not as hard as one might assume. When you were so busy, so stressed that you didn’t have time to think of the strangeness of the situation, it was actually kind of nice, not having to do it yourself. Especially when the dress seemed to be made out of tissue paper.

“I don’t guess any of you know where I can find a portal to the other realm?” I asked lightly, trying to fill the silence that seemed at once oppressive and natural.

“You talk overmuch,” one of the pixies, shimmering blue as a robin’s egg, proclaimed, dropping to hover before my face. “You waste your breath on needless words. Too human,” she added. It was easy now to discern male from female among the pixie, despite their generally androgynous appearance; the females seemed to favor skirts that looked to be made from flower petals and the males tended towards leaves.

“I can’t help it,” I sighed. “I *am* too human.”

“Only because you allow it.”

I uttered a tiny shriek then, a choked noise as Mabd moved into my line of vision. I don’t know how she got into the room without me hearing or seeing her do so but there she was, dark and ivory, silent as the grave in her regard. She did not so much as flicker a lash at the pixies and they vanished, retreating to the rafters and thick folds of the bedding as she stepped towards me, her dark gown dragging softly across the bare wood of the floor. “Mabd . . .”

“I am not stupid, child,” she spat as if the words burned her tongue. “I am aware of what is happening here, and if you were not touched by Danu, if you were not of the Tuatha di Danann . . .” She paused, her raven brows drawing downward in a scowl. “You will go above, you will get your . . . supplies . . .but you will not take Cadfael.”

“No,” Du’s voice erupted suddenly from the darkness by the door. “Plans have changed.” The look he gave Mabd as he strode forward was at once meaningful and fraught with nervous tension. “Cadfael has received word from Above that the circles . . .” he paused again and flicked a mildly disturbed glance at me. “There’s trouble amongst the circles. The Seelie have flocked to Sarum.”

Sarum. The name rang a huge, loud, mother of a bell in my brain. Sarum plain, Salisbury.

“Are we going to Stonehenge?” the words bubbled out excitedly, moreso than I intended. “I went there once when I first moved to England and again last year for Jackie’s birthday and . . .”

“Silence her,” Mabd snapped to whoever was listening, be it pixies or Du. “Gather the army.” She sailed past me, snapping “For the love of Danu, put some clothing on! I’ll not have you parading your human flesh for the eyes of my army. They have enough to worry about.”

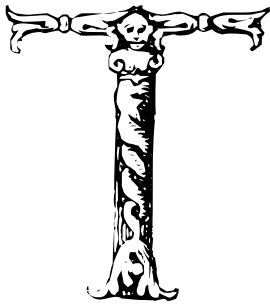
I realized that I was staring after her my jaw dropped, only when it began to ache. “What the hell was that?” I demanded, my eyes flicking to where Du stood, looking oddly pleased with himself.

“I,” he grinned, “am a bad faerie.” Motioning to the pixies, he uttered some word I did not comprehend and turned, tossing me a cheery wave over his shoulder. “Cadfael says three minutes!”

I shook myself as if that action could clear the confusion and found it only made me look like I had some mild variant of Saint Vitus Dance. “Okay . . . three minutes. I need trousers . . . and possibly Valium.”



CHAPTER THREE

“HAT IS A BIG FREAKIN’ HENGE.”

Silence met my commentary and I could feel the thick disapproval over my cavalier tone but the words kept coming. “In fact, I think that is the biggest henge I’ve ever seen.”

“You,” came Mabd’s chill voice in the quiet night, “are a twit.”

So spake the Queen of Night and Shadow, I thought, but she didn’t give me a chance to say anything else.

“Fan out. Alfhild, you are staying by my side, is that understood? Cadfael, do not give your mother that look. Do as you’re told. So long as I draw breath through my body, I am still leader of the Unseelie Court.” She was next to me then, suddenly and imposingly. She was taller than me I but not by much, her body whipcord lean but graceful, the body of a warrior queen. Her inky black hair was tightly braided and then twisted into a low bun at the nape of her neck, and her eyes were glittering dark. It was a disturbing trend I’d noticed in all of the Unseelie; their eyes shifted too easily, going from something almost human to something definitely not. Cadfael’s could pass for hazel until you really looked at him and noticed they were a kaleidoscope of color, the irises seeming to change even as you watched. It was either creepy or sexy. I pretended to myself that I hadn’t decided which yet.



“That may be,” Cadfael’s low, almost purring, voice drifted from somewhere to my left, “but I am the prince and she is my bride-to-be, provided I can convince her of that notion. It would be much easier to do so if she were with me and not off with you, witnessing the true terror of her future mother -in -law.”

He stepped into a thin sliver of moonlight that stabbed between the tall stones of the sacred circle and for a brief moment, I thought I saw a smile on his lips but then it was gone, his face a neutral mask of efficiency. “I will take her with me. Du will be along. The pixies are your minions for this evening, Mother.” Now I was sure of it; he *was* smiling, even if it was only in his tone.

Mabd looked momentarily apoplectic but she swallowed whatever she might have said and instead issued me a tight, pained smile. “Your glow will protect you from the redcaps. They won’t dare use your blood for their rites, not the blood of a Tuatha di Danann.” She did not give anyone a chance to respond, vanishing truly vanishing in the space of a breath.

“I’ve told her time and again to stop that,” Cadfael commented after a bare moment in which I had let my jaw drop like a yokel seeing the big city for the first time. “It’s so melodramatic.” He smiled at me then, an open and genuine smile as he offered me his arm. It made me marginally uncomfortable and I hesitated. I didn’t want to take his arm but I knew it would be rude and foolish not to. The line between the Sidhe realm and the human one was very thin in this night of the dark moon, the ancient Sidhe magic strong in the place of the stone circle. He escorted me to a tussock of grass and left me there.



“I hate being kept in the dark.”

The stone circle was full of Unseelie, all of them silent and brooding. No one seemed to hear me and I considered repeating myself, but paused. I was turning into one of those girls I hated in high school, the sort that spoke just to hear their own voice and affirm their own notions of self importance. I contented myself, such as things go, with picking at the damp grass beneath my outstretched legs. At the far side of the circle, Cadfael was in some deep conversation with Mabd, who had returned with a host of Unseelie I had never seen before, the thick shadows of the standing stones masking some of them from my sight.

“Just a few minutes more,” Du’s soft voice intoned near my ear. He had been sitting silently next to me for some time now, picking at his nails with the air of one much bored with the proceedings around him. “They’re talkn’ harsh. Mayhap Cadfael will convince her not to strike out in anger. Your friend, what was her name? The lass that wanted me unmanned?”

I couldn’t help the tug of a smile at his mention of Jackie and her insistence the big male tom that had tagged along last time I was allowed home be ‘fixed.’ “Her name’s Jackie. You know that. I’ve only mentioned her a million times . . .”

“Aye, Jackie.” He stared into the swirling mass of pixies that seemed to be dancing in the air in the midst of the stone circle, their colors mixing and separating as they passed one another, looping back around so quickly that they left trails of color in the night. “She safe, ye ken?”

“I . . . I suppose.” I slid a sidelong glance at the Cait Sidhe sitting next to me, elbowing him gently. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“The keeper of this circle is dead,” he stated flatly. “No two ways about it. The Wild Hunt took him.” Shaking his head sadly, he added, “They’re not our side nor theirs, no matter what yer books tell ye. They’re their own side.” He offered me a weak smile and elbowed me in return, the soft fur on his limbs tickling my bare flesh. “The burnin’ you smelled was peat, lass. Peat burnin’ to send the poor body on.”

His cadence had become sing-song, his gaze unfocused as if he were remembering something from long ago. Which, I thought with no small amount of interest, he likely was. They were old things, old creatures, older than anything I had ever seen in my life.

“You all right there?”

I blinked and the world seemed to snap back into place, such as it was. Looking at Du, I could see movement from the knot of royal Sidhe on the far side of the circle. Cadfael was walking towards us; I could tell his gait from all others, I realized with no small amount of surprise. That’s something heroines in romance novels do, know their love’s walk and posture and blah blah blah. I shifted to my knees, making to stand up, freezing in place when I saw Cadfael in a shaft of moonlight. Great googly moogly. Did I ever mention that he’s pretty hot for a faerie?

“You just can’t stay dressed, can you?” The words tumbled from my mouth before I could stop them, causing him to draw up short of me and triggering an ill-hidden snigger from Du. Cadfael folded his bare arms across his equally bare chest and frowned, woaded lines on his face wrinkling with the movement.

“I am not going to present myself to the Seelie court done up like some . . .” he paused, his brow furrowing as he seemed to be considering a choice of words.

“Fop?” Du suggested. “Dandy? Man milliner?” He perked up, his body fairly wriggling in amusement as he added “Metrosexual?”

“Du!” He glared roughly at his boon companion and I could not help the giggle that rose in my throat. Cadfael had shed his shirt and bore now an intricate, dark pattern over his skin. His wings were still hidden, somehow, but I knew they were there. I could see them in my mind’s eye, unfurled and unearthly, but for now they were invisible to my mundane sight.

“I’m just trying to be helpful,” the Cait Sidhe leader sniffed, a hint of a wink shivering in the corner of his eye. “Your vocabulary is very out of date sometimes.”

“Because ‘man-milliner’ is so current,” I sighed, rolling my eyes heavenward, mainly because I could not look at Cadfael any longer without doing something embarrassing like drooling or making yummy noises. “Look, I know I wanted out of the court but this is getting silly. What the hell is going on here?”

Cadfael, arms still over his chest, shifted his attention from his best friend to me, his frown still firmly in place. “There has been a shift in plans. The Seelie have mobilized more quickly than we expected, thanks, in part, to the ghou and the sylph.”

“Sounds like a bad indie band,” I muttered weakly. Clearing my throat, I asked, “So? This means what?”

“It means we are at war,” Du said softly, his eyes fairly glowing in the moonlit night. “The circle-keeper’s blood is on the hands of Gulliver. He is the only one who could have entered without question; the keeper would never have opened the door for a non-Sidhe.” Pausing, he seemed to realize I was about to ask a question and headed me off at the pass. “Iron bands on the door. The only way in for a pure blood Sidhe is through one special entrance, one portal into the home not banded in iron and garlanded in bells.”

“It’s a courtesy, the bells,” Du put in helpfully. “They don’t do much to us other than annoy us when they get to jangling all at odds . . .” he trailed off under Cadfael’s intense gaze. “Um, you were saying?”

“The one who killed the keeper bore no effects from the iron and only a Sidhe, or one who is part Sidhe, could have the ability to kill him and summon the Wild Hunt. Especially,” he added, glancing up at the spring time moon, “at this time of year.”

I took a deep, bracing breath and gathered up every objection I could possibly have to whatever plan they had hatched and, as I blew the air from my lungs forcefully, I let it carry away anything I might have said. Instead, I pasted a smile on my features and stuffed my hands into the deep pockets of the roughhewn breeches someone had given up for me to wear. “Okay. Now what?”

“Now,” Cadfael said cautiously, his brows creeping up on his pale forehead, “you stay with Du and myself. We are going to present ourselves to the Seelie Court.”

“I guess . . . we follow?” I suggested weakly.

“We follow.” Du nodded curtly and strode after Cadfael, his playful demeanor gone, put away in some internal box with a tight lock. I was left to trail after them, my own long legs not quite fast enough to keep me from looking like some gangling, awkward girl striving to keep up with the cool kids in P.E. Silence reigned in the stone circle despite the large number of Unseelie present. I could feel eyes on me, the fluttering of awareness teasing along my skin like so much static. It was not unpleasant but at the same time, I wanted it to stop.

“Cadfael,” I panted once I was close enough to be sure he would hear me, “slow down!”

“There’s only so much time,” he shot back, his voice, for once, was not the teasing lilt or smoothly modulated tones I was used to. Instead, it was sharp and jagged, a man on the verge of . . . of something, I decided. Nothing I could think of was dire enough to compare to the pall of feeling that was washing through the stone circle.

We reached the middle of the circle. Without even asking, I knew it was the exact middle, equidistant from all of the ancient stones. We were standing at the convergence of the old lines, the very middle of some invisible vortex. I could feel it pulling on my skin, tugging at me with an almost breathtaking reality.

“You feel it,” Cadfael murmured, suddenly close and sounding pleased. “Your Sidhe blood is not forgotten, no matter how you run your mouth and maintain your veneer of obtuseness. The Sidhe in you recognizes this place, the significance.” he nodded, obviously happy with my reaction.

He took my hand in his and I felt a jolt. Du’s softly furred hand (I had to stop myself from thinking ‘paw’) grasped my other hand and I felt a similar, answering jolt. I felt as if I were the conduit for some power, some great and ineffable thing that chose me to pour through. It felt good . . . it felt *beyond* good.

I gasped, my head falling back and mouth opening. Pleasure greater than anything I could ever imagine seemed to explode in my veins, filling me with golden light. Cadfael’s hand tightened on mine and I was horrified to hear myself moan in an entirely pleasure-filled way. Du’s soft chuckle trickled through the sudden roaring in my ears . . . and, all too soon, it was over.

I was cold, the space was dark and my hands were dangling limply by my side. Cadfael’s broad chest pressed against my back and his breath feathered across my ear as he bent low to whisper to me.

“Mmmm?”

“We are in the court. You brought us here,” he added, something I couldn’t place, coloring his voice. His fingers passed lightly over my jaw, skimming my flesh so lightly that it sent a shudder through my entire body, wracking my bones with sensation.

His thumb pressed against my lips and I opened my eyes. “The court lies just beyond those doors,” he murmured, his breath hot against my cold skin.

A set of gold and silver doors stood, high as a house and twice as wide, a short distance away. Jewels of every color conceivable studded the intricate carving on the portal, my mind boggling at the sheer size of the entrance. Just one of the green orbs marking the eyes of some ancient

Seelie warrior would have paid for my house, my land and the land of everyone in the village, I thought dumbly. My gaze jerked suddenly to take in the rest of the space where we had appeared. Hard packed dirt seemed to make up the floor, moist black soil forming the walls. The rich smell of living earth confirmed the appearance; this chamber was carved out of the land, life seeping through its very core. It was different than the kingdom of the Unseelie. Where Seelie was rich and loamy, Unseelie was cool and dry. Seelie's entrance was ornate and jeweled; Unseelie's was dark and forboding, studded with dull metal that gave no indication of its treacherous nature, the razor sharp edges of dwarf-forged spikes.

A soft scraping noise infused the space with an ominous sense of waiting, passing time you had rather spend doing other things, far away from here. For a moment, I thought that the massive doors were opening and I pressed back against Cadfael in a fit of need; I needed to feel safe and he, his very presence, instilled an odd calm in me.

Before I could dwell any more on the peculiar turn my brain seemed to be taking of late, a shape resolved itself from the shadows around the entrance. A man, or what seemed to be a man, lithe as a willow limb and taller than any of the three of us, moved forward with the sort of grace that comes not so much from years of training but being born with really fantastic genes.

His long, silvery hair hung in a single plait over his shoulder, the queue banded in golden circlets that matched the heavy gold torque around his bare throat. Like Cadfael, he was bare to the waist and ornamented in the blue patterns that must have been ancient even to the Celts. A tiny sliver of a thought occurred to me then—this was an elf, a trooping faerie. Something I had not seen in the Unseelie court, not like this anyway.

“Have you come to battle fairly?” the elf asked in a tone both sweet and rich.

“I have come to seek an audience with Gulliver,” Cadfael replied in a similar, even tone. His arms, which I had not realized were around me, tensed, the only sign of his apprehension. The elf, I noted, saw this.

“You,” he said softly, “cannot enter. She,” his long, pale finger indicated yours truly, “can. She is his kith and kin.” He tilted his head at me and frowned, his gaze concerned. “You are ill, human. Your body screams for comfort.”

“I can comfort myself, thanks,” I babbled, pulling away from Cadfael more easily than I had anticipated. “Um, that sounds really bad. What I meant was . . .”

“You may enter. They may not,” the elf repeated. “Come. We do not have all night.” He held out his hand and it seemed as if he were about to tap his foot impatiently or do something else uncouth to his way of thinking.

I drew myself up straight, the exhaustion that had been creeping in, fed off malnutrition and uncertainty, shedding like old skin. “They come with me. I am a princess of the Unseelie Court and I do not enter your stronghold without my fiancé and retainer.”

Du let out a low whistle under his breath and I sensed rather than felt Cadfael go tense behind me. The elf seemed to be turning this over in his mind for a long moment before shrugging an eloquent shoulder and turning back towards the doors. He formed a complicated gesture with his slender hand. The double doors began the slow swing outward.

Cadfael’s breath was in my ear again. “So you accept my proposal?”

“Chill, big guy.” I felt color suffuse my cheeks and I couldn’t quite decide why that was. Was it the idea of being married to Cadfael, being his wife in all senses of the word, to borrow a phrase from a Regency romance I once read? Or was it because I was in the midst of some strange experience and I couldn’t choose which was more affecting, his bare chest

pressed against my back or the blindingly bright light suddenly gleaming through the widening crack in the doors? “Gah!”

“Try and sound more charming once we’re inside,” Du murmured somewhere by my right ear. “I fear that ‘gah’ does not quite connote the proper amount of awe and respect expected within the walls of the Seelie court.”

I didn’t have time to come up with a good response before I felt a long-fingered, cool hand close around my wrist and I was pulled forward, away from Cadfael and Du. The light was blinding but not painful, golden and soft if light could be such a thing. I smelled something sweet and floral but not cloying. The sound of thousands of fluttering wings filled my ears and then, my vision cleared.

I stood before a high mounted throne, the entire thing ornately designed out of what seemed to be gold and silver, hung with ropes of gemstones, and overhung with a canopy of living (or it seemed to be living) vines and flowers. It was like a brightly lit version of the Unseelie court, I thought with a tiny hint of amusement. A hand pushed my shoulders, forcing me to my knees before the throne and its seated resident. “Watch the hands,” I snapped before I could stop myself.

“You are amusing. More so than Gulliver led us to believe,” the musical voice above me intoned. “Weapons down.” A metallic and wooden clatter indicated that at least some beings were obeying her. “The Unseelie swore fealty to you,” the voice’s owner said then, a rustle of fabric underscoring her words. She was walking down the dais to me but I did not look up; some part of my brain was screaming at me to behave for once and I decided it was offering some decent advice. “Most of them, anyway.”

“All of them,” Cadfael snapped. “They all knelt to her and offered their token and their pledge.” I had forgotten, for one moment, that he was on par with our erstwhile host here. He was royalty, not just the naked man I’d found under my rose bush what seemed like ages ago.

For the first time in . . . well, ever . . . I was scared of the Sidhe. The air crackled with an energy so ancient I was sure it had no beginning and no end; I was insignificant here, no matter what the stories were about my ancestry. I could be crushed like a bug. Like a pixie, some internal voice threw out on a mental shriek.

“Typical Unseelie,” the female derided softly. “You pay no attention to the things that will not benefit you. The sylph did not obey. How could it? It was in my chambers the entire night. And,” she smiled, crossing her ankles as primly as a Regency miss, “the Sluagh.”

“The Sluagh,” Cadfael began, then paused. “The Sluagh.”

The most removed of the Unseelie, the Sluagh were once called the souls of dead sinners, unable to enter Paradise and condemned to roam the earth forever, doing the Devil’s handiwork. It was less complicated than that, though. They were earthbound dead, tied to the Unseelie because no one else would have them. They were no absentminded shades, not benign cartoon ghost apparitions, but rather sentient, angry, terrifying beings that seemed to have ever forgotten they were alive, ravaging the night and competing with the Wild Hunt for infamy.

The queen turned to me, her face terrifyingly beautiful. “I am pleased that you have enough of the Sidhe blood in you to work our charms and to open the portal in the stone circle. Gulliver was not wrong about you.” Her gaze flicked to Cadfael and her expression altered so slightly that I almost missed it.

Du’s sharp inhalation told me that he was alert to it, as well.

The bugger was, I couldn’t name it. She didn’t look, to my eyes, angry or sad or amused or pleased or anything other than . . . *there*.

“Alfhild of the Seven Snows,” she murmured, sounding as if she were tasting my name, the name I was being called here anyway, on her tongue and finding it not unpleasant but not delicious either. Like the

etymological equivalent to a peanut butter sandwich. “Why do you refuse this name among the humans?”

“Wh . . . what?” I stuttered, unable to school my voice into a semblance of cool, calm and not about to freak out.

“You have refused your birthright where Gulliver embraced his. You have forced this prophecy into being.” She glanced fleetingly at her court, silent as a tomb, and then at Cadfael. “You’ll do,” she said after a moment. “You’ll do fine.”



“I’ll do what?” I demanded again as Cadfael’s fingers tightened on my elbow. I was practically being dragged from the Seelie Court, my ill-shod feet sliding and stumbling on the highly polished floors that seemed to glow like backlit alabaster.

“You’ll do,” he said through clenched teeth, his eyes firmly fixed on Du ahead of us, and beyond him the elf-like guard with his long spear.

A fleeting ‘overcompensation’ comment danced through my brain but I tamped it down, unwilling to incite any more ire than I already, apparently, had.

“The key to the kingdom,” he paraphrased, smiling a shade ruefully as we drew to a halt before an unassuming wooden door, “is through you. You bear a child to Gulliver and—”

“EW!” My voice reverberated off of the high arched ceiling and smooth, subtly colored walls. “EW!”


“As I was saying,” he growled, aware of the keen attention of our guard and likely knowing better than I did how many ears were listening to us, “you bear a child to Gulliver and the line of the Seelie is strong. You’re a warrior, Alfild. That’s why you’re here. In all honesty that is why you

were chosen to be my bride; you will lead your people to victory over their foe.”

Du cleared his throat gently, interrupting whatever Cadfael had been about to say (and it looked like it'd be a doozy, judging by the expression on his face). “Um, our cell is ready . . .”



CHAPTER FOUR

T WAS SIMPLE, WHEN YOU GOT TO THE HEART of things, I thought. Cadfael could no more answer my question than I could. He just knew the prophecy, knew what he had been told and what I had learned. The Sidhe races were fading, losing their native homes and lands, the earth from which they draw their power growing fallow and swollen with industrial rot, electricity disrupting the natural flow of energy and homes demolishing ancient, timeless circles and lands. Bringing the blood of the Tuatha in, my blood, would bring them life. It would make them stronger, revive them. But the Unseelie and Seelie could not unite, would not unite. Too many eons of bad blood between them, too many centuries of hatred.

The Seelie, pure in form and ethereal in presence, craved the powers they'd once had, the dominion Above and Below. The Unseelie accepted humanity and longed to return to the days when the surface dwelling humans respected them, respected the old ways, and all lived together. The Seelie, golden and bright, were favored in the end, favored because they looked so benevolent and kind, favored because their words were like honey with flowers and their touch moved like silk across warm flesh.



“There is no life without death,” Cadfael murmured in the darkness of the cell we had been shown to, a small room that was plunged into shadow as soon as our guard had shut the door on his way out. “But death . . . humans fear death. You feared it when the Snow Queens enabled your escape. The others fear us because we embrace it as part of life. The Seelie promise eternity, youth everlasting and unending fields of green and gold. They do not allow change . . .”

“Like the stories,” I sighed. “Humans would be taken into the realm of the Sidhe, lost for ages only to return years later unchanged, their families dead and gone, the world moved on without them . . .” I closed my eyes and exhaled softly. “And somehow I can fix this?”

“No, not you alone,” Cadfael corrected gently.

I felt him stretch beside me, his leg moving against mine, a warm flush of awareness spreading over my skin. *Not the time*, I scolded myself, almost ashamed of the keen sense of his presence I seemed to have developed.

“You are but a part of the key. Gulliver is your brother, Sidhe and Tuatha in blood, as you are. He has been working hard at ensuring you cannot succeed in your portion of this game, Alfild.” Butterfly touches skimmed across my cheek and I went still, feeling frozen to the spot as he pushed loose strands of hair from my face. “The queen’s name is Iseult. She succeeded her mother to the throne only recently. No one is talking, but it is thought Gulliver did away with the old queen to make way for Iseult, who thinks much as he does. The Seelie are destroying the only paths between our world and the world of the humans.”

I did not correct him this time. I was no longer, I realized with a sickening mental thud, human to their eyes. At least not to Cadfael and Du and likely Mabd. I still bore the faint golden sheen of the Tuatha, I still heard their words without translation, I felt the pull of the universe around

me in a way I had never realized could exist. “If they win,” I asked quietly, “what happens?”

Cadfael stiffened beside me and I could tell I had either surprised him with my question or hit a sore spot. Possibly, most likely, I had done both.

“Then the Unseelie diminish. We vanish completely. It is the will of the Seelie that we no longer exist. They take our realms, they take our very life force and absorb it into themselves.”

“And to the humans?”

“They remain . . . unchanged.” He sighed and his arm moved around my shoulders. I didn’t fight it. “The Seelie do not care for the humans and they will ignore them at will, unless they can find amusement with them. They seek purity, holiness, and to them the humans are less than that.”

“Gulliver is Seelie,” I pressed onward, the feeling of Cadfael’s fingers tracing idle circles on my upper arm oddly soothing. “He’s a murderer.”

He would kill again, I knew, as certainly as he had the first handful of times. Not caring, not stopping. People in his way were disposed of summarily. Like a used tissue, I thought dully, feeling so far removed from my life before, a life where I had to change my name to hide my connection to my half brother, that I could not muster the indignation and nausea I had previously felt at the thought of his actions.

“He does not care for the human race, no.” Cadfael’s hand stilled on my arm and rested heavily there, his breathing still deep and even, making my left shoulder rise and fall with each inhalation and exhalation. “He seeks power through subjugation. He sees his human side as foul, something to be rid of, which is why he seeks immortality through you, Alfhild.”

Cadfael shifted and I felt suddenly cold when he moved away from me. I knew he was looking at me but I couldn’t see his face, even with my newly awakened senses.

“What do I do?” My voice seemed far away, distant even to my own ears in this enclosed space. “Do I kill him? Do I kill Iseult?” The thought

made my breath hitch in my throat and I found the nausea which I had thought myself free of earlier. “I can’t do that, Cadfael!”

“No one is asking you to,” he assured me, his voice smooth and soft as a fur pelt. “Did you know that we really don’t have wings?”

I laughed, unable to stop myself. “What? What the hell are you talking about?” The smell of burning leaves teased my senses and I felt lulled by his words, his presence.

“The Sidhe . . . wings are strictly for pixies. I don’t actually have wings . . .” He shrugged, his shoulder moving again against mine as he regained his previous posture against the wall. “It’s an illusion. Makes humans happy, makes them feel that all is right with the world if they can see something they recognize. So we pretend to have wings.” He laughed softly as I tried to stifle a giggle.

I knew he was trying to distract me from our present situation but I couldn’t help it. The sheer amusement in his voice was infectious. He found the idea of parading about in wings to be laughable and therefore, I did as well.

“See? If you can laugh, it’s not all bad!”

“You’re high,” I muttered and took a deep breath, but I was still grinning like an idiot in the darkness. “So now we’re here, you don’t have wings, Du is out like a light . . . now what? We just sit this one out? What’s Mabd going to do?” I leaned closer, feeling the warm hardness of his arm shift to accommodate me, pull me closer.

He still held himself carefully, as if he were afraid that I would scream and flail, but I was past that. I was no longer going to fight it, this new reality of mine.

“You’re wrong, you know,” I added as a new thought occurred to me. “I’m not part Sidhe at all . . . the Tuatha de Danann aren’t Sidhe.” He was silent for a long moment so I pressed onwards. “The Tuatha de Danann . . .

they're gods. I mean . . . that's how they've always been portrayed. They're not Sidhe like you are."

I fidgeted in his silence, uncertain if I had misspoken and misunderstood the nature of their being. "I mean," I finally said, "that's what I was taught."

He remained silent for a long moment, his breath brushing across my cheek, teasing the sensitive flesh of my ear and sending shivers down my spine.

"I know I've pushed it away before but . . . the truth would be a really good thing right now."

"Rest, Alfild. We have a hard road ahead of us." He sighed and wound his fingers into my hair, tangling them in the already messy strands, making me wince silently as he caught a few snarls with his motions. "You are marked, that is the truth. You are destined for great things with the Sidhe, and that is also the truth." He paused, the silence stretching on for so long that I started to wonder if he'd fallen asleep. "And I don't really have wings. Not like the pixies anyway."

"Not really," came Du's tired voice from across the narrow chamber. "He doesn't have wings, Mabd doesn't have wings, I don't have wings . . . it's stratifying in our society." I could practically hear his grin as he added, "You don't have wings either, Alfild. Just shine."

"Screw the shine," I yawned. I could see it, though, marking me, making me sparkle like stars even in the dark cell. A constant reminder of my status, I thought miserably. It was like a war in my head, this dichotomy between Sidhe and human, supposed reality and this . . . I spread my fingers as if I were letting something slip through them and found Cadfael's face in the dark, his eyes glittering sharply as they caught the sheen of my glowing skin. "That's not all, is it? There's more that you're not telling me yet."

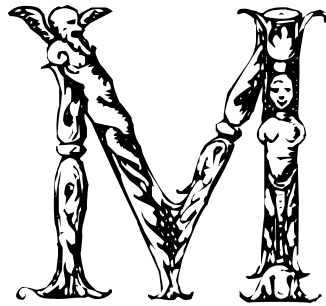
Du hissed in the dark and his strong fingers curled around my ankle, seeking my silence. I shook him off, or tried to, but held my tongue in spite of myself.

Cadfael heaved a sigh and drew away from me as much as he could, and began. “Before humanity had considered itself too good for nature, before religion as you know it, and before people became mad for power and thought they needed leaders and policies to simply exist, the Sidhe were there. We were between god and man, nature made flesh.”

His voice was soporific and I felt my eyes closing in spite of myself. My limbs felt warm and heavy, my breath slowing in my chest. *Everything*, I thought in some distant haze, *would be fine . . .*



CHAPTER FIVE



MY FEET FELT WET, MAKING ME frown. I looked down and realized, with a start, that I was mired in thick and soupy mud up to my ankles and no amount of pulling seemed to be helping. Everything smelled dank and damp and oddly green, sucking and slapping noises telling me that others were having the same problems I was with the mud.

“How do I get out?” I asked the nearest person and was startled to realize the voice was mine but the words were foreign, feeling thick and strange in my throat and on my tongue.

Tiny midges swarmed about my face and I swatted madly at them as I finally pulled my feet free of the muck and hurried-carefully-to catch up with the others. We were at the edge of a river that seemed populated solely with long and narrow boats rather than waterfowl or weeds.

Some people moved about the barges but most of us were walking, voices soft and awed as we neared a bend in the river where stood a thick copse of trees the like of which I have never seen before in my life.

They're aglow with rainbows, I thought to myself. Tiny stars of every color imaginable. I felt fear quake in my belly but not enough to slow my steps as I drew even with a woman I knew as my mother.



She barely glanced at me, but from the split second I had of her gaze I was struck by how sad she was, how horribly guilty she must feel.

The group was slowing, the bargemen leaping onto shore as I was pushed forward, the group shouldering and squeezing me towards the massive trees that twisted up out of the riverbank. The fear in my belly spread through my limbs and I knew that, if I gave in and ran or let myself be sick, I would be punished or worse. The voices fell silent and all I could hear was my own breathing.

An old man, older than anyone in the entire world as far as we knew, stepped forward to stand by my side. His face was marked in blue patterns, tattooed into his flesh by some steady hand decades before, the color spilling down in complicated knots and curls to his neck and chest. He was a painted man, I thought, the fear subsiding just slightly. The painted men protected us.

His voice did not shake as he called out, raising his arms to the tree. I heard rather than saw the assembly drop to their knees behind me and when I tried to do the same, the painted man grabbed my wrist in a death grip and held me in place. The tree seemed to shimmer and move, the lights winking out one by one only to reappear around the trunk, wrapped around the bark in an embrace. The darkness of the copse thickened and shifted before my eyes.

Before I could draw a breath, I was being shoved forward, my feet heavy again as my bare feet slid and slipped over roots and slick mud. I smelled the coppery tang of blood and bone, the sweet and thick smell of rotten flesh, and I knew what was to become of me. I screamed, my throat raw from it within an instant. I screamed as hands on my back pushed me into the copse, as the painted men chanted behind me. I was unbound, part of me noted, and should be honored.

Darkness punctuated by twinkling sparks of light swallowed me;, the thick canopy of leaves blotting out the weak light of the sun. My legs gave

out beneath me and I fell forward, hands skidding in the thick soil, rough sticks and debris abrading my palms and knees. The chanting was not as loud as before but I did not know if they had grown quiet, listening for my demise, or if it was the blood pounding in my ears that made them all seem so far away.

The twinkling lights had stopped and hung halfway between me and the branches. I had heard, had known that the ancient ones sometimes demanded the blood of the River Folk in times of war and need, but it had always been young men, those who had chosen to go forth bravely and willingly to save the village, to save our entire race.

I did not move, did not even dare breathe as I rested on my hands and knees, waiting for I knew not what. The chanting was fading now I knew for sure that they were moving away. Probably back to the river barges, I thought, fear making my tongue thick and bitter in my mouth.

I was seized by back-bending spasms of nausea and my body bowed with the urge to vomit but nothing came, the lack of food in our village coffers finally coming in useful as I heaved and strained on the forest floor.

“When you feel more the thing,” a soft voice said somewhere near my ear, “I will lead you to your new home . . .”

The world jolted around me, the sound of wood scraping on stone drawing me back to the present. Cadfael and Du were on their feet, blocking me from the door. Slivers of golden light still cut across my vision, though, making me blink and tear up. “Step aside,” a voice, low and thick, uttered. Something about the tone of it made me think of rotting leaves piled thick over damp ground, decades of decay and deep, black mold. “Alfhild is summoned before Iseult.”

Cadfael did not move but Du stepped forward. “We are her guardians. She goes nowhere without us.” His tail swished once and I was put in mind

of Jackie's old cat Tinker, how he would stalk dustbunnies and crows. *Please don't, I thought. Don't do it, Du . . .*

"She comes, you stay. It is the request and requirement of Queen Iseult." A dark figure pushed forward, a shadow moving in the light, and Cadfael stepped aside. "Come, half blooded cur." I scrambled back, trying to avoid the thick-fingered hands that reached for me out of the slices of light. It looked as if whoever it was had immersed their hands in motor oil and then dragged them through loam before letting them marinate in swamp water.

The smell seemed to buoy that notion as I found myself pressed against the back wall of the small cell, the hulking mass of this servitor of the queen between me and my seemingly halfhearted protectors. "Enough of you," he snapped, at least I assumed it was a he, and grabbed me under my arms. His grip was so tight that I couldn't draw a breath, my scream a barely-voiced whimper as I was dragged to my feet.

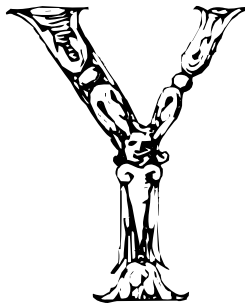
"He is Sluagh," Cadfael said flatly, sounding oddly uncaring. His voice held no anger, no rancor, not even annoyance as this Sluagh creature spun me about and forced me to walk towards the door, his hand on my back to ensure I did not try to run. "He will not hurt you, Alfild." The faerie prince stepped back as much as he could as we passed and I knew then that the Sluagh could or would hurt and possibly kill him. "Iseult," my erstwhile fiancé added, "will."

I found my voice finally and anger colored my words. "If I'm not truly Sidhe, what good will I do you?" I knew I'd hit a nerve; the Sluagh stopped moving and Cadfael drew a sharp breath.

"You are as stupid as they say," my captor spat and I was enveloped in darkness.



CHAPTER SIX

“OU ARE WEAK,” THE SEELIE QUEEN remarked as my eyes fought to open. “My servant found it best to remove you from the presence of the Unseelie offal posthaste, and you failed to remain conscious for his efforts.”

Clucking her tongue like a scolding mother, she picked her way down the dais towards me. We were in a smaller chamber than the grand, opulently decorated one I had first seen Iseult in, and we were alone. Not even the Sluagh was there, I noticed. Just Iseult and I.

“The sylph is most anxious to see you again. She was quite worried,” the queen added, her lips curving into a smile so kind and beautiful that my breath caught in my throat.

I felt very loved, very important in that moment. Fragile and delicate and loved. *The Unseelie are beautiful, in their own way*, I thought as I gazed up, openmouthed, at Iseult, *but the Seelie . . .*

“You know the truth of it now, that you are nothing so base as Sidhe,” Iseult murmured, sounding almost apologetic for her nature. “You are marked by the Tuatha de Danan; you glow like them, shine in the dark like them . . . Even the taint of humanity in your blood is swallowed whole by the exalted Tuatha de Danan of your ancestry.”



She knelt next to me and spread the train of her gown about her feet as if it were a blanket. “Gulliver is of Sidhe blood, but he has a dirty little secret.” Her smile became more edged, less kind. “He cannot get a child off me. He is unable to spawn with us.” Her cool fingers brushed my temple and I shuddered, ribbons of some unidentifiable emotion spreading through my veins as her touch moved down my cheek to my jaw, then my throat before coming to rest. “I am too pure of blood for him . . .”

“Because he’s part human,” I supplied quietly. “You can’t carry a human child. It’s not like the old days, is it?”

Her eyes snapped up to meet mine at that and I felt the first pangs of power over her. She did not know I had seen. She did not know that I could see without Cadfael’s help, that I had been the one that opened the portal in the circle.

“The blood of the Tuatha de Danan will never die in us, no matter how many generations removed we are from the source, but it does make it harder to breed, doesn’t it? The River Folk were not human like we are now, were they? They were closer to nature, closer to the gods, closer to you.”

I sat up and Iseult had to rock back on her heels to avoid being too close to me. Her hand fell away from my throat and the shuddering pleasure I had felt at her beauty ebbed out of my bones like the tide.

“Gulliver can get a child off a human woman, though, can’t he? And what better human than one who carries the bloodline of your ancients?” I rose onto my knees then, the disoriented feeling of a moment before gone in a blink. “I am his sister but that’s of no concern to you, is it? You just want this blood.” I held my wrists out towards her in a maudlin punctuation as my voice carried on before I knew what I was saying. “I’ve been lied to for what feels like decades now. I’ve come to terms with this reality and with my being here but I have not and will not agree to be

anyone's brood mare, Unseelie or Seelie. This is your war." I was on my feet before she was, angering her in my presumption. "This is your war, you fight it. I refuse!"

I didn't know where I was going, but I was going there fast. And lightheaded, I noticed in some distant part of my awareness. I was still malnourished from my lack of proper food but I pressed on, my steps not slowing as I reached the narrow door, gilded with images of ancient knotwork and animals twined in seductive battle.

"You will not get far," Iseult noted pleasantly. "The Sluagh who serve me have orders to kill you."

"Better that than this," I spat, reaching for the doorknob.

"Lorelei!"

A sharp pain exploded in my chest, somewhere in the region of my heart. My breath whooshed from my lungs and I could barely stand as I forced myself to turn back around.

"Jackie! Jackie, no . . ." The woman who was more family to me than any living relative of mine was held in the arms of the same Sluagh that had brought me from the cell. "What happened to you?"

"This is the worst dream ever," she groaned, her eyes sliding closed. She bore obvious, livid bruises on her arms and legs; a great gash marred her forehead, congealed blood dark on her pale skin.

"She still thinks she sleeps," Iseult noted dryly. "It is a common condition of the human mind to ignore and alter the things it does not understand into situations it can manage without disturbing the narrow scope of reality set for itself." Her long fingers brushed a blood-matted hank of hair from Jackie's face and she smiled down at my friend. "She thinks this is a nightmare."

"It is," I muttered, taking a few steps towards her. "What did you do to her?"

“I did nothing. The Seelie did nothing.” Her smile switched to me then and she seemed to be waiting for me to say something.

I held my tongue, afraid of what my anger would drive me to say, how it would endanger me, as I took another handful of steps towards Jackie in the Sluagh’s arms.

“We found her thus at the border of our realm. The prevailing opinion is that she was attacked by a redcap but somehow, I doubt that. She lives, you see, and if a redcap had taken her, she would have been in far more pieces than she is currently in now.”

“The Unseelie did not do this,” I replied tersely. “This is a mistake.” Jackie was very still; if not for the rise and fall of her breast under the thin nightshirt she was wearing, I’d have thought she was dead.

“You see now,” Iseult put in before I could speak again, “we have leverage, as it were.” She stroked Jackie’s face lovingly now, almost as if she had predatory interest in her. Which, I supposed dully, she did. “You have a choice in this, Alfild. You serve the greater good. You help the Seelie, you turn your back on Cadfael and his kingdom. Or you help the Unseelie. You turn your back on your best friend and leave her to our . . .tender mercies.”

I felt very dizzy of a sudden, the room tilting and shifting around me, colors fading and brightening randomly. “I think I’m going to vomit,” I announced.

Iseult recoiled as I stumbled forward, my knees not wanting to function properly. I reached out for Jackie. The Sluagh, having no orders to move, stood there, staring. Iseult hissed a curse and it happened . . . I was sick all over the thick, woven rug at her feet.

Days, weeks possibly, of ill nutrition and stress culminated in that moment, me going to my knees in the queen’s drawing room, expelling the meager contents of my stomach wretchedly, the echoing dry heaves doing nothing for my state or Iseult’s mood.

I heard her voice but not the words, my head buzzing with a dizzy, sick feeling as I fell onto my side and rolled to my back. The world was shifting again.



CHAPTER SEVEN



T WAS THE FOREST AGAIN, BUT LATER.

I knew that several days, if not weeks, had passed since the painted man had shoved me into the darkness of the trees. I was still alive and what was more . . . I was loved. The tiny dots of light had touched me, stroked my face and hair. Pixies, I knew.

We had been called pixies, my people and I, but only by outsiders who had never seen the twinkling stars of their bodies, these tiny beings that made up but one layer of the universe. These, the creatures caring for me, were truly pixie. I stood very still as they tucked blossoms into my hair, blossoms that must be magical for it was approaching winter and no plants showed their lovely faces to the bitter winds that blew off the lake. Behind me, he approached. I was not afraid; I knew he would not harm me. He had seen me, I learned, seen me and instigated an ancient rite, an ancient promise. He demanded me from my peopelme, of all womento come to his bower. Bloodthirsty as the painted men were, with their serpent tattoos and woaded chests and faces, they thought I was to be killed, and even offered to spill my blood themselves. No, he had ordered, bring me whole. Ah, they smiled. The old ways . . .

*“Gancanagh,” I said, my voice oddly soft, almost a whisper.
“Gancanagh, I will not die with love for you.”*



“Nay, lass,” he smiled, the clay pipe he carried but never smoked dangling from his fingertips as he looked on me, his eyes moving from the tips of my toes to the crown of my head in a slow and appraising way. “Nay, that’s but legend, not true ‘tall. I will not make ye pine for me. I am yours and you are mine.”

Feeling as if I were swimming to the surface of a very thick bog, I realized this was my wedding day. I was to be wed to this old god, this mystic and mythic man, and be his helpmeet. The idea of being such for Gancanagh, the legendary lover and seducer of women, made me laugh, there in the dark grove, the sound sending the pixies scattering. Helpmeets cared for the home, cared for the children . . . they did not stand nude in a faerie bower, decked in flowers that bloomed out of season, being looked upon by male eyes so deep and dark that one could drown in them. “Is it funny, then?” he asked me, tilting his head to one side and smiling thinly. “Are you laughing at my love for you?”

“Aye,” I admitted, the strange voice I had come to recognize as my own in this vision bubbling through the laughter. “I am! I am no wife for you. I am river folk. I am to be wife to some fisherman, some bargeman, some rough sort who will die early of the cold and leave me with a passel of bairn to care for until the day I die, old and dirty and hungry.” The bitterness bled through, brewed from a lifetime of hard winters and disappointment, a lifetime of being forced to change and move as those who had no respect for our ways, the ways of those who knew the dawn of time, encroached on our rivers and lakes.

I blinked and he was before me, touching me, his long fingers roaming over my face and shoulders, undemanding but claiming, cool slivers of magic running over the heavy warmth of my flesh. “The women speak of you,” I added. “Gancanagh, he who calls to the young maids,

seduces them with his words and eyes, brings them to fits of need and longing so deep and keen that they die for want of him . . .

“Gancanagh,” he repeated, his accent old, thick and musical to my ears. “Gancanagh who is glorified falsely. Gancanagh who loves the river woman Gormlaith . . .” He smiled again, his face very close to mine. His breath smelled of honey and wild herbs, his skin of wood smoke. My eyes fluttered closed as his words traced fire on my skin. “Gormlaith . . . your very name claims you for me. Princess is its meaning. You were chosen for me before you were born, before I drew breath on this island . . .”

I felt his lips press against mine, and then nothing but cold.

“You See,” Iseult’s voice intruded on my darkness. “You See,” she repeated and even I heard the emphasis on the second word. “You are given to the Sight and I did not know!” Her voice rang off the high rafters and fairly dripped poison on us all.

Jackie stirred again, and this time, the Sluagh dropped her onto the stone floor, drawing a sharp cry from my friend and a growl from me.

Iseult was not deterred. “Send a message to Mabd,” she barked at her servitor. “Send it with Du.” She smiled thinly at me then, an expression fraught with something darker than simple malice and distaste. “Make it loud.”



Cadfael was waiting for me, as I knew he would be. And Du was gone, also as I had expected he would be.

“She will not kill him,” the Sidhe prince said flatly as I was not so much ushered as pushed into the cell.

“You,” I began, and then paused, counting to ten. “You are a coward.” Fat lot of good the counting did me. I was shaking and sick, swaying on my feet like a drunkard. “I can’t stop these damned visions! I feel like I’m

drugged!” I leaned heavily against the wall and slid down, clutching my knees to my chest when I hit the floor. “She has Jackie.”

“Aye, I know.” He sat next to me and hesitated, moving his hand as if he wanted to touch me, then seeming to think better of it. “Alfhild—”

“We get out of here, even if I have to promise her things. We get out, we get Jackie and you take me home.”

“Jackie cannot leave, Alfhild,” he said softly, finally showing some emotion other than disinterest or distaste. “She’s bound here.”

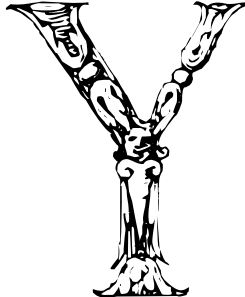
“Bullshit.”

Cadfael stepped close to me then, his fingers slipping around my wrists, holding me in place when I would turn away. Something in his tone, his very nature, stilled me and I looked up at the ever-shifting colors in his eyes. “Alfhild, she has taken the water and food of the Sidhe. She is bound here.”

“No.” I felt the word catch in my throat like a hiccough and I found myself shaking my head impatiently, like a kid about to pitch a fit. “No, she didn’t. Iseult said they found her like that and they weren’t the ones who did it. She said . . . she said . . .” I was on the verge of hyperventilating then, everything suddenly felt far too close, and hot, and stifling. “Oh, god.” Nausea washed over me yet again and I barely managed to turn away from Cadfael before the empty retching doubled me over at the waist.



CHAPTER EIGHT

“OU NEED TO EAT,” CADFAEL SAID for the third or fourth time. Hours had passed, *maybe*, I thought miserably, *days*, since Du had been taken from us. All I could think about was Jackie looking as if she had been beaten by many hands.

“How do you know she’s had the water and food?” I finally asked, the question that had been preying on my mind ever since Cadfael had stated it was certain. “Maybe . . .”

“It is what we do when taking prisoners of the above world. We feed them and give them drink. We bind them here. It is a punishment,” he paused, his bright gaze finding my own tired eyes in the dark. “Not for them, I promise you. She will not be killed by the Seelie. To kill a human that is not involved in battle is . . . it’s just not done.” He didn’t try to touch me then but his hand moved on his leg as if he wanted to.

I frowned and shook my head wearily.

He continued, his voice tired and thick with some emotion I couldn’t name. “Alfhild, we must leave. Now. While we can. We will return for Jackie as time allows.” His hands closed around my upper arms and he forced me to look him in the eyes. “You will learn that, no matter what life you choose to lead, you will have many difficult and painful decisions to make.”



I was tired, more bone weary than I had ever been in my life. All of Gulliver's trials, all of the media attention, none of it had worn me out like this. I felt wrung dry. The visions that had come to me earlier had done their share of the draining but the realization, firm and full and solid, that I was basically at the mercy of the fey at this point, weighed me down and drowned me in my own pathetic misery. "Tell me what we need to do then," I said, my voice barely my own. "How do we leave?"

Cadfael did not smile at me then, not like he had before. It was more of a grim twist of his lips, a bitter acknowledgement that I had ceded power to him in this instance.

"Iseult!" His eyes never left mine as the echo of his voice rang down the hall. I did not hear so much as feel a subtle shift in the atmosphere around us as Iseult's voice replied from just the other side of the cell door.

"Are you ready for the terms, Cadfael?"

"Let us out, Iseult. I refuse to speak with you through the door." He finally looked away, drawing himself up to his full height and surreptitiously tugging his clothing into place. "I'll discuss terms as soon as I can look you in the eyes." He stepped forward, putting, I noticed, himself between me and the door.

Iseult stood in her glowing glory on the other side and he, for some reason, did not want me to be in her line of sight.

"Eyes down," he murmured. "You're not entirely immune to glamour." "

The door swung open on silent hinges and a faint glow filled my sight but I did not look up as Cadfael moved towards Iseult. "Iseult, you seek immortality through the bloodlines of the Sidhe and the Tuatha and I can offer it to you."

"Surely," she choked, her voice shrill rather than melodious, "you do not mean to suggest that I will sully my bloodline with your Unseelie taint!"

I had to agree with her there, to an extent. A very feral part of me snarled that I should castrate him if he even tried to ‘get’ a child on her.

“No!” The disgust in his voice was almost comical. “You will have your spawn, pure of blood and lines, and we will help you get it. I swear on the Tuatha de Danann. You give us the year and a day that is coming to us and we will give you your get.”

I couldn’t help it. I had to see her face at that; I had to see his. Iseult looked grimly amused, likely to throw the offer back at Cadfael. Hell, I would have, if I were her. But something in what he said must have made sense or been honest enough for her to agree.

“A year and a day. And you are not to return to the Unseelie court in that time.”

“Even Gawain could return to his home,” he reminded her. “We had the council meeting, remember? The Knight himself allowed it and *he* was the challenger!”

“That was an entirely different situation,” she hissed, and I was reminded forcibly of debate club in school. “You will have your year and a day. It begins at the rise of the full moon this eve and you will not be alone.” She stepped back, spreading her hands wide. “Go and do what it is you think will win you this debacle but know that, one year and one day from now, we will meet at Sarum Plain and you will give me Alfhild and witness the Great Rite between she and Gulliver, or I will unleash the Sluagh and the Seelie upon the Horde.”

Her gaze slid to me and brightened slightly, a seductive smile curving her lips. “You will not suffer under Gulliver’s attentions, Alfhild. Surely you remember how it was with him. Willing or not, you remember how it felt.”

I wanted to kill her. My hands curled and my body shook but I could not muster the words or actions to express the hate, pure and unadulterated, that I felt boiling to life inside me then.

“Give us Jackie and we leave,” Cadfael said flatly. “And in a year and a day, you will cede to the Unseelie what is ours and keep to yourself that which is yours.” His hand sought and found mine in the dim glow of the cell.

I did not object as he covered my fingers with his larger hand, and a warm, melting sensation spread through my veins. I did not know what he was doing but I didn’t fight it—my entire body seemed to turn into light right there in front of Iseult.

She frowned but did not argue with Cadfael, turning away sharply and speaking to someone I could not see in hissing, seething tones.

“You will take Jackie with you but she will remain in between for the entire year and a day,” she informed us coolly. “Neither living nor dead. Between.”

I opened my mouth to protest but she didn’t give me a chance. The walls seemed to fall away around us and I felt as if I were falling, the world tumbling around me like a waterfall. Cadfael’s grip on my hand never wavered and when I inhaled, mere moments after the falling sensation had begun, we were standing in the stone circle that we had abandoned what felt like ages ago. A handful of Unseelie were still there, mostly faces I had seen during the presentation of fealty, soldiers I remembered. Some scarred, most just fearsome in aspect in a way that was both beautiful and nerve-wracking. Jackie lay some distance away, her arms at her sides as if she were on a slab in the morgue.

“Oh, god,” I gasped as soon as equilibrium stabilized and I did not feel as if I were about to go flying in a million directions. “Jackie!” I shook off Cadfael’s grasp and rushed to her side, sliding on my knees in the wet dawn grass. “Jackie!” She was breathing but that was the only sign of life. Her pallor, her lack of other movement, spoke of death.

“We’re not alone,” Cadfael informed me as he closed the distance between us. “The sylph has joined us.” He gestured to the air around us

and frowned. “She cannot come into the Unseelie court proper but she can make things difficult for us in other ways. We knew Iseult would not let us do this alone.”

He knelt by my side and laid a heavy hand on my wrist as I shook Jackie gently, knowing full and well that she would not open her eyes for me but unable to stop myself from trying anyway.

“We have little time, Alfild. Come.”

I let him pull me to my feet, watching as two of the remaining guards came and lifted Jackie between them as if she weighed nothing.

“We will see Mabd and find out how much she has discovered now about the murders, and then we will make our plans for the year and day we have been given.” He clasped my elbow lightly and led me to the center of the circle, where the stone altar stood. “Close your eyes, Alfild,” he murmured.

“Now’s not the time to take advantage of me,” I joked halfheartedly, but did as he asked. A soft breath caressed my face and arms and his lips brushed mine. My eyes flew open and I nearly cried out in surprise to find we were in Mabd’s throne room, before the queen herself. “I really wish you people would take the bus or something less weird.”

He smiled faintly but did not respond, turning his attention to Mabd instead. “We have a year and a day,” he informed her.

“The only traces we have of the murder is this.” Mabd held up a scrap of cloth, dotted with dark stains and a very faint, almost nonexistent, glow. “The blood is Sidhe. The fabric is some human concoction that is meant to mimic flax but is vile in its insult to nature.” Her nose wrinkled in disgust, the queen unable to stop editorializing even in the face of catastrophe.

Though, I supposed, one did not get to be queen for as long as she had without facing some pretty crap times of it once in a while.

“This does nothing to help us. And another circle keeper has died, found far from his home.” Her gaze flickered past us and her mouth curved into a definite frown. “What the bloody blazes is *that*?”

“Her name is Jackie, mother,” Cadfael sighed. “She is a friend of Alfhild’s. The Seelie had her and claim we did her great harm. She is part of our bargain. We have but a year and a day as of moon rise tonight to settle this.”

Madb glared at me then, even though I had been holding my tongue. She snapped her long fingers and several pixies appeared from the dark folds of her gown and swarmed over Jackie.

I had the distinct impression that they were analyzing her and discussing the best course of action to take. They flew back to Madb a few moments later and she nodded faintly.

“Bring Lorelei in then and let her see to the . . . guest.” She waited until the tiny beings were dispatched before returning her attentions to us.

“Your little task is not to stand in the way of this,” she informed us both in grave tones. “Charles Hunter was found in Uffington. Leave now and you will be there by moonrise.”



CHAPTER NINE

“UFFINGTON,” I SIGHED, STRETCHING my arms over my head and tilting my head back in what I thought was a romantic heroine sort of pose but, judging by the look on Du’s face, was more akin to a woman in pain. “Its name sounds so—it sounds like the sound you make climbing up a hill.”

“It’s from the old human tongue,” Du murmured. “In your Domesday books, it was Uffa’s ton or similar.”

“Thank you, Professor Brainy Guy.” My eyes roved over the darkening valley and the pale curve of moon just starting to show in the purple-black sky before settling again on the dark slope of plain spilling towards the ancient, white horse carved into the earth itself. “I’ve never seen this in person.”

“It was a prank, you know,” Cadfael informed me dryly, his own gaze restless, searching the horizon as if expecting someone. “The horse . . . it was the result of a party that raged out of control.” He glanced at me with a perfectly straight face, almost as if he were daring me to believe him.

“Bullshit,” I smiled.

It was easy to forget all that was going on, or at least pretend that it wasn’t happening, while we stood in the growing evening on the hill. It was simply a nice night, three people who could, in some sense, be considered friends, out for a stroll under the stars, looking at sites of historical interest. But I knew better.



We were in the Between again; I couldn't see the road which I knew ran nearby. I couldn't see the village proper, only some twinkling lights that may or may not have been candlelight in the distance.

"I was there," Du said mildly. "It really was just a prank. We had a bit too much honey wine, a bit too much faerie dew, and well," he shrugged. "Someone had chalk."

I could only stare for a long moment at the two earnest faces looking at me in the gloaming. I couldn't help the smile as I replied, "Again, bullshit."

"Believe what you want," Cadfael sighed. "Just don't ask about the Cerne Abbas Giant." The chalk carving he referred to, often called The Rude Man, was quite popular among some segments of Anglophile communities due to its rather obviously male nature.

Anything else he may have told me was abruptly halted by a sharp, cold wind that swept from the north and seemed to wrap around our limbs. We all shuddered with it, drawing closer and forming a tight knot of life. "Alfhild," Cadfael said in my ear, his breath blessedly warm, "the Snow Queens—"

"Finally found me," I sighed, burying my face in Du's hot neck. He had the metabolism of a cat as well as some of the features. "Skadi!" I shouted, forcing myself to look up and meet the gaze of the tall, imposing female's gray eyes. "Where are the other two?"

"They have other parts of the tale to attend to," she replied, the cold wind dying with her words. Her appearance looked, to the quick eye, gray and drab, but when you looked at her, really looked at her, she was gloriously beautiful and imposing. Her hair was the color of a winter storm sky, bound back from her face with a dull silver clasp. Her skin was the same color and tone as the snow at night, gleaming almost in the rising moonlight.

She was much taller than a human or Sidhe, a giantess if there ever was one.

She looked around us and sniffed disdainfully at the English countryside before focusing again on me. “You have escaped grievous harm narrowly. You must pay more heed to the words of your guardians, Alfild.”

“Hey, Cadfael is the one who—” I barely got the words out of my mouth before icicle-sharp tendrils of cold wrapped around me again, grabbing the breath from my throat and rendering me silent.

“The Snow Queens are your guardians,” Skadi informed me with the most brittle tone I had ever heard in my life. “Cadfael is naught but your mate. We know of your pact for a year and a day’s time from Iseult and we know that you are helping discover who is murdering those that keep the sacred circles. We can only help you with one. You choose your own path in all things, Alfild.” She paused and a faint smile curved her pale lips. “For the most part.

“Now, enough of that,” Skadi ordered, looking up at the now fully risen moon. “Your time has begun. In ancient times, the year and a day was a time of no time. You existed but could not be harmed. This will be no such thing. You must rely on the fact that Iseult is after your very life. If she is able to get a child off you, Alfild, then her line is secure.”

Her cool gaze lit on Cadfael. “And you, do not pretend Mabd’s motives are any more pure than that as well.”

She moved past us, going down the slope towards the ancient carving, her steps pressing the grass down into frost-covered depressions in her wake. Cadfael and Du did not spare me a glance as they set off after her, leaving me to trail behind, fighting the urge to be huffy and bratty all over again.

“The body of Charles Hunter was found here, in the horse,” she said, her voice drifting back like snowflakes, light and sharp at the same time. “Ancient legend of these people of Britain holds that performing certain activities in the horse’s outline will grant wishes. Darker tales do not speak

of mundane spinning circles and silly dances around a pole but bloodletting.” She paused again and turned to face me, walking backwards for a few paces as she spoke. “You remember your vision, Alfild? The painted men who wished to let your blood?”

“Gormlaith,” I replied before I could stop myself. “Not mine, Gormlaith.”

“One and the same,” she shrugged, not seeming to care how this news affected me, one way or the other. “All things exist at once, Alfild. You, your identity as Lorelei, Gormlaith,” she spread her fingers as if letting something slip through them. “It is nothing to concern yourself over. Simply accept it. As for this aspect of your reality,” —she turned and faced the figure of the horse, throwing her arms wide— “this is the first fork in the path. Choose to stay and help ensure the spirit of this man is restful, choose to find Gulliver and kill him, choose to crawl under a rock and hide. It won’t matter in the end. You will not live one day longer than you are supposed to in this existence.”

“Right cheerful, aren’t you?” I sighed, my eyes following the lines of the chalk equine, the white inlay seeming to glow in the darkening evening. “It’s the first full moon of the year and a day . . .”

“Thirteen more to go,” Skadi smiled. “You won’t be alone with the Sidhe, Alfild.” For the first time since she arrived, she seemed to remember they were present. “Cadfael and Du are your protectors, whether you like it or not.

You have options in this, my girl, but they will ultimately lead to the same ending. All mortals end in the earth, same as they rose.” She tilted her head and bent to peer into Cadfael’s eyes. “She will. Worry not. Concern yourself more with the sylph that is about you and the Sluagh that creep outside the bounds of your protection. They wait for her as surely as the cold fingers of my world.”

“Remind me again,” Du asked as Skadi dissolved into thin air, leaving a frigid trace of her presence cloaking us for several moments, “why we don’t entertain the Snow Queens more often.”

“Because,” Cadfael muttered, his shifting gaze roaming across the landscape as if he could see the invisible sylph in the air around us, “they’re horrible guests who overstay their welcome, and they scare the horses.”

“. . . you have horses?” I heard myself ask before I could stop the words. “Like . . . tiny, faerie horses?”

“I don’t think Epona would like to hear you call them tiny,” Du remarked, sniffing the air and closing his eyes. I could have sworn I heard him purr. “She and Rhiannon do a damned fine job of caring for the braw beasties.” His eyes open and glowing gold in the light of the full moon. “Cadfael . . .”

“We’ll follow,” the faerie prince’s low voice rumbled.

Something was shifting around me; I couldn’t tell what it was but, I realized with a strange mix of elation and trepidation, I didn’t care.

“Du is on the trail of something,” he remarked as the Cait Sidhe dropped to all fours and disappeared into the darkness. “We’re not sure what we’re looking for, but we’ll know when we find it,” he added, shedding his coat and dropping it on the grass at his feet.

“Um, how casual is this going to be?” I asked as he began rolling up his sleeves. “I’m not taking off more than my boots and maybe my overshirt . . .” Cadfael shot me a look that was unmistakably amused and paused in his undressing.

“I’m getting comfortable. This is going to be work and I work best without . . . restrictions . . .” He raised an auburn brow and smirked. “However, if you’d like for me to shed all of my clothing, I have no objections. You did not seem to either, when you saw me in your garden.”

“Yeah, that open mouthed look of shock wasn’t *anything* like fear and confusion at what a naked man was doing in my rosebush,” I muttered, then froze as I realized how that could be taken.

Cadfael apparently realized it as well because he was suddenly very close to me, his brilliant eyes narrowed as he considered me, his gaze hot on my skin and a tangible thing in the moonlight. I didn’t move as his long fingers moved to tangle in an errant lock of my hair and tug slightly, his face so close to mine that I was ridiculously aware of the faint smattering of freckles on his nose and cheekbones. It made him seem all the more fey in that moment, less the battle prince and more the elfin trickster.

“Cadfael,” I said so softly that I wondered if I had even spoken at all.

“Even if you could not See, even if you were not of the Tuatha di Danann, I would want you still,” he murmured, closing the distance between us with a breath. Autumn overwhelmed me, the smell of burning leaves and cold air mingling with tart apples and the loamy, earthy promise of the decay that would claim us all before we rose again sweeping over me as his lips moved against mine.

I stiffened in surprise but he didn’t seem to care. The hand that had tangled in my hair dropped to my shoulder as his other moved across my back, his fingers splaying wide and pulling me closer. I felt heat spread through my veins and into my bones like molten gold, glowing bright and filling me with something that was akin to lust but so much deeper. It wasn’t the sheer physical want and need of base animal urges, but like something clicking into place, a tide eddying into a pool and filling the secret, dark places with life.

The kiss ended almost as soon as it began, Cadfael pulling away enough to breathe, his eyes almost black above me, practically crackling with a heat I did not name. “Alfhild . . .”

“I know,” I breathed, leaning in again, “I’m screwed.

CHAPTER TEN



U HAD FOUND A TINY—EVEN BY her realm’s standards—pixie called Bluebell hiding in some particularly thick grass at the edge of the chalk horse. She would not speak but rather remained huddled in Du’s hand, forehead to her knees, wings wrapped tight around her limbs as he murmured endearments and soothing words to her.

Cadfael had broken the kiss entirely at some signal from Du, something he detected but I missed. I was still blushing, I was pretty sure, at the thought of my brazen attentions, how I kissed him back, my tongue tracing the seam of his lips and . . . “Huh?”

“I said,” Du repeated with no small amount of amusement in his voice, “that she is a witness.”

For some reason, I felt a spike of inappropriate laughter burbling in my chest and it was all I could do to keep it from bursting forth. “We’re like one of those television crime shows,” I said with forced casualness, “except a lot less cool.”

The tiny pixie did not move. She might have appeared, to someone who didn’t know any better, as fantastic and unreal as a statue or painting, the veins in her tiny wings black against the electric blue shimmer of the tissue, her spine clearly visible as she bent over her knees in Du’s palm.



“Bluebell,” I crooned, bending slightly to bring myself to near eye-level with her. “Bluebell, can you tell us what happened?”

A long stretch of silence ensued, broken only by Cadfael’s deep sigh and shifting his weight from one foot to the other, apparently in annoyance or boredom or both.

I opened my mouth to speak again and Bluebell moved, rising to her full, if diminutive, height in Du’s palm and fixing me with a black glare. Her wings spread wide, she took flight and swooped close to my face, her body moving so quickly that I didn’t have a chance to predict her next movement before hot pain flared in twin stripes down my left cheek, hot blood welling to the surface and trickling down my skin. “Hey!”

Du watched Bluebell take to the night sky as Cadfael muttered a curse and began dabbing at my face with his fingertips first, then his sleeve. “She attacked you,” he noted somewhat absently. “These are deep, but they should not leave a scar.”

“Thank you, Captain Obvious,” I sighed, wincing as his sleeve rubbed along one of the scratches. “Why the hell did she do that?”

Du leaned in close, his eyes bare slits in his face as his nostrils flared. His tongue darting out to moisten his lips, he smiled grimly. “You smell bad.”

“Excuse me?”

“I mean,” he amended, his smile still in place but now tinged with a hint of amusement at my outrage, “You smell like something she fears . . .”

“Humans?” I suggested with a tiny shred of hope. Cadfael had stopped dabbing at my face and now simply stood next to me, his hand on my shoulder only slightly rankling in its possessiveness.

“No,” Du sighed, shaking his head slightly as he and Cadfael exchanged a significant look. “You smell like Gulliver to her. Or at least have traces of it. You share similar blood so you are similar beings in her mind.” He

leaned in close and sniffed me again, his breath tickling my face. “I can tell the difference, but in her fear . . .” he stepped back and his smile faded. “You smell similar,” he repeated, shrugging.

Cadfael’s hand dropped and he seemed to withdraw into himself as he skirted Du and I, heading for the thick chalk outline of the horse several feet away. “Gulliver’s part in this is no secret. We just need to stop him.” He looked up at the stars scattered across the sky and something shifted.

We were fully in my world. My former world. Whichever. The faint hum of cars on the main road was audible but not close as we stood at the head of the chalk horse. A very faint aroma of cooking food wafted over the grassy plain and I wondered how far the scent had come. “The sylph is still with us,” he noted dryly. “She has nothing to take back to Iseult though . . . nothing she doesn’t already know.” The air shimmered between us and Du, and for a fleeting moment, I saw the outline of a female form before it dissipated like heat rising from pavement in the summertime.

“So we’ve determined what we already know,” I said after a moment of odd silence, all of us staring at the space where the sylph had been. “So what? Where does that leave us? One hour less of the year and a day. One hour more of Jackie being in Between.”

Impatience exploded into full bloom in my chest and I turned sharply away from the pair of Sidhe and began walking along the outline of the horse. I knew the Sluagh were there—I could feel them even without Skadi having told me of their presence. Each passing moment, it seemed, I was becoming more firmly rooted in this new life of mine, whether I liked it or not.

I took a deep breath and turned back to Du and Cadfael, a strange thrumming deep in me that felt like a current, growing stronger with each breath I drew. “If we find Gulliver, we can stop the murders but that doesn’t mean that we’ve solved the problem. You told me that the Seelie want control over the stone circles and their portals . . . how many need to

remain open for your realm to keep . . .um . . .functioning?” My mind was racing with logistics and the need for more information; I found myself desperately wishing for some paper, and possibly a flow chart.

“Three,” Cadfael answered promptly. “Three is the ideal number but if we only have one, we can manage. It will be difficult but we can manage.” He glanced down at the chalk at my feet. “You’re in the horse’s eye,” he said, seemingly apropos of nothing.

“Um, okay . . .”

“The legend has that if you stand in the horse’s eye and turn about three times while making a wish, your desire will come to fruition.” He raised a brow and smirked. “Faerie tales, I’m sure.”

“I’m sure,” I replied dryly, staring down at the white circle. The way things had been going lately, I was predisposed to give it fair consideration. “I wish this was all sorted out!” I muttered, turning quickly three times and hearing one of them—Du, I guessed—snickering at me in the dark.

“Ah, you’ll never know if it works or not,” Cadfael sighed, reaching out a hand and inviting me, wordlessly, to take it in my own. “You’re not human. Faerie wishing only works for them.” He paused and seemed to reconsider before adding, “Not entirely human anyway.” He raked a gaze over me and I knew he was waiting for my by-now-usual-outburst at such a claim. I surprised us all, I think, when it did not come.

“Well, if it’s not going to work, we need to get our asses in gear.” I stuffed my hands into the loose pockets on my borrowed trousers and let out a long sigh. “So where first?”

Du raised a brow. “I suggest checking the murder scene. The local authorities . . . human ones . . . are gone by now.”

Cadfael merely nodded in agreement and I shrugged, mimicking Du’s earlier action.

“I guess I’m leading the way then?” he sighed, turning to look at the very faint glow of the nearby village where the caretaker had lived. “Right.”

“It’s not so bad,” I said with false cheer. “Next time I’ll use my refined senses and sniff out the blood and . . . oh, wait, I can’t!” I swatted his arm lightly and smiled, as close to an honest one as I could manage then. “Well begun is half done.”

Du rolled his eyes again and set off across the grass, Cadfael and I close behind. “She’s insufferable now,” the Cait Sidhe remarked as if I were not there.

“Isn’t she?” Cadfael grinned. “I prefer her this way.”

“Hello? She’s listening, and she doesn’t like you talking about her like that!”

“She needs to stop speaking in third person,” my supposed fiancé replied tartly. “Now be quiet and try not to glow.”

“I’ll try not to glow so long as you try not to be an ass.”

“Children,” Du chided as we neared the road, “behave or I’ll turn this cadre of wyrd around right now!”

“Sorry, Du,” Cadfael and I dutifully responded, barely managing not to laugh. Is this what being Sidhe was, I wondered, this feeling like something was growing inside me all the time, like the world around me was seeping through my veins? I couldn’t help but smile, wanting to laugh at the sensation of the slight breeze on my skin as we walked quickly down the side of the road, no cars in sight but not wanting to linger overlong lest we be mistaken for hitchhikers and someone look too closely. I was fairly certain I still looked human, despite the glow of my skin, but Cadfael and Du were clearly something else, something remarkable and special that had been long forgotten by most of the world.

Cadfael’s fingers sought and found mine in the dark and I welcomed them this time, feeling the strong pulse of life within him answering my own. Damn it, I thought without the bitterness that had tainted the idea

before, I might be a bit more than a tiny shred attracted to him. *A lot more. Damn it.*

“You seem at odds,” he remarked, making me jump at the sound of his voice. I wondered if I was blushing.

“Mmmm.” I stared at the back of Du’s head, what I could see of it in the dark, and didn’t add anything else to my reply.

Cadfael squeezed my fingers again and I suppressed a shudder.

Seeking anything to break his intent gaze as we walked, I asked the first question that sprang to mind. “Cadfael, if I were ever to eat and drink in faerie . . .” The pause was painfully fraught with hope from his quarter and trepidation from mine. I could feel it like spider webs on my skin, Du’s soft whistle ahead of us the only sign that we were not alone in the now very dark evening.

“If you decide to partake, you will not change outwardly. You will not gain wings, you will not be like the pixies or Lorelei or the Snow Queens.” He paused and frowned. “Something is gnawing at me, Alfild, something I should know . . .”

“Better figure it out soon. Du’s found something.” The Cait Sidhe lord had stopped some distance ahead and dropped to a crouch as smoothly as the animal he resembled.

Cadfael grasped my wrist so tightly that I was sure the bones clicked together as he pulled me further into the shadows overhanging the roadside.

“What is it?” I breathed, wincing as a stick snapped under my feet. I felt heavy, cloddish; I felt like I was too real. “Cadfael . . .”

Distant hoof beats sent rivulets of cold fear down my spine and I could not move; my feet were rooted to the earth.

“The Wild Hunt,” Cadfael hissed, tightening his grip on me to the point of pain.

It was early. From what I recalled of the old stories, they didn't usually come out so close to dusk. The hoof beats faded after barely a minute and the thick, oppressive atmosphere was gone.

Du rose from his crouch and Cadfael let out a sigh as he loosened his grip on my hand. "Something's afoot. They didn't even try to stop for Alfhild."

"Um . . ."

"Oh, I don't mean that in a bad way." Cadfael waved me off dismissively, taking several steps towards Du and gazing skyward.

Nothing showed, at least not to my eyes, but apparently the two full-blood Sidhe found something interesting up there. They were both staring hard at the night sky as I gave up and walked several yards ahead of them down the road. I felt a brush of air, warm and solid, and I knew that the sylph was moving near me. For a fraction of a moment, I considered giving a damn then changed my mind. "I only have a year and a day," I called. "And I'll be damned if I spend it staring at the sky. I want to see Jackie before morning so let's hurry up."



CHAPTER ELEVEN



T WAS A SMALL VILLAGE, COMPARATIVELY, but that didn't mean that it was quiet or still after dark. Voices called for pets and kids to come inside, lights flicked on in dens and off in bedrooms as we made our way down the side streets, winding around normal lives and the smell of cooking food and blooming flowers.

I closed my eyes as Cadfael led me through the streets, trying not to think of the comforting boringness of the lives around us. Not one of them, I thought as we ducked down a narrow alleyway, has to deal with Sluagh, Sidhe, deities that wore snowshoes . . . I ran into Cadfael's back as he stopped short, forcing me to open my eyes.

He silenced me with a finger over my lips and nodded towards the dark pit that was the front of an old cottage.

We were just off the high street in a part of town that had likely last seen renovations when Britain had a king and America was a handful of colonies. Something stank to high heaven in this corner of the village, like rotten garbage and burned meat; bile rose in my throat but the two males didn't seem affected as we drew towards the front door.

Du moved on all fours, seeming to me more animal than anything else in those moments as he arched his back and leapt fluidly to the window box that graced the outer wall of the house to the right of the door.



“Cadfael,” I started, and then fell silent as the ominous feeling of dread that had been simmering in my belly burst into full bloom. We weren’t alone, in a significant way now.

Du slid in through the broken window, easing around the yellow crime scene tape left by the police and disappeared into the inky blackness of the house.

“Do not,” Cadfael said tightly, “move.” He squeezed my upper arms hard, making me gasp in pain, a sound that was swallowed by a sudden, hard kiss. His mouth covered mine hot and hard, tasting of caramel and wood smoke, making my body respond in ways I didn’t care to deal with in that moment. Before I could pull away, he was gone, disappearing into the house with Du.

“This is familiar,” I said to no one visible. The sylph didn’t respond. “What the hell does he think I’m going to see in there that I haven’t seen already? If I’m supposed to be some big warrior savior person, why the hell is he sheltering me? What is he hiding from me?”

“Me, maybe?”

Gulliver’s voice was at once familiar and painfully loathsome. A feeling like ice water raced down my spine as he stepped into view. He looked the same as ever, too pretty and innocent for his own good, but he was not the same, not to my new eyes.

“You couldn’t be more trite if you tried,” I finally said, filling in the startled silence with my brittle tones. “I have a year and a day to deal with you, Gulliver.”

“And you’ll have it,” he replied, his eyes almost comically wide in feigned innocence. “This is just happy coincidence,” he added, holding up his left hand and showing me something in his palm that looked like a dark bag in the moonlight. “I needed to get this before the moon rose to its zenith.”

“What is it?” I found myself asking without wanting to do so.

“Now, now, *sister*,” he smiled, closing his fingers over the item before I could lean in too close. “Mine for now . . . you will get to see soon enough.”

He reached out and grabbed my hair then, knotting his fingers in the strands and pulling me forward so hard that I tripped over my own feet, going to my knees and pulling his arm down with me. Pain shot through my scalp as his grip tightened even further, pulling loose some hair in the process.

“Until you are done with your silly little task, you need only know that, when the time is right, this little toy will bring one of us much happiness.” He pulled me back to my feet with my hair and drew me in against his chest, his breath hot and thick against my mouth. I wanted to puke all over him. “Your true name was leaked in the media, you know. They’re calling Lorelei your alias.” he smirked and pressed a quick, sickeningly soft kiss against the corner of my lips, the tip of his tongue flicking out to taste my skin. “You seem to have stirred up quite the controversy. They don’t know whether to brand you a criminal for your suspicious disappearance or cry foul play. The house is taken care of, the properties and your finances are untouched.” He bit me then, hard enough to draw blood, before pushing me away and letting me fall back to the street, the impact knocking the breath from my lungs. “Good night, Alfild. I’ll carry your regards to Iseult and the court.”

Sketching me a courtly bow, he turned on his heel and walked quickly towards the high street as I struggled to my feet. Raking in a deep breath, my lungs aching like fire, I let out a mangled shout for Cadfael and Du, my voice weaker than I expected after the fall onto my back. “Hurry your asses up!” I added a moment later as Du’s legs appeared in the window, the lithe Cait Sidhe sliding out into the street with an abstracted air. “Gulliver was just here,” I breathed, each breath making my chest ache a bit less but still painful and annoying.

“I know,” Cadfael sighed, appearing as if out of thin air. I was just starting to understand how the Sidhe moved between the realms, not truly appearing and disappearing, but just *moving* through another part of space and time, stepping through a veil and coming out on the other side almost at will. If the stone circles closed, though, that would all change . . .

“You *knew*?” I hissed, noting out of the corner of my eye Du’s sudden stillness, much like a cat that had been caught peeing on the rug. I felt my hand draw back and I knew he saw it but he still didn’t move out of the way as I let fly the strike, my palm leaving a bright red imprint on his cheek. “Why the fuck did you leave me out here if you *knew*?”

“I was hoping,” he said stiffly, “that he would tell you why he was lurking about.” He bowed, almost as formally as Gulliver had but without the mocking traces. “I was wrong to do it without telling you first. Forgive me, Alfild.”

I didn’t reply. Instead I strode towards the house. Du’s halfhearted attempt to stop me was easily ignored as I shoved aside the crime scene tape and pushed the unlocked door wide open. The stench inside was worse than out and, as my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I realized why. There wasn’t just one body in the small cottage but several, and they weren’t all human. Animal corpses littered the floor, slaughtered just as cruelly as the human had been.

Blood darkened the walls, from the look of things, and offal was spread across every flat surface. I would not have been surprised to find out that the officers responding to the scene had been ill from the sight. No one had even started to clean things up yet; too much needed to be processed, I was sure. I swallowed against the wave of hot, thick nausea and forced myself to look at the scene with my new eyes, tamping down my initial reaction (scream, vomit, scream more, faint) and looking for some sign that would be meaningful to me as a member of the Unseelie court.

“There’s nothing here other than dead things.” The tremors in my muscles began quietly, almost imperceptibly, then seemed to explode through my skeletal system, setting me to jarring my teeth like a cartoon spook.

“Which is what Du and I found. Gulliver took whatever it was that drew the Wild Hunt overhead. They are his problem now.” His tone told me that he didn’t expect the Hunt to be much bother for my half brother but I didn’t pursue it. I was too sick at heart and of body to follow the line of questioning. “We need to move on. Dawn comes quickly this season and we need to be gone before sun up.”

I let him lead me outside as my thoughts churned, turning over and over my entire life as far as I had known it. I had died, it seemed, died to the world I had grown up in and lived in for two plus decades. Jackie was missing to them. Gulliver hadn’t said a thing about her and surely, I thought, he would have had he known. Maybe Iseult was being truthful when she told me that the Seelie had not harmed Jackie. I let my hand fall from Cadfael’s distractedly and I turned around to face the cottage again.

“Alfhild,” he murmured, and Du moved closer as if preparing to grab me. They had come to expect foolishness of me, I thought absently. I had nothing left on the other side, really. My beloved family was gone, Jackie was here. My home would stand as it had for hundreds of years, untouched. This I was sure of. It made it easier for me then.

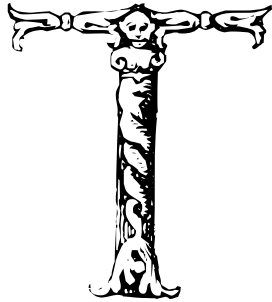
“Did you find what you were looking for?” I asked, startling them both.

“No,” Du replied after a moment. “Not yet. We still need to check the stone circle. The White Horse is a different sort of magic,” he added, answering my unasked question. “It is powerful in its own right but the circle is the most important right now.”

“Then let’s hurry. I won’t be caught out after dawn.” It was easy in that moment to ignore Cadfael’s intent gaze.



CHAPTER TWELVE



HE CIRCLE HAD PROVEN TO BE anticlimactic, at least to me. Instead of massive slabs of rock like Stonehenge, among others, it was a handful of small boulders, the largest of which reached my lower ribs, all of them very *boulderesque* and lacking in anything that made me go “Ooooooh, a henge!”.

Cadfael and Du, however, seemed to feel differently. They spoke in hushed tones, heads bent close together and their entire bodies sagging in what looked to be sorrow. They moved to the middle of the circle of stones and just stood there, murmuring, waiting.

I didn't feel so much as a tiny pull in the sacred space and wondered at my own flare of disappointment. I walked around the stones, spiraling out in ever widening circles, looking for something that would make me go “Ah Ha!” but found nothing as I reached the outer perimeter.

A small copse of ancient oaks stood nearby, a dark smudge on the night sky, and it reminded me forcibly of the vision I had, what seemed like ages ago. I felt nothing from the grove, either, and the disappointment grew more keen.



With a small sigh of resignation, I turned a full, slow circle, scanning the horizon for something, some sign or indication that we were on the right track, but stopped short as I reached my point of origin. For a moment, just a flash of time, I saw eyes in the grove, dark and golden, staring at me from the inky blackness.

“Cadfael?” I called softly, not looking over my shoulder at him as the eyes vanished. “Cadfael, come here!”

“In a moment, Alfchild,” he called back, his voice barely a breath on the wind. He did not even look up from his apparent inspection of the grass at his feet. I swallowed against the sudden dryness in my throat and focused on the trees again. The eyes did not reappear but I felt them on me, watching and waiting. Hurriedly, nearly tripping over my own feet, I moved back into the protective circle of stones and practically dove for Cadfael, grasping his arm and putting him between me and the copse.

“There’s something out there!” I whispered, part of me surprised that Du had not scented it on the wind. “It’s in the grove! It’s watching me!”

“Hunting, more like,” the Cait Sidhe commented airily, giving the stand of trees a cursory glance. “Get used to it. Iseult will do anything to ensure you renege on your side of the bargain.” He glanced at me and shrugged. “Learn to duck.”

“What?”

“Duck!” Cadfael’s voice rang in my ear and I found myself face down on the cool, damp grass. A dull thud sounded near my head and a moment later, I was rolled onto my back and facing the night sky, Cadfael’s tense face slid into view. “Are you all right?”

“You lose at foreplay,” I finally sputtered, sitting up and forcing him to move back. “What was that about?”

Du’s reply was tinged with derision, and almost amusement. “Elf bolt. The twits think they can harm us with an elf bolt.” He tossed something to Cadfael and reached out to help me to my feet. “It would have hurt like the

devil but not have harmed you like it would a full human.” He swept an appraising gaze over me and nodded to himself, apparently satisfied that I was not about to drop dead at his feet.

Cadfael held out his hand and showed me the thin, pale arrow that was barely as long as his forearm. “Elf bolts are small but they are powerful. They do not use the longer arrows, like of human hunters, often because they are difficult to maneuver in the trees and caves . . .” he trailed off, his gaze drifting to the copse. “Wrong direction,” he muttered, then seemed to abandon some inner thought as he dropped the elf bolt back onto the ground. “Come along. We have a few hours before dawn yet and there are some . . . individuals that we should speak with before the night is over.” He looped his arm through mine and, at some unspoken signal, Du did the same on my other side. “The river isn’t very far, by our standards.”

I paused. “And by human ones?”

He didn’t answer, merely shot me an enigmatic smile that I supposed passed for an answer in his mind.

“I knew I should have worn insoles in these things,” I sighed, glancing balefully at the worn boots on my feet. “Lay on, MacDuff,” I said in a blithely false Shakespearean moment.

Du rolled his glowing eyes but smiled nonetheless. “Jenny won’t like visitors.”

“Especially not with Lorelei being in such fine fettle,” Cadfael agreed, walking in long, fluid strides that were matched by Du, but forcing me into a near jog in order to keep from being dragged between the two Sidhe.

Silence reigned between us as we moved at what seemed to be a supernatural speed over the grass and the undulating landscape, the chalk block houses disappearing as we headed towards, ostensibly, the river.

“Did Mabd tell you why Lorelei was in a mood? Other than the usual?”

Du shrugged in the dark as we hurried and I had the feeling that they were trying to distract me with a mostly normal conversation, trying to make it seem as this were all routine, even for them. “Something about being pelted with trash on the Rhine.”

“She has a hard time letting go of the old ways,” Cadfael sighed. He shot me a sidelong glance and squeezed my fingers lightly. “She still looks for her lost love. He’s so long dead that even his shade is faded. She found him once, a long time ago, and tried to take him with her, pull him down into the river where she lives, but he slipped from her grasp like smoke in the wind.” He shook his head, his gaze focused on the dark ahead of us. “He didn’t even have the sense of a ghost.”

Du nodded in agreement. “Lorelei’s been on a tear ever sense.”

“Is that why she was so . . . bitchy . . . to me? Because I use the name Lorelei in my usual life?” I could smell the river now, green and wet in the night. I heard the slithering life moving within the shallows and the soft swish of fish tails and water grass in the depths. My body felt alive, burning with light and something greater, something I couldn’t quite comprehend, but a soft voice whispered in my ear that I didn’t need to, that all I had to do was be, keep breathing and moving and just be. Cadfael’s voice startled me from my reverie, making me jump slightly.

“I don’t think that’s the crux of it, no,” he murmured. “She doesn’t like you simply because you’re you. You are a living, breathing female.”

“And you’re beautiful,” Du supplied helpfully, neatly avoiding my glare. “And you’re to marry Cadfael, like she told you that night in the bedchamber.” He paused and winked at me. “I have good ears.”

I didn’t have a response to that. I just stared straight ahead and let them lead me to the river, trying not to feel too sacrificial.

I felt as if I were walking in two places, the now with Cadfael and Du, walking down the now-downward-sloping path towards the river, and in another place, walking the same path but long ago and far away, going to

the water to peer in and see the dark of the moon and look for my future. I shook myself and found Cadfael watching me out of the corner of his eyes, his glittering gaze hard to miss in the dark. “What?”

“Your past has been trying to get your attention for a while now, first the visions and now this.” He drew us to a halt in a particularly mushy patch of ground and regarded me with his changing gaze.

“What’s ‘this’?” I demanded softly, something about the moment requiring I keep my voice down. Du’s grasp on my arm was loose, as if he were distracted, but I made no move to shake him off. It was oddly comforting, being secured by the two males, and I wanted to keep that feeling for as long as possible.

“The spacey, staring thing,” Du supplied, finally dropping his hand from my flesh. “Jenny!” A slithery splash met his call and instantly, the hairs on the back of my neck stood up. “Jenny! ‘sme! It’s Du!”

Cadfael winced and pulled me closer. “I hate it when he does things like that. Damned Cait Sidhe forgets we’re not entirely immortal.” The slithery splash sounded again, this time closer to us. “Mind your toes.”

“Why?” I stepped back reflexively, moving Cadfael with me. Mud sucked at my shoes, making disgusting slurping noises, and I winced at the feeling of being held fast to the earth, even if it was only for a moment.

“Jenny’s a grabber,” he said just a moment before something cold and spindly swiped at my leg.

We were closer to the water than I had thought, I realized with a stunned spike of fear through my belly. I all but climbed Cadfael, trying to get away from whatever it was that had grabbed for me, ending up in his arms, held relatively high above the slick mud of the river bank and tightly to his broad chest. It was strange how I could feel his heart beat against my side, how stultifying and normal the feeling was; another nail in the coffin of normalcy, I told myself as my arms snaked around his neck and my

head tucked under his chin. I hated myself for a second for being so . . . clingy. Fuck it, I decided. Just roll with it.

“Jenny,” Du called again, this time more softly, “we need to ask you something.”

“No,” a quiet yet firm voice replied some somewhere at ground level. “I am in no mood to humor you, Du. Not after your last visit.” The clouds drifted across the moon just in time to reveal the speaker to me: she looked, I thought, beautiful. She looked as if she were a water thing, pale and dark hues of green and blue swirling together and giving the impression that the river itself had risen up to speak to us. Her hair hung past her hips, long and curly locks that shone in the moonlight, covering her breasts and disappearing into the water. Her dark eyes found mine and suddenly, she was closer, so close that I could smell the wet life of river grass on her skin and breath, the musky promise of green growing things whispering around us both. “What,” she said slowly, “is she doing here?”

“She’s Cadfael’s intended,” Du supplied cheerily, slinging his arm around my shoulders and squeezing a bit harder than could be considered kind. “Alfhild . . . you know . . . *Alfhild*.”


“Yes,” the river woman replied, hissing the word as she swayed. “I know who she is. I’ve known her in many forms.” She narrowed her dark gaze until her eyes were nearly closed, her swaying growing more furious with each passing second. “Lorelei told me all about her this go ‘round.” Without warning, her hand shot out and she clasped my wrist in her long, very boney fingers.

I don’t know why I didn’t notice it before, I thought as I felt my feet slide out from under me and mud squelch beneath the soles of my shoes. She wasn’t beautiful. She was horrible, all angles and planes and no softness to her at all. She was not the green and blue of river water but the mottled tones of a drowned corpse.

I barely felt the water slide over my ankles, sucking at my legs. I could dimly hear Cadfael's shout of surprise and anger—I just plain didn't care as she pulled me down, deeper into the icy water. It slid like silk over my head and I saw everything, the water teeming with life, swirling around me. It was, I decided, magnificent. Then the burning started. My lungs were on fire, my eyes seared with water. I was drowning and Jenny Greenteeth had me in her grasp, pulling me down to the bottom of the lake.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“’M REALLY TIRED OF THIS WHOLE GETTING dead thing,” I coughed as Jenny released my wrist. She had pulled me rapidly through the currents of the river, moving upstream in darkness, through thick water choked with weeds and decay, diving down until I was sure I would die then and there, before bursting through the surface of the water where the river poured into a lake. Her home, or at least the place where she seemed to be staying, was in a cave that smelled damp and green. She shoved me into a pile of wet cloth-rags, from the looks of them-and strode into the depths of the cave. She was gone for a long moment before returning with a guttering lantern that seemed to have seen much better days, likely during the reign of King George.

“You’re not dead, as much as I’d like for you to be,” she replied tersely. “Cadfael and Du are fine; they know where to find us if they can be bothered to look and not play men for a while.”

I had the feeling that she used ‘men’ in the general sense, and that it was derogatory to the Sidhe to be compared with mortals like that.

She held the lantern closer to my face, watery eyes peering at me closely. “You are not mine to take, so stop looking so damned scared, Alfild. I wanted you away from those lummoxes to give you something.”



She held out a closed fist and nodded. “Open your hand. The sylph isn’t long behind and I don’t fancy a visit from your brother now. I have enough to deal with!” She shook her fist at me and I mutely held out my open hand, palm up.

Jenny Greenteeth, horrible hag of legend, smiled at me like a child on Christmas morning. “Good girl.” She dropped something cool and heavy into my hand and closed my fingers over it. “Hide it away now and don’t take it out till you need it!”

“Um . . .” I resisted the temptation to peek—her gaze was intent and almost daring me to look. “Okay.” My clothes clung to me like so much algae as I struggled to shove whatever it was into my sodden pocket. “Look, I’m sure this is a great honor and all, not being killed or what not, but I’m sort of on a tight schedule here, what with murders to solve, sociopathic brother to stop . . . You understand . . .” I offered her my best Southern Charm™ smile but she merely raised a brow at me.

“So . . . yeah. I guess what I’m saying is, it’s time to go and . . . well, nice meeting you!” I didn’t move, though—not when she was so close to me, pressing me against the slimy stone of the cave wall. “And . . . um . . . bye?”

“You are *always* in such a hurry,” she sighed, rolling her dark, fathomless eyes heavenwards. “Just where do you think you will go? Through the water again? You will never find the way without me. You’d best wait for Cadfael and Du. They won’t be long.” She gave me another, less gleeful, smile and lowered her lantern, turning and shuffling back into the recesses of the cave, a faint glow trailing her as her steps made a sucking, sliding noise on the damp floor.

I sat very still for a long moment, conscious of my wet clothes, of how cold I was beginning to feel, and of the smooth, heavy weight in my pocket. There was barely enough light to see the shape of things as I fished it out and held it in the flat of my hand. It was circular and flat, some sort of stone.

In the very dim light of the cave, it looked black but I supposed it could be any dark shade as they'd all appear about the same in there. It didn't hum or vibrate or give off any sort of indication that it was magical or special or anything other than a smooth, flat river rock. My stomach gave a loud, threatening rumble and I closed my hand over the stone, feeling its weight in my palm and wishing I had something solid to fling it at, something to make grunt in pain. Something like the tall, male figure walking towards me at that very moment. "I told you," Jenny called from within the cave. "It wasn't long at all!"

"Alfhild!" Cadfael all but shouted, closing the distance in a few long strides, dragging me to my feet and into a hard embrace without letting me so much as gasp. "I told you, stay away from the water!"

"You never," I croaked, not trying to free myself as he pressed me full-length against him, my soaking wet clothes making no nevermind to him, "told me that!" It felt nice to be the object of someone's concern and not have some dire implication for an entire race of beings attached to it. "Can't . . . breathe . . ."

"If you couldn't breathe," he pointed out, setting me back on my feet, "you couldn't speak." He set me at arm's length, his swirling gaze fixing me in place. "Alfhild, time moves differently here, differently even than in the Unseelie court." He did not take his hands off my upper arms and I found that I didn't mind.

"How long?"

"Hmmm?"

"How long have I been here? If you tell me it's been a year, I'm killing someone. Possibly twice."

He snorted and dropped his hands, leaving me feeling a bit chillier than before, but I didn't give into my urge to step closer, not even under the excuse of seeking warmth.

“Just over six of your hours. It’s near dawn now.” He smiled tightly and looked around the damp cave, his expression frozen on politely hopeful. “This is . . . adequate shelter.”

“Let’s hurry to the court. Or anywhere else,” I said in a quiet tone, not sure how well Jenny could hear me. I was pretty sure it was a futile gesture, though, judging from the faintly cackling laugh from somewhere in the depths of the cave. I reached out and found his larger hand in the dim cave, squeezing his warm, long fingers in my damp, much shorter ones. “Where’s Du?”

“Entertaining Jenny. She’s forgiven him for his last visit it seems.” He paused, his dark brow arching. “I find it’s best not to ask.” He returned the squeeze and let out what sounded like a long-suffering sigh. “There’s a faerie mound not far from here. If we hurry, we can reach it before the sun is up and the portal closes.”

“Portal? You don’t need a stone circle to get in?” I let him tug me deeper into the cave, my feet sliding on the wet floor of the cave.

“It’s not like the true entrances into our realm,” he said over his shoulder. “It’s like . . . a way station.”

His tone didn’t invite further discussion and I decided then that I was too tired to pursue it anyway. I sighed to myself then and let him pull me along.

The cave was darker in the long tunnel he led me into and I soon lost sight of his outline. I could smell the river still and growing things, but the cold bite of the water was no longer seeping into my bones. I scraped against a rough wall as we turned down a side tunnel and suddenly, I was blinded by an explosion of luminescence.

“Alfhild!” Du’s voice drew my blurry, light-filled gaze somewhere to my left. “About time! I’m going to stay here tonight with Jenny and . . .catch up on old times. Meet you at the usual, Cadfael?”

I didn't have to see the faerie prince's face to know he looked faintly amused.

"Usual time, Du." He didn't move for a long moment and my vision cleared slightly, enough to see that he was frowning at me.

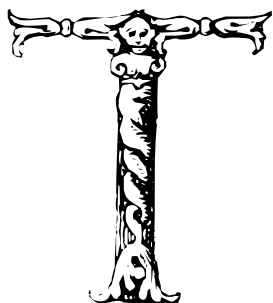
I must, I thought, look terrible, and that notion made me snort with laughter.

"What is it?"

"Nothing," I lied, amazed that vanity was still preying on my mind even at a time like this. "Let's go. I'm tired."



CHAPTER FOURTEEN



HE FAERIE MOUND WAS NOTHING like the Unseelie Court. It was, I decided, the Sidhe equivalent of a motor lodge. The mound lent its nominal shape to the interior, a round and domed structure. The floors were not dirt as I'd thought they might be but rather rough hewn boards. The walls were covered with tapestries and decorative hangings and, after a brief word by Cadfael with a bent, gray figure just inside the entrance, we were led to a side chamber that was surprisingly spacious and clean, if somewhat anti-climactic after the courts I had witnessed. "It's nice," I offered after a long, tense moment of silence. "Very . . . simple."

"There is only one bed," he pointed out. "I will take the floor." He paused, brows delicately arched.

"Take it where?" I rejoined gamely, carefully not looking at the bed. *Think of Jackie*, I reminded myself. *Think of things like imminent death, the destruction of the Unseelie Sidhe . . .* My slut of a sex drive had other ideas though, its attention focused on the bed just feet away, made up with an orange coverlet that looked as if it were made of leaves and flowers. Cadfael had not replied to my comment so I looked over at him and found his gaze . . . unsettling. "Problem?" My voice was too high, too chirpy. He noticed.



“Don’t worry, Alfild,” he replied soothingly. “I won’t do anything . . . untoward.” He sketched me a half-bow and sank to the floor, already reaching for his boots before I spoke.

“I . . . I don’t mind.” I hated the hesitation in my voice but I couldn’t stop it. The words rattled out then like I had upended a bag of them. “I don’t mind sharing the bed. It’s plenty big enough for both of us.” He shot me a look fraught with . . . well, with fraughtful things. *Fraughtful isn’t a word*, I thought, feeling a bright flush bloom on my cheeks, something that was greatly distorted by the highly polished mirror over the nightstand with its ewer of water and chipped stone basin.

“Alfild,” he said quietly, standing now but not moving any closer, “what lies between us . . .”

“Is about six feet of floor. I’m going to bed. If you want to sleep on that cold stone, more power to you.”

I hurried to the nightstand and blew out the candle, plunging the bed and its surrounding area into dimness. Another candle burned across the room and cast an orange-gold glow over the rug and half of Cadfael, but I refused to go snuff it, as well. I’d have to pass close to him and that would be too much to deal with right then. In my small circle of darkness, I shed my outer clothing and stood for just a long moment in the thin shift that had been given to me by the pixies when I dressed what seemed like days ago now. I shivered, not from cold or wet but from exhaustion, from hunger, and from things I didn’t want to think about anymore. With a small sigh, I crawled into the bed and, pulled the linens up to my chin in a small show of defiant modesty.

Cadfael muttered something under his breath and I heard him moving around, his shadow bisecting the light cast by the candle, moving across the bed in lengthening strides until I was covered by it, by him in a sense. I closed my eyes and forced the thoughts back.

I wasn't Gormlaith. That vision had been just that . . . a vision. A memory held in a place, maybe just a hallucination thrown to me by my current state of being. *Or not.* I found that, in that moment, I really didn't care. Cadfael slid into bed next to me, keeping as safe a distance as we could manage, given the circumstances. *He's warm,* I noticed blindly, *warm and . . . stop it,* I scolded myself. *Deal with it later, when you have alone time . . .*

"When the sun rises here, we continue. We are beyond the help of the Snow Queens here, beyond even Mabd and Iseult." His voice was soft and husky, as if he were trying to whisper and not quite succeeding. "Alfhild?"

"I heard you," I sighed.

"Ah." He was quiet again, this time for so long that I was pretty sure he had fallen asleep. "Alfhild . . . I know this is not the life you chose for yourself but . . ."

"It's taken me a while but I found out that we don't choose our paths, Cadfael." Now, I really was tired, fighting a yawn almost. He was so warm. I scooted closer before I could help myself and we were almost touching. He had gone tense, but didn't move, either towards me or away. "I gave up trying to make sense of this a while back. The more I fight it, the worse it gets. If I just take it as it comes, I can manage."

"Tomorrow we'll find you food," he said softly, the huskiness replaced by an obvious tinge of worry. "Don't argue with me," he added, cutting me off. "We'll—we'll find something." His concern was obvious. It would be almost impossible to ensure a regular supply of non-Sidhe food now, and I wasn't sure what to do. "Du will be back with us in the morning and we can send him above to procure something—something not . . . virulent yellow." Twinkies had concerned him I found, especially their color.

"I'll be fine," I lied, pressing my hands against my belly, which had grown a bit more concave over the past however long it had been. Grief, panic, fear and plain old exhaustion would do that to a person, make

hunger seem secondary. Or tertiary. My stomach roiled again and I felt nausea threaten. Let sleep come fast, I prayed to whoever was listening. If I'm asleep, it won't be so bad.

"Liar," he accused, but without malice. "Goodnight, Alfhild. I'll see you in the morning." He fell silent, his breathing the only other sound in the room as it settled into a deep, regular pattern.

Bastard was asleep, I thought angrily. I lay there for a long time, staring at the ceiling and the patterns thrown by the now-guttering candle, waiting as it sputtered its life out on the far table. Soon enough, the room was as dark as could be and all was silent save for Cadfael's soft snoring. I was tired but not sleepy and being in bed was not helping, reminding me that I would just be even more exhausted come morning if I didn't get some rest soon.

After a brief hesitation, I slipped from bed as carefully as possible, Cadfael's breathing only hitching once before resuming its quiet rhythm. The floor wasn't as cold as I'd expected, but I still shivered as I padded across the floor towards the bedchamber door. On the other side was the strange, medieval atmosphere of the faerie mound. Not all of the Sidhe knew who I was or accepted me, but they knew Cadfael. The ones here seemed to either be Unseelie or just uncaring about the politics of their world. I debated for a long moment, standing there in my shift, and finally decided what the hell, and opened the door just enough to slip out into the hall.



"It don't matter," a tiny voice protested. I couldn't see who was speaking, just hear their voices and glimpse shadows as I stood just outside the main hall of the mound where Cadfael and I had entered mere hours before. It could not have been more different now: it was as if some high council

meeting was going on, a large circle of beings all talking in hushed tones around a low table that had not been there earlier, the space blazing bright with candles. “Even if they does find him out, what good’s it do us? We’re still slaves to the masters, aye?”

“No,” another voice snapped, “we be no slaves. Not if the Unseelie Court reigns! We’ve never been slaves under their boots!” The voice’s owner sounded more militant than angry and after a second, I saw their face as they paced around the table proper. The small female was very slender, like a reed, and seemed to radiate a prism of light, rainbows dancing off her skin. She paused beside the chair of a goblin-looking figure and bent low, her voice still pitched enough to be heard around the table. “I will kill every last one of my fellow sylph before I let Mabd rule freely over us.”

She was a sylph? I was suddenly wide awake. I pressed back into the darkness of the hall and took a shallow, quiet breath. The meeting continued and I wondered, dimly, why Cadfael had not been invited to join. I realized that it didn’t matter, whatever they were saying could not be influenced by his presence. I slid down the wall to sit on the floor, the shift bunching around my hips, cold stone shooting lancets of shock up my spine as bare skin touched bare rock. *Was this sedition? Were the rank and file planning on rising up against whoever ‘won’ the ongoing struggle?* It sounded as if the factions had long ago been formed, like the seeds of a civil war. I took a deep breath and rose to my feet as silently as possible, edging back down the hall towards the bedchamber. The conversation continued unabated, as far as I could tell, and I slid back into the room with a rattling sigh.

“Hear all you wanted to hear?” Cadfael’s voice came out of the darkness. “Or would you like to go back and listen some more?”

“Why are you so angry?” I asked immediately. His tone could not be mistaken and I refused to be the brunt of anyone’s anger. My thoughts

tangled now, vacillating between being annoyed with Cadfael and being curious about the meeting I had stumbled upon. I veered towards bitchy.

“I couldn’t sleep so I took a walk; it’s not like I went out and tried to spy on them!” I paused, a new thought occurring to me. I stalked towards the bed where the Sidhe prince still lay as unmoving as if he really had been asleep, and I jabbed him in the chest with my finger, wincing as I felt a jolt of uncomfortable pain shoot through my hand. It was, I thought, like poking a brick wall. “How do *you* know what was said, anyway? You were all the way in here!”

He moved so quickly that I was literally rendered breathless, flat on my back on the bed before I could blink. His body, pressed against mine, suddenly more menacing because he seemed so strange. Cadfael looked anything but human then and I could not, not even for one second, delude myself with notions of his normalcy. He was heavy, crushing the remaining air from my lungs as his hands clasped my arms in an iron-hard grip.

“It is long past time that you understand. You are bound to me, chosen before birth. We have been humoring you, pandering to your silly human notions of how things ought to be. We were linked long before you even considered existing.” He eased off me slightly, just enough to let me breathe, before he continued, his hips cradled as he was between my thighs.

He didn’t seem as aware of the near-intimate contact as I was and I didn’t want to draw his attention to it. For the first time in what felt like forever, I was afraid of Cadfael, afraid of the entire faerie realm.

“That still,” I murmured, unable to muster my usual full volume, “doesn’t tell me how you know what I heard.”

I gasped as he bent to whisper in my ear, lips brushing the curved upper part that seemed to hum to life with forgotten nerve endings at the feel of his

breath on my skin. “You are mine, Alfild,” he practically growled. “And I will know all you know, hear all you hear, see all you see.”

He moved off of me then, leaving me feeling cold and bereft, sprawled at the foot, as he settled back on his side of the bed, staring at the dark patch of ceiling overhead. He was not going back to sleep; I felt his tension even from my distal location.

“Talk to me and not *at* me!” I snarled. I was breathing hard and so was he, his gaze glittering in the dim light of the room. “If you are going to spy on me, just say so. You’re acting like some dumb ass jealous boyfriend!”

He was silent but not still. He rose to his knees on the bed, power radiating from his very being as he fixed his entire attention on me, making me feel both powerful and weak at the same time. “We are chained together through time, you and I. You were once Gormlaith and wed to a Sidhe prince. You were once of the River Folk. Your family has been wed to mine, in a sense, before recorded time. You,” his fingers went to my hair then and I started. I saw a guilty flash in his eyes but he continued. “You are not as ordinary as you think you can be. You cannot go back to life above. You are dead there. Jackie will be dead there, too, if you persist in trying to live as a human lives. Eat of our bread, Alfild, and finish the transition.” His fingers tangled in the already knotted strands by my face but he did nothing more than simply look at me, and wait for some response.

“Let go of me.” Immediately, his hand dropped and he sat back, eyes still intent on my face. “I’ve tried to keep ties to my world because it is *mine*, Cadfael. You might think it’s funny or weird or whatever but I can’t just cut ties. I can’t stop being human any more than you can stop being Sidhe.” I slid off the bed and to my feet, the thin shift that had been warm enough an hour before was now, suddenly, too little protection from the chill of the room. “I can’t even sort out what I am supposed to be—am I Danann? Am I Sidhe? Am I human? I can’t be all of them. I can’t just

change what and who I am because you and your mother wave your hands and glare.” I took a deep breath and felt tears threaten to spill over my eyelids. “They’re talking sedition, Cadfael. Civil war. Do you comprehend that?” He didn’t flinch at my angry tone and I admit that I did feel guilty. I pressed onward, closing my eyes to block out the faint glow of my skin and the shivering of my body in reaction to his hungry gaze. “Your realm will be torn apart no matter what my brother does if this keeps up.”

“Alfhild.” I tensed as he touched me; his burning-leaves smell overwhelming as he loomed next to me, large and imposing in the mostly dark room. It wasn’t fair, I thought—he was like nighttime itself when he moved in silence, observing and remembering all that passed before him. “You are a brave woman, no matter if you are human or Sidhe or Danann. You are . . .” he trailed off, his eyes closing for a long, pained moment.

“Cadfael.” It felt right, moving within the circle of his arms, the heat rising from his skin enveloping me, smothering me as I pressed my face to his shirt front. I was tired, in pain, starving—but I didn’t care. I inhaled deeply, taking in the autumn scent of him, breathing out the tired drag of my life, feeling it pass from me with each breath I took.

It was a jumble, the things I now knew. The visions, even if they were not ‘true’, had given me something to consider, a story to know and keep to my heart, a way to believe. “I don’t know what I need to do,” I heard myself admit, sighing as his hands pressed against my spine, trailing firmly down the line of bone leading to the swell of my backside.

He was warm, hot almost, and alive, his breath tickling my ear, my neck, before I realized that he was kissing me. Feather-light touches of his lips on my flesh drew another sigh from me and I felt him pick me up, his hands going to my thighs and lifting me easily against him. I felt the raw power of him thrumming against me, the lifetime of a thousand years or more enveloping me, taking me into its fold and pulling me apart. I could

feel it seeping into my veins, pouring down into my bones, and it took my breath away.

“You must rest, Alfild,” he murmured after a long, tense moment. “You cannot face the dawn without sleep.” He did not let go of me though, and I was glad. I could feel the strong pulse of his heart against my cheek, the tight grip of his hands on my thighs, and I felt, while not exactly safe, secure. I twisted my fingers, catching the queue of his hair around my hand and wrapping it loosely there. “Alfild,” he sighed, his voice throaty with something that thrilled me to my marrow.

“I’m not so very tired,” I replied. “I’m too scared to be tired.” I knew I was blushing but I couldn’t help it. “Stay up with me?” Only a split second after I said that did I hear my own double entendre. I couldn’t tell if Cadfael knew what that could mean but I didn’t want to find out. I was blazing red with self-conscious embarrassment, held tight against this . . . *male*.

“That,” he said in a low, honeyed tone, “would be lovely.” Unceremoniously, he loosened his grip on me and I fell to the bed, bouncing slightly as he joined me on the mattress, stretching out full length next to me. “The Sidhe have fought since the dawn of time, Alfild,” he murmured, brushing a kiss over my forehead. “We will always war on one another.”

“That doesn’t make it right,” I protested, closing my eyes. His nimble fingers moved down my arm, sliding to my waist and hip before curving to grip me there, squeezing slightly and making me sigh.

I wasn’t a virgin but this was different than any of my previous (albeit limited) assignments. I couldn’t open my eyes for fear of breaking the enchantment, even though part of me worried that was exactly what it was, some faerie spell that would be broken should I examine it too closely. I let him push me onto my back and I shivered as my nightdress was drawn up, over my legs, stopping just below my hips. My toes curled in anticipation

and I thought that I heard him chuckle, but I wasn't sure. "If war breaks out and we still haven't found—"

"Be silent," he groaned, in aggravation. "You are the most trying woman I have ever known!" He didn't sound truly angry though. His fingers certainly didn't cease their exploration, trailing their cool fire up my leg, squeezing the flesh there, just short of my inner thigh. I could feel him nearing me in a most intimate way and I wasn't sure how to act. I fought back the urge to pull my shift down over my impending nudity, to cross my legs and beg him to move away.

Instead, I tilted my head back and inhaled deeply, striving for calm. I felt the golden light of the Danann on my skin like it was a living thing, swirling over me in tiny eddies as Cadfael's touch moved higher, brushing against the apex of my thighs. I couldn't help it—I jumped. He stopped his perusal of my body and drew back just enough to speak, his fingers still lingering, barely touching me in such a maddening way that I wanted to scream in frustration. "Did I hurt you?"

"Not yet," I snapped, my voice thick. He chuckled and I knew that was the end of it for me, any semblance of maidenly virtue and self control gone. My body arched in response to his ministrations and I gasped, unable to stop myself at the feel of his touch on my most sensitive spots.

I willed myself not to think of the scores of females he had likely done this with, not to consider how . . . nonchalantly the Sidhe viewed this act, the joining of two (or more, from the sight of some things at the Court) bodies simply another form of sharing and love between consenting beings.

I felt hot and shivery all at once. Cadfael's teeth grazed the peak of my nipple as I arched again, this time biting down on my lip to keep from crying out as he entered me with his fingers, twisting in just such a way that it felt as if lightning coursed through me.

His tongue darted out to lave my breast, his teeth nipping me as I gritted my teeth and tried not to hyperventilate in my attempts to remain as calm as possible.

I heard a guttural moan as he moved his mouth from my breast and realized it was my voice uttering such sounds, but I was beyond caring. “Alfhild,” he whispered so softly that I could barely hear him over my own breathing. “I will not take you tonight, not as you wish me to.”

“Oh, trust me, I wish you to!” I panted, shifting to trail the bare toes of my foot up his calf to the back of his knee. It gave me some small satisfaction to see him jump slightly, to feel him press against me involuntarily as his fingers moved within me still.

He didn’t reply, but fixed me with a smoldering look that I was forced to break away; I felt as if I were drowning when I looked at him like that, so close and . . . wanting.

“You have not agreed to be my wife yet,” he pointed out, dipping his head to tease my breasts again, his free hand coming up to tangle in my hair as if he were my anchor to that which passed for real in those moments. “If I were to take you now—”

“Cadfael,” I breathed, grasping his long hair and tugging hard enough to make him look up at me. “If you don’t plan on continuing past this, stop now.”

He paused and I didn’t know if I should be upset or happy that he was listening to me. “I’m too old to play teenager games and you can’t make me follow your will by getting me all hot and bothered.” If only he knew, I thought bitterly, as my inner sex goddess jabbed me hard in the ribs, telling me to shut up.

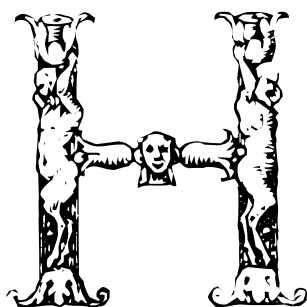
He closed his eyes and seemed to be thinking quite hard about *something* because his lips pursed and he tilted his head, as if listening. “You must eat the food of our realm before I can make love with you. You are still connected to the human world and I will not have you become like

those women of old, who were faerie led, half-witted beings who thought of nothing but copulating with their lovers!” He sounded disgusted at something—himself, the past . . . who knew!—and drew away from me entirely.

I grew very cold then, very cold and naked in ways I couldn’t explain even to myself.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN



HE DIDN'T SLEEP WITH ME that night. I don't know where he slept and, when I woke up alone, twisted in the fine sheets of the bed, I told myself that I didn't give a fuck, which was, obviously, a patent lie.

I shook off the bedclothes and slid to my feet, grabbing up my outerwear from where it had been abandoned late the night before or early that morning, whichever. I found myself almost missing the swarm of pixies that would have been presiding over my morning goings-on had I been at the Unseelie Court, but I didn't dwell on how lonely I felt. Instead, I made a beeline for the rucksack I had abandoned the night before and rummaged through it for my last (disgusting) snack cake to break my morning hunger.

"Good, you're up!" Du's achingly cheerful voice called from the doorway. "I was sent to shake you loose from the sheets . . ." he paused and raised a feline brow. "Have fun last night?" His nostrils flared in what could only be called avid interest. Damned cat sense of smell.

"My evening was just peachy keen, thanks," I smiled cheerily, knowing how fake it sounded and looked.

Du did not respond, just sauntered into the bedchamber and, glancing at the bed, shot me a curious look. "If you're expecting me to tell you what went on—"



“No need,” he cut me off. “Cadfael already has. Oh, don’t give me that look! We’ve known each other, he and I, for far too long for him to keep secrets from me. But apparently, he has no trouble at all keeping them from you.” He closed the distance between us and leaned close, so close that his lips were practically against my ear as he asked, “Did he not tell you why he would not . . . complete the act?”

I shook my head, my cheeks hot with something akin to but not quite reaching embarrassment. “To join with you fully would mean you accepted your status in our world, Alfild.” He leaned back, still encroaching in my personal space but no longer right against my ear. “He doesn’t think you’re ready to accept it.”

I held silent for a long moment, everything seeming exceedingly real—the rough homespun of my clothes, the wild, wine-like scent of Du’s skin, the cool air of the chamber that reminded me of an early autumn morning . . . Then I forced a smile and nudged him with my elbow.

“He said something like that. I’ll accept it when he tells me the whole, unvarnished truth. Come on. We’re down a day and have just a year left to do whatever the hell it is we’re supposed to be doing . . .”

“Stopping your brother.”

“It’s more than that, Du, and you know it.” I edged past him to the door and shot him a look over my shoulder. “I’m not as in the dark as you all like to think.” I had no idea where that came from but it seemed to settle something in the Cait Sidhe’s mind because he grinned suddenly and nodded, his tip-tilted eyes crinkling in amusement.

“I told him you’d get over yourself,” he announced, sweeping past me and into the hall, tossing me a grin as he passed. “You’re the right one.”

“Was there ever any doubt?” I was dizzy with the lighthearted banter, intoxicated, it seemed, from the sudden and enforced normalcy of our conversation.

He laughed and didn't say anything else as we made our way down the hall, turning towards the grand entry where I had overheard the meeting the night before. Cadfael was there, bent double at the waist to hear what a small, bark-colored being was saying. A flurry of pixies shot by and Du had to duck to miss being hit by a straggler. An overwhelming feeling of warmth shot through me, nearly staggering me, before Du laid his hand on my elbow and gently guided me into the large hall.

"Cadfael," I acknowledged, nodding genially in his general direction.

"The circle in Sarum was attacked early this morning," he said without preamble, glancing at me without much affection in his eyes. "They failed to do much more than misalign two of the stones, something easily fixed, but the general consensus among our . . . friends in the community . . . is that this attack was naught more than an attempt to garner my—our—attention."

He bent and murmured something else to the being whom I decided was male and likely a gnome before straightening, the diminutive figure scurrying to join a loose knot of red-garbed creatures of a similar stature. "The keeper was not harmed. In fact, she woke to find the stones misaligned and fixed them herself before notifying us."

I exhaled slowly, trying to summon my best potential queen demeanor and succeeding only in awakening a screeching little girl in my breast who stomped her foot and yelled in my ear, demanding why he wasn't paying me any attention like he had before, why he wasn't looking at me like earlier . . .

"So we go to Sarum then?"

Sarum, or Salisbury, is a place known the world over for its mystical nature and the famous Stonehenge. I had been there once, years ago, when I first moved to England and even then, it had been a quick tourist stop. They had stopped allowing people to get close to the famous stones some time before, after tourists and lowbrow sorts had damaged them.

Thousands of years in one place and it only takes a handful of twits to ruin them, I sighed inwardly.

Cadfael gave me another shrug. "I suppose we do."

"Don't," I said through clenched teeth, trying to keep my voice low despite my sudden but intense annoyance with the male of the species, "be a jerk. Get off your high horse and focus, damn it!"

My chest burned with annoyance and I was more than a little scared; Cadfael was powerful, more so than I could ever be, I was sure, and he could easily put me out or worse should I annoy him properly. Instead of wielding that power, a dire action, though, he shrugged again and called out something in a rough, guttural tongue to another Sidhe male I hadn't noticed before.

The tall, dark haired Sidhe strode across the room towards us and stopped just short of our little group, sweeping a grave bow in my general direction.

"Um . . ."

"This is my cousin, of a sort," Cadfael supplied. "It is pure luck that managed to put us here together—he usually does not stray far from the Court, especially at this time of year."

"It's dangerous to be too far from home whenever it decides to move," he smiled, his voice similar to Cadfael's in accent and timbre but much more careful, it seemed, as if he were afraid of saying the wrong thing. "I am Hywel," he bowed again, though this time not as deeply. "I doubt that you remember me from the other evening, when we all swore fealty . . ." he trailed off hopefully, brows inching infinitesimally upwards.

I smiled and racked my brain for his face. So many beings had knelt before me, murmuring words I only half heard and understood. His face did seem familiar, though, so I nodded and accepted his upturned palm with my fingers, a tiny trill of amused pleasure shooting down my spine at the brush of his lips on my fingers and Cadfael's annoyed grunt of notice.

“I remember you, Hywel,” I informed him sweetly. “So did Cadfael tell you what we’re about?”

“He’s told me some,” the Sidhe began, only to have Cadfael cut him off sharply.

“He’s been told enough. We go to Sarum, avoiding the waterways and chalk lines.” At some unspoken command, the massive doors began to swing open, allowing thin slivers of cool, weak sunlight and a wash of wet morning smells to enter as we stood, waiting. The silence wasn’t uneasy but it was clear that each one of us had a lot to think about.



“Do you know,” Hywel asked when we had stopped to eat some simple food many hours later, “that Cadfael has not told me one word about you other than what is common knowledge?”

He was sitting in the grass across from me as I rested my sore feet. We were in a safe space now, inside the human realm, and I relished the chance to eat real food. Hywel had caught me at a bad moment, my mouth full of apple and cheese, his impossibly cobalt blue eyes scanning my face intently for some response as my cheeks bulged like an overfed chimpunk.

“Well,” I coughed, swallowing my bites of food, “maybe he just figures what’s public knowledge is enough to know about anyone.”

“Maybe,” Hywel shrugged in an uncanny imitation of his cousin, “but I just find it strange, especially after how he went on and on about Lorelei when they were first introduced.” His eyes were wide, unblinkingly innocent, and I felt a spike of irritation. I had known people, usually women, back home who would make statements like that, trying to provoke a reaction in the hopes of gleaning some juicy gossip. It was

somewhat disheartening to see that tactic was not just some Southern female trait but universal, even down to the Sidhe.

I smiled and took a sip of my cider, feeling it burn down my throat. “Well, maybe he just had more interesting things to talk about with her.”

I held out my half eaten apple and he wrinkled his nose in distaste before I took it back, chomping down on it again and relishing the look of mild disgust on his face as I chewed.

“Lorelei is a fascinating creature.” I changed the subject. “I’m sure you know that I went by the name Lorelei in my world for a time, mainly to avoid the press and how they just wanted to tear me about in lieu of having my asshole of a brother in their grubby little mits.” I’m not sure what part of my brain kicked in to make me use Film Noir terminology, but I just went with it. “How much time do we have?”

“Not a terrible lot,” Hywel replied slowly, eyes narrowing back to normal proportions as he stood smoothly, offering me his hand. “Come, we’ll rejoin Du and Cadfael. They are likely done with their plotting.”

“It’s weird that he ran into you,” I mentioned, kicking myself for speaking the words before I could consider any possible consequences. “Traveling through the area on business, or pleasure?” We had reached Cadfael and Du now, so I really didn’t expect an answer.

“Pleasure,” Hywel smiled, his voice rich and slow.

I couldn’t help it; I’m a sucker for a good voice. I shivered and turned away, my cheeks probably as red as a cherry’s skin.

Cadfael hissed something under his breath and Hywel laughed, Du’s soft snort making me blush all the more, feeling as I were the butt of some joke or the hinge knot in some absurd tug-o-war.

“How much further?” I demanded, staring out over the plain, looking back at the path we had so recently been upon. Cadfael had insisted on traveling as much in his realm as possible since time passed differently there, and we had made a pretty decent distance.

“A while yet,” Cadfael said somewhere near my left ear. I refused to show how much he had startled me and this seemed to raise his ire, judging by the faint grunt he uttered as he stood next to me, leaning in close. “My cousin has a minor position in the court. He is related by virtue of my father’s second bride, a Sidhe female who was herself Seelie at one time, before her fall.”

My ears pricked up at this and I felt, for one insane moment, like one of those annoying ‘meddling kid’ stereotypes on so many mystery shows. “Is it at all strange that he happened to run into you at the faerie mound?” I asked in what I hoped was a nonchalant tone. I chanced a peek at his face and, true to my thoughts, he seemed to be concerned.

“Possibly. It is also possible that, like us, he is traveling on some diplomatic matter.” His sudden shift in demeanor then told me that the subject was closed. “Come on then,” he said in a slightly too-loud voice. “If we’re to reach Sarum by eventide, we must make haste!” He offered me his elbow and I sighed, laying my fingers on it. I didn’t like doing this, even though this would only be my third time. It made me feel floaty inside, like when you go over a speed bump too fast in your car, and I seemed to be prone to headaches after the act. “Alfhild, if you would?” I nodded, gripping his elbow tightly. His hand rested on Du’s shoulder and Du, I noticed, was gripping Hywel’s wrist. Cadfael nodded at me and I closed my eyes.

I had no idea how it worked and part of me suspected I wasn’t really the one doing all of the work, but the familiar tingling sensation spread through my body and in moments, we were in the Sidhe realm.

“If you lot can do this yourself,” I asked, feeling a bit sick to my stomach, “why are you asking me to do it now? You managed just fine before I came along.”

“You’re not as known as we are,” Du said kindly, perhaps feeling somewhat responsible for my nauseated state, judging by the sympathetic

and slightly guilty expression on his features. “Those who are watching for us, waiting for our arrival in these places, will not recognize your entrance. It is your magick that shows up on their, ah, what is the word your sort uses?” He snapped his finger, his white fangs showing as he bit his lower lip gently.

“Radar,” Cadfael supplied, looking around the Sidhe side of the place with a careful eye. “They call it radar for some reason.” He sniffed, his eyes narrowing as his grip on my arm tightened. “The redcaps are about. Something is amiss . . .”

“Redcaps?” Hywel asked, his voice throaty and almost, I thought, hungry. “What in the name of Danu could they be looking for? We’re not in a blood war right now, not unless there’s something you haven’t told me, Cadfael.” He arched an eloquent brow at his cousin and, for some reason, a tiny voice in my head called him a liar. Too practiced, it said, too rehearsed.

I swallowed hard, my throat suddenly dry, and I forced myself to look about.

“That smell,” Cadfael informed me, ignoring his cousin, “is blood and gore. The redcaps are hunting.”

As if his words emphasized it, the coppery tang of blood erupted in my senses just then, making my throat close and my stomach churn.

“I need to sit,” I breathed, overcome by a quick wash of pain and terror. It disappeared as quickly as it had come, but it left me with the distinct feeling that we were being watched, that we were being led somewhere against our will, that we were as gullible and naive as children.

The grass was wet and cold under my rear, moisture seeping through my clothes and clinging to my skin. I feared, for just a moment, that another vision was coming over me but instead, it was as if a shock of golden warmth covered my bones and radiated through sinew and flesh. I didn’t think I was glowing any more than I had before but apparently,

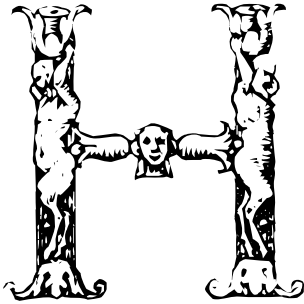
something had changed; the three Sidhe were looking at me as if I'd grown another head.

Surreptitiously, I checked to make sure I hadn't (in that place, one never really can tell) and, satisfied that I at least appeared normal by my standards, I drew a shaky breath, tamped down the impending urge to vomit, and rose to my feet, pushing my damp hair back from my eyes. "Okay. I'm ready."



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“**H**OW MANY IS IT NOW?”



“Still the one.”

“You absolutely sure?”

“Alfhild . . .”

I had done it. I had succeeded in irritating Du. “It *feels* like it’s been more than one day. It feels like it’s been at least three . . .” I paused, plucking a leaf from the nearest overhanging branch, turning it over in my hands and admiring how very alive it seemed, how the veins appeared to shine with some inner secrets, then I let it be caught by the breeze and flutter away from my grasp. No maudlin metaphors, I promised myself. Any turn for the Hamlet and I’d fling myself at the redcaps willingly.

The beasts were still roaming about, the bloody tang of their scent wafting through the sweet air that was neither springtime nor summer, but oddly wintry, like sugared berries and frozen grass, broken open in the frost. It was not cold, though, not truly. Maybe I had lost all sense of temperature, like the Sidhe, I thought, meeting Du’s annoyed gaze once again.

“Well, it does!”

“It still,” he ground out, “has only been one full day, according to the year’s wheel.” He gestured towards Cadfael and Hywel, standing some distance away, not speaking to each other but seemingly each lost in their own thoughts. “You can ask them!”



“They’ll lie,” I asserted. “At least Cadfael will. I have only met one unflinchingly honest Unseelie and that’s been you.”

“Don’t put me on high, chit,” he warned, rolling his eyes. “You will nay meet an honest anybody. Every living creature lies and dissembles if it will get them what they want, what they need. Even the beasts of the field know a trick or two to ensure survival, things that would surprise those heathen nonbelievers you used to live amongst when you were acting human.” He eyed me then, a look fraught with daring. Fight with me, he seemed to be telling me, cause a scene.

I smiled sweetly and shrugged, though it went against my very nature to let that slide. “Probably true. If we’re one day in, we need to keep moving. How far are we from Sarum?”

“We’re here,” Du replied with a tense, growly tone to his voice. I had no idea why he was trying to pick a fight with me but I was not about to fall into it; if he wanted a fight, let him have at Hywel or Cadfael. I was not dumb enough to believe I could hold my own against a Cait Sidhe and come out the better for it all. He swept his golden gaze over me once more and stalked away, his back arching in feline annoyance as he drew closer to Cadfael and Hywel.

Sarum, on the Sidhe side of the world, was lush and green, entirely as I had imagined a place with such a mystical history would appear. A large stone building, not quite what I’d call a castle, loomed above us on a hill some short distance away, but it appeared abandoned. No sounds of life that I could discern were in the air, and the Sidhe seemed antsy, silent themselves and tense as a drawn bowstring.

My own gaze drifted towards Cadfael and settled there. I was attracted to him—I couldn’t deny that no matter how hard I tried—but would I be able to marry him? Why was my train of thought taking a turn for the soap opera? I forced my lips to curve into a smile and I forced my hands to

move to my hair, pushing it back out of my face, twisting it into some semblance of order. I had no choice now.

“Stonehenge looks different from this side of things,” I remarked obviously, standing in the midst of the circle, staring up at the proud, dark stones that threw long shadows over us. They were not crooked, not like my realm had them. They seemed to hum and glow with an inner radiance, something warm and comforting. I did not hear footsteps around us but I knew that beings were moving, circling, watching. The blood-sharp tang of the redcaps hung in the air but it was not so strong here, inside the circle of stones. “Where are they?”

Cadfael didn’t even pretend to misunderstand my concern, gesturing past me towards the low hill where the castle stood.

“They are there, waiting. They have fed already and are hungry for more. Someone directed them to this plain; Sarum is far outside their usual haunts.” He glanced at Hywel and frowned. “There is still time for me to return you to my mother’s court.”

“You seem to forget sometimes, Cousin, that it is the Unseelie Court, not Madb’s court.” Hywel raised a raven-wing brow and quirked his lips. “The mistake is quite easy, it seems.”

“What in the name of Danu does that mean?” Cadfael asked mildly, but I saw his fingers curl by his sides and his body tense ever so slightly.

Yep, I was right, I thought somewhat smugly (hey, can’t blame me for being happy I was right to some degree). The cousins were anything but thrilled with each other.

Hywel shrugged, turning a blindingly charming smile towards me. “That’s nothing to worry about now, is it? Not when you have a mission to accomplish.” He offered me his elbow. “Shall we proceed?”

“Um . . .” I wavered, looking askance at Du and Cadfael. Hywell *tsked* impatiently and grabbed my arm himself. “Hey! I didn’t give you permission!” I jerked my arm free and stumbled back a few steps, wishing

I were stronger, wishing I wasn't so damned proud, so resistant to giving over to what was apparently my lot in existence . . . The ground heaved under my feet and for a moment, I thought that I was about to faint. Cadfael was behind me then, holding me up, pressed firmly against my back as he turned, shielding me from Hywel.

"I'm fine," I lied, the world righting once more. I needed to take the plunge, to take a deep breath and eat something in this realm. There was no other choice now. Maybe, when we were done, I could find a way to leave and not be penalized for it.

"Time," Du muttered, pacing past us and moving towards Hywel. "Time, time, time . . ."

I wriggled slightly and Cadfael loosened his grip. "Let's keep going. The caretaker might not be alive and the longer we wait, the worse this gets."

"There is no caretaker, Alfild," Du said calmly, his gaze focused somewhere outside the circle. "Cadfael . . ."

"I know," he barked, looking frightening for just a split second before turning back to me. "Alfild, stay with me. Do not—" he laced his fingers with mine and squeezed so tightly that the bones in my hand popped and creaked, "—let go of me, is that understood?" I nodded mutely. "Hywel, I don't care what you think about things as they stand. Stay close. Du . . ."

"I know," the Cait Sidhe smiled, his fangs flashing in his handsome face as he dropped to all fours and shifted, his muscles and bones changing before my very eyes, becoming purely feline in form before bounding between the standing stones, running through the tall grass until I could not see him anymore.

"Cadfael, what the hell is going on?" I demanded, feeling Hywel move close behind me, his cool presence discomforting. "If you don't tell me what's going on, I'm going to do something incredibly stupid." I tried to jerk free from his grasp again but failed, his hand tightening on mine to the point where I gasped in pain. "Cadfael! You're hurting me!"

“If that is the only way I can make you listen to me, then so be it,” he snapped, pulling me flush against his chest and stomach and forcing me to look him in the eyes. “You heard the rumblings of civil war last night, Alfild, and now you will see its birth.

“The caretakers’ deaths are only a small fraction of what your brother has done. The Seelie want power and will have it at any cost, even if that means tearing apart all of the realm to do it.”

I could only stare at him, my throat dry at his intensity.

“You are the prize in this little game, Alfild, no matter what you think, no matter your human sensibilities about the value of your life.”

“What about—” I began, finally finding my words, but he shook my wrist, silencing me with a glare.

“This is a wild goose chase and I have known since leaving the Seelie Court that the entire intent was for you to die, Alfild. I am nothing to them, despite being prince and heir apparent to the Unseelie Court, I am nothing. You carry the key to the future of our existence.”

“No pressure,” I breathed, shaking now, feeling my teeth start to chatter in abject fear.

“You are special, Alfild. Your part in our legends is true but not as you think. This is no simple mystery, no easy path where, at the end, you win a prize for solving the riddle and can go home and live happily ever after.” He relaxed his grip on me only slightly, still pinning me with his glare. “If we returned home right away, we would have led the hordes through my mother’s front door.”

“So we led them to Sarum and now we’re going to be the scapegoats and die for this? Uh uh.” I shook my head violently, not trying to escape him this time but instead leaning in closer. “One more lie from you and I will let them kill you all.”

Something was welling inside me and I was remotely horrified to feel that I meant my threat, that my anger was so great that I would let these beings be slaughtered just to stop the confusion and lies and half truths.

“The only lie I have ever truly told you,” he replied in a hollow, soft tone, “was—”

“Cadfael,” Hywel snapped, “enough. We do this now or we die cowards.”

Cadfael nodded. “Come on then. Let’s go.”

“Where are we going?” I demanded, letting him lead me through the standing stones, into the high grass.

“The castle,” he sighed, nodding at the massive structure above us. “We present ourselves and try to stem the tide. If we fail, we are prisoners.”

“Whoa,” I dug my heels in literally then, setting him just enough off balance so he had to stop or fall if he chose to try and press onward. “Prisoners? No way. I am not doing that again.” I felt something brush by me and I knew it was the damned sylph.

“Tell your mistress,” I snarled at the seemingly empty air, “that if she wants me dead, she can come take me herself! I’m not part of this game!” I felt Cadfael drop my hand but it didn’t truly register with me at that moment.

“Tell her,” I added, the feeling of something, of the sylph, caressing my face and neck with its incorporeal form growing more pronounced, “that she is welcome to Gulliver and all he stands for but she can bite my fat ass if she thinks I will have any part in helping her!”

“Alfhild, quiet!” Cadfael snapped, clapping a hand over my mouth—just a second too late, it seemed. The blood tang smell grew stronger and seemed to thicken in my throat. Hywel made some noise of surprise or pain, I was not sure which, because all I could see were Cadfael’s eyes, luminous and changing, close to mine as he covered my mouth to silence me further. “You have killed us all!”

I tried to bite his fingers and failed, succeeding only in mashing my lips between my teeth and his hand. We were just outside the stone circle, outside of its protective warmth and hum of energy. Du was gone, I didn't know where and, in that moment, the enormity of it all crashed down on me: I was never leaving the Sidhe. Never.



A YEAR AND A DAY

*or, in which the whole damned thing blows up in Alfhild's face, but
that's okay because bad faeries rule . . .*



CHAPTER ONE

“**Y**OU KNOW . . . THERE’S SOMETHING to be said for the whole nudity thing.”

“Please shut up.” My head ached unbelievably, as if I had just stood up too fast under a stone shelf and whacked the hell out of it. I stank, I was sore, and I was fairly certain there was something in my hair that had once been inside an animal. At least I hoped it was an animal. That was a bit easier to stomach than thinking it had once been inside a person. “How many days now?”

“Just the two,” Du’s imperturbably cheerful voice answered from the darkness. “Two. Twooooooooooooooooo . . .”

“Please shut up.”

“You’re getting repetitive in your old age,” he commented dryly, but fell silent.

I couldn’t sleep; I don’t think I wanted to, either. The stone walls around us were damp and slime-covered and smelled like sweat and rotten meat. I had tripped over something when we were first shoved into the cell and I had no idea what it was, but it squished. I’d been pressed against the far wall ever since. Du didn’t seem to mind so much, but I had decided by then that he was half mad.

“Cadfael,” he began, and then paused. “May I speak?”



The idea—the notion of Cadfael—made my stomach roil. The fight had been swift and merciless. I had barely time to muster a good scream before I was torn from his side, from Hywel and the safety of their sheer presence and spirited in a dark miasma of putrid smells and soft-fingered grasps. The Sluagh, wanted by neither paradise nor damnation, had taken us—at least Du and myself. I closed my eyes and sank into an even deeper blackness, trying not to think of what was coating the wall behind me.

“Speak, talk, jabber, whatever,” I muttered. “I’ve decided that I don’t care anymore.”

“I was taken after you,” Du said quietly, after a brief pause. “Cadfael was not. Hywel was not. We are in what you would call Ireland, the Cave of Cruachan.” He trailed off expectantly, waiting for me to recognize the name.

I whispered it, tasting it on my tongue, trying to stir the ghost of my grandmother in my memory, trying to puzzle it out, when the distant clang of metal on stone jolted the thought into being.

“The Hell Gate,” we murmured together, at once confirming and hating the name.

Du shifted in the darkness and I felt his warmth flow over me as he pressed close. He was not shaking as I was, but I felt his fear. The longer I was in the Sidhe lands, the less human I felt. I had been noticing it for some time and I feared it. It made me too much like Gulliver, I worried, too similar to his own lack of humanity that made him able to kill without concern for the repercussions, made him unable to see the gravity of what he had done. I swallowed hard and pressed close to Du, trying to drive the chill from my bones. “We are being kept amongst them, neither living or dead, because they cannot kill us, Alfhild. I am bait; you are one of them.”

It took a long stretch of quiet for me to realize what he had said. “No . . . no, no, no . . . I’m not Sluagh.” The very idea was laughable; I made a

mental note to chortle mockingly when I was not being held captive and on the verge of something awful.

“Sluagh are Fallen.” Du shrugged, his arm moving beside mine. “Some say they are as the light-bringers and fell in a battle. Some say they are humans who cannot go up or down, or whichever direction you lot think your afterlife is. Some say they are the Tuatha de Danann, reflected darkly.” He touched my leg then, his agile fingers squeezing my cold knee in a way that was meant to be comforting, I’m sure, but served only to underscore my deep chill of anger and fear. “They will not kill you because you shine. You show your Tuatha de Danaan heritage and it burns them, burns them here,” he tapped my breast bone and sighed. “They will not kill you but if we stay much longer, you will wish for them to do so.”

“You were saying something about Cadfael,” I prompted, my brain too tired to think, to even suggest a plan for escape. “He . . . he’ll hate me. This is all my fault . . .”

“You didn’t ask to be born in this time,” Du cut me off, his voice suddenly stern. “Not even the Snow Queens could control that. We are beyond their reach here, by the bye. No use calling out to them.”

“I wasn’t going to.”

“I would have,” he replied, his warmth now a burning heat down my right side.

For the first time, I was afraid of Du; something in his tone, the way he pressed close and how his breath seared at my senses, skittering along my cheek and neck like a sirocco, made my fight-or-flight response kick into overdrive. Wouldn’t you know it, I thought, I’d have to be the ‘fight’ sort. “Back off, cat breath.” I felt his entire body jerk beside me, like he had been pulled taut by some invisible string, but after a second’s hesitation, he let out a soft laugh and slapped my thigh fondly.

“You will be a fine queen one day, Alfild . . . but not any time soon.” There was a shift beside me and I knew that he had risen to his feet to start

pacing. “Tell me again why you called yourself Lorelei when you were among those humans.”

With a sigh that felt as if it were twisted from my very bones, I repeated the story I had told or half told him what felt like eons ago. “Gulliver was suspected of murder when we were younger; he was about twenty-five and I was just out of my junior year of college. Our family was considered well to do and ‘old money,’ so the media flocked like vultures. By the time he had been charged and then acquitted, I was being hounded day and night. I left Louisiana to escape them. I hid out in the old house . . . no one cares in England, really,” I added, closing my eyes.

“They left me alone. But I started calling myself Lorelei whenever a reporter asked my name. It became second nature after a while and I forgot to think of myself as Alfhild, sister of Gulliver, spawns of a freaky little family . . . I was Lorelei: young, eccentric and independently wealthy in the far off mists of Europe.”

“Why that name?”

I sighed again, tired of his distraction tactics, when something occurred to me. It was his tone, I realized. He was not asking merely to distract me. “Why is it important?”

He merely kept pacing.

After several long seconds had passed, I told him. “It was a dream. My grandmother used to tell me all these old faerie tales—no offense . . .”

“None taken.” I could hear his smirk.

“Anyway, one of them was about the Lorelei, how she was so beautiful but so sad and her sorrow made her voice so beguiling and it led sailors to their doom. I used to pretend to be her when I was little, sitting on this rock jetty down where my uncles and grandpa would go fishing in the gulf, and I’d comb my hair and pretend it was blonde and I was beautiful and I’d sing.”

The memory was so bright and biting that it made me ache, made my gut twist with the action of remembering and realizing it was a time and place gone, that I would never get it back.

“And when the mess all started coming down, I started to think I needed a disguise, a pretend thing . . . One night I had a dream that I was sitting on this huge rock in a river that was wider than almost any river I’d ever seen and I was combing my hair and combing and combing and then, I saw this ship rounding the bend . . . it was really old and creaky and I could hear men talking . . . I knew, like how you do in dreams, like you’re just watching inside yourself, that I was the Lorelei. So the next day when a reporter asked me if I was Gulliver’s sister Alfhild, I smiled and said no, my name was Lorelei, sorry to disappoint ‘em.”

“That,” Du said after a very long, very quiet moment, “is the most melodramatic load of drivel I’ve heard since . . . well, since Cadfael’s last attempt at poetics.” His teeth flashed in the darkness of the cell. “You could have simply said it was an assumed name, trying to avoid your brother’s macabre fans.”

“That’s weird, hearing you say fan,” I murmured, wondering at my own voice. It sounded thick and strange and tasted, if words could taste, of old fruit and sugary-sweet drinks left to grow warm in the sun. “I’m sleepy . . .”

“We hear you lot talk. We’re not all hiding about in burrows and cairns in some—” he paused, and even though I couldn’t see his face, I knew that it was screwed up into an expression of distaste, “—Renaissance Festival!”

I couldn’t help it then; I laughed. Jackie had spent many long hours bitching about the one Renaissance Festival I had taken her to in the States. She had been a history major at university and the sight of the people playacting at some idealized, commercialized, pseudo-Renaissance village offended her on some deep level that she rarely showed the world, preferring to hide behind ditzy, pretty Jackie rather than Jacqueline the Professor, lately book editor.

“I’m sorry . . . maybe you all need a publicist, you know? Someone to take care of media relations . . .” I felt giddy, silly as a kid on a sugar high. I waved my fingers in the dark, tracing the roots of my plan as my head felt full of helium. “You can get someone to, you know, make press releases and issue demands for apologies for things like Disney stories and junk.” I felt hot and was glad for it—I was tired of the bone deep chill that the Sluagh seemed to favor. “Hey! I can do it for you! I talk to reporters a *lot* whenever Gulliver fucks up . . .”

“Alfhild,” Du said quietly, which, for some reason, made me giggle some more. “Alfhild, be silent.”

I managed it, barely, a sweeping urge to giggle some more, to slide down the wall and succumb to the lovely urge to sleep, mingling to silence me long enough for Du’s fingers to skim over my face and throat, lingering at the hollow between my collar bones. For a moment, my giddiness lifted and I felt fine, normal and whole again. Warmth spread from Du’s fingertips and through my skin, pushing whatever darkness held me aside like a veil.

“Oh . . .”

“Shhh.”

I nodded and closed my eyes, the lassitude moving steadily from my toes to my hips, up my stomach to my chest, my arms, my mouth. I inhaled, tasting the thick and putrid tang of the dungeon air filling my mouth and lungs. I slipped, Du’s fingers still on my throat, and sound ceased. I felt light again and wondered if the Queens had slipped me another draught, if I were dead and imprisoned. *Du would tell me if I was*, the thought skittered across my mind.

A tiny flicker of anger at Cadfael boiled to the surface, anger that his mistruths and evasions had led me here, but the flicker never bloomed to flame. My eyes were closed but lights danced in the dark, smaller than the

pixies but bright as stars, colors defying description moving faster and faster, leaving trails and seeming to exude warmth.

Softly, Du's voice, his breath, brushed my ear and neck. Words I didn't understand, could not understand even with my newly found gift of tongues from the Tuatha di Danaan, hissed into my being.

I felt boneless all of a sudden, light and ephemeral, Du's fingers on my neck my only anchor to solidity.

Du's voice was a soft litany of words that made no sense to me at first but, as the warm light seemed to spread further, glow brighter, they became individual sounds, distinct phrases that resonated in the recesses of my mind, triggering realization. A blessing, a prayer, a request for protection . . .

"You know the words, don't you?" he asked with a smile in his voice. "You're too tired to fight it, too tired to fight your blood. You are of the Tuatha di Danaan."

"We've established that," I replied weakly. My mind roiled with thoughts of Sluagh and Sidhe, human and not, and what comes after. "I'm not feeling so well."

"We're out of human food to give you," Du sighed softly, his words almost imperceptible. He had stopped his incantation but his fingers still rested on my throat, connecting us. "It has been several hours by your human time since you have last eaten and even then, it was nothing nourishing. The best I can offer you right now is a bit of water from your realm. There is no more than a mouthful left."

I hesitated. I wasn't exactly thirsty but I felt so very weak . . . My nod was quick and sharp, sending a wave of nausea and pain through my skull. Du shifted away, the absence of his touch making me feel bereft and cold.

After a moment, something was pressed to my lips and a voice in the back of my head told me it was Du's leather pouch, the one he wore at his hip when he had his kit on as opposed to his usual near-nudity. Warm,

slightly leathery water trickled into my mouth and over my tongue. I let it stay there a moment, filling my mouth and relieving some of the painful parched feeling before I swallowed, and reveled in the feeling of it sliding down my throat. I was surprised at how good it felt to take a sip of warm, old water but I did not dwell on it overmuch as Du pressed close to me again and leaned to whisper in my ear.

“The Sluagh will come for you soon. You will be tortured. You will wish to die. The Snow Queens cannot help you here, no matter how you wish for it.”

“Why are you saying this to me?”

“You need to know . . . you need to understand.” In the distance, the scrape of metal against something wet but hard sounded and then a loud clang, like a jail door being slammed shut, echoed through the space. “Not all tortures are physical, Alfild. Not all tortures leave an outward mark. The Sluagh have had all of time in the world to discern the most painful tortures and they know the best ways to hurt a being.”

I blinked, feeling only mildly revived by the mouthful of water. “They can reason? I always thought that they were . . . sluggish. Just creatures who acted on impulse with no thought behind their actions . . .”

“Not even a little,” Du sighed. “I sorely wish that your ancestors had been better at divination and more able to see your lack of education coming. Maybe then we would have been better prepared.”

“And what? Had me go to an orientation meeting when Cadfael first shanghai’d me?”

“Maybe,” Du said and his smile colored his voice. “The Sluagh are not lack-wits, Alfild. They are . . . ancient,” he said, his voice taking on a faint note of confusion. “I’m sorry, there is no way to explain it in human terms.”

I nodded slowly, still feeling as if my brains were sloshing about in my skull. “I think I understand, Du. They’re beyond the concepts of dark and light, right and wrong. They just are.”

“Something like that . . .” Another metallic scrape sounded and he pressed closer. “Alfhild—” Before he could finish whatever he had been about to say, a weak green light flooded the cell and picked out gruesome details I would have had been just as happy to never know existed. There was nothing so mundane as manacles on the wall and a skull in the corner; rather, gore splattered the stone and for the first time I realized that I had not been leaning against a cave wall damp with subterranean moisture but rather a cave wall damp with drying blood.

Du closed his eyes and his lips moved but I was not sure what he said, only that he cried out as a dark and shapeless mass surged through the opening, blocking the green light entirely.

I realized, for the first time, that he was well and truly scared out of his wits, despite his words to me just moments before. I didn’t have time to dwell on that as a feeling of overwhelming sadness and fear swept over me, filling every particle of my body. I felt as if I were made of ice and pain as darkness surrounded me, and I recognized its source. I had felt this when I was taken from Cadfael’s side. The Sluagh were moving me, folding me into their Darkness so I would not, could not, escape.



I felt the floor pitch beneath my feet and the darkness receded in a sudden sweep, sending me stumbling forward, disoriented and off balance. Sprawled face-down on stone that was damp and smelled of old blood, I took a moment to try and breathe, try and swallow back the nausea that went deeper than hunger and exhaustion. Something in me recognized this place, even without looking. Something in me was screaming at me to

run, to fight, but I couldn't make my limbs obey. Instead, I pushed myself onto my hands and knees, rocked back onto my heels, and looked up at the large stone chair before me. Darkness wreathed it like a living thing, writhing and swirling, seeming to coalesce into a large shape. I rose to my feet, shaking, fighting not to let my knees buckle as the shape reached its full distinction. "Iseult . . ."

"I just could not let you fester here without making sure that you were being treated properly," she said in her silvery, lilting tone. Her gaze raked me from head to toe before a smile touched her lips. "You seem to be fine."

"The Sluagh . . ."

"Yes, yes, I know. Don't be tiresome. I have allowed your mate to return to the Unseelie Court with his bloodkin Hywel. He is amassing an army . . ." Her smile became more feral and edged, marring her beautiful face with an animal anger that spoke of base desires unfulfilled. "All because of you, a little human woman. Your blood taints the Sidhe, marks us as impure . . ."

"You seemed mighty keen on having my help earlier," I muttered, unable to stop myself. I still couldn't shake the feeling that something was familiar about this place, something fundamental.

"You are marked by our blood," she repeated, stepping off the stone dais and closing the distance between us. I could feel the pull of her glamour again, the tug of belief. She stopped a handspan from me, the silvery-gold shine of her very existence dancing along my arms, dazzling my eyes. The faint glow that had suffused my skin since my first entry into the world of the Sidhe was all but drowned in her shine. "And as such, I lack the ability to deal with you as I would a mere human. The Laws," she grimaced as if the words were foul on her tongue, "apply to you, it seems."

"That's good to know . . . so now I have to mind my jaywalking and be careful not to go speeding in some Sidhe-mobile . . ."

The sharp blow she dealt sent me reeling, my hand flying to my cheek as blood welled along the three narrow furrows left by her nails.

“That,” I said after a shaky moment, “was childish.”

“It shut your mouth,” she noted, entirely composed. “The Seelie are waiting, watching your mate, Alfild. He is weak without you there. You’re his half.”

“I knew it. I knew Cadfael would find a way to guilt me from a distance,” I muttered, unable to flip my sarcasm mode to the ‘off’ position. Iseult glowed even more brightly for a brief moment and I flinched, unable to stop myself. This seemed to please her, the sliver of a smile dancing across her lips more sinister than any scowl. “So you can’t hurt me, the Sluagh can’t kill me What are we doing here? Are you wanting to settle this with a thumb wrestle?”

“Your glib . . . wit . . . will be the death of you,” she murmured, turning to face something or someone unseen to my left, giving me her profile.

She flickered then, seeming to grow very pale before blazing back into full color, like watching an old television that didn’t quite want to keep its tubes warm. She raised a slim, luminous hand and a dark shape drifted forward, blocking my view of her, pressing so close to me that I could feel the bone-chilling cold that seemed to make up its very essence.

It drifted away just as silently, leaving Iseult facing me with a trio of small, plain, gray stones in her palm. “Do you know these, Alfild?”

“Um . . . pebbles?”

“You are a disgrace to the blood of the Tuatha di Danaan,” she spat, reaching out and seizing my wrist before I could stop her. She pressed the three stones into my palm so hard that they felt as if they were grinding into my very bones. “Uruz, Raidho, Hagalaz.”

“Wh . . . what?” The words sent alarm bells clanging deep in my memories.

The stones were carved with faint symbols. I turned my hand slightly, watching the markings, trying to make sense of them. They did not change, no matter which way I held them, the tracery shifting to always present itself in the same manner. They lay in a triangle in my palm, the pinnacle carved with a mark that looked like a slightly lopsided, flattened U, the lower left seeming as an upside down R shape and the last one appearing as a rather stylized H.

Runes, a voice whispered somewhere in my thoughts. I had a flash, blinding and breathtaking, of hands—not my own as they are but as they once were, moons and moons and moons ago, before this body existed, clutching stones worn smooth with time, throwing them onto the scarred wood of a table riddled with gouges and smelling of meals and smoke and ash and resin. I gasped and jerked, my vision clearing, Iseult's smile surely the same as a shark's when it finds its meal.

“Runes,” I said aloud. “My runes . . .” Mine? Where the hell had that come from?

“Mine,” Iseult corrected. “Your flesh has never before touched these sacred stones,” she breathed, her eyes never leaving mine. “They hold your fate. The Unseelie Horde will fall, despite your presence. Cadfael may think he has secured their fate with you at his side, but that was written long before you existed in any form.” She released my wrist and motioned to someone or something behind me, out of my line of sight. “You have been in my care for a little over three days by Sidhe reckoning. Your blood prevents us from killing you as you so deserve but your alignment with the Unseelie—”

“Isn't of my choosing,” I cut her off, closing my fingers over the stones. They felt oddly warm in my palm, as if they were living things rather than pieces of the earth's bones. “So what you're trying to tell me, Iseult,” I was finding my second (or third?) wind and could not muster a damn to give at

just that moment, “is that you’re holding me and my companion here against our will despite the fact you can’t hurt us?”

“No . . .” She tilted her head and regarded me curiously, her smile softening to something lovely to behold. “I can’t hurt *you*, Alfild. I can do whatever I like to your friend.”



CHAPTER TWO



TASTED COPPERY FEAR ON MY TONGUE as I was led back to the cell I had been sharing with Du. I was afraid of what I would find there; images of Du's battered body, scenes of splattered blood and gore, danced in my mind's eye as the slow moving, cold Sluagh bracketed me, not touching me but forcing me down the long and narrow corridor to the stone and wood door blocking the cell's entrance. I fought to keep my eyes from closing in preparation for the horror that awaited, holding my breath as the door was pushed open after one of the Sluagh muttered an incantation to unlock it. A hand as cold as ice and hard as granite pushed me forward, just to the threshold, and I froze, unable to move, horrified, bile rising in my throat . . .

"Done yet?"

My knees buckled and I started to slide towards the floor before familiar, fine-boned and strong hands caught me under the arms. "Du!"

"I know I haven't done my best grooming lately but that's no cause for melodramatics . . ." His tone was light but the slight tremor in his fingers and his too-tight grasp spoke volumes. "Are we done here?"

I nodded, glancing at the large dark shape next to me. "I think so." The Runes felt heavy in my fist but I did not try to tuck them away or show them to Du for fear of losing them or worse. "I think we're being let go."



Du shifted his attention to the Sluagh guards. “Hey there, good looking, you need us here anymore or can we scamper off into the night?”

The response was guttural and sounded like wet hisses and sibilant pops, only the vaguest semblance of words and familiar sounds.

Du nodded and turned me around, all but frog marching me past the guards. “Don’t look back,” he murmured. “Their true form will literally scare you to death.”

“That isn’t their true form?”

“It’s their socially polite form,” he said softly. “Keep walking.”

“How do you know the way out?” I asked quietly after we turned a near corner. “There’s no signpost . . .”

“Cadfael’s been, ah, calling me for a while now. I can feel his pull, the pull of the Horde. They are not far off.” He moved so that he was apace with me and shot me a tired but apologetic glance. “Connection,” he added, tapping a spot before his pointed ear.

That reminded me. “I . . . I think I had a vision when Iseult was, ah, questioning me . . .” The hallway seemed to turn left every twenty yards or so, growing warmer with each bend we passed. “Are you sure this is the way out?”

“It’s our only option so any way you look at it, we won’t be here much longer,” he grinned, pointed teeth showing in the dim light that seemed to emanate from the stone walls pressing in on either side of us. It was barely wide enough to walk two abreast, even when one of the people was about as wide as a minute is long. “What vision?”

I sighed. “Maybe it was a hunger and stress induced hallucination, but after the Snow Queens . . .” I shook my head and fell behind by half a step as the corridor narrowed yet again after a bend in the path. “Iseult handed me these runes,” I lifted my fist but did not open it, “and when I first held them, I swore I saw myself tossing them but it wasn’t me . . . but it was me . . .”

Du nodded, somewhat distractedly, before muttering, “And up we go . . .” The hall narrowed once more, forcing us to walk single file. It was so warm that I was sweating, my hair sticking to the back of my neck in snakey tendrils, my skin uncomfortably clammy. “Here we are.”

“It’s a stone wall.”

“Human blood,” he sighed, reaching out a hand and shoving hard. The stone wall parted and swung open. “It’s just a door. Simply because it lacks a knob does not make it anything less than what it is.”

“How profound,” I muttered, following him out into a startlingly warm evening. “There wasn’t a lock?”

“No one escapes the Sluagh,” he informed me gravely, his gaze roving the small clearing into which we had emerged. “Not unless they are meant to. In lean times, they will often allow a prisoner to escape simply for the chase.” His gaze found mine again and the smile didn’t reach his eyes. “This is what you would call Wales, Alfild. Cadfael has moved the court to a nearby circle.” Before his words had even faded, I felt a familiar prickling on the back of my neck and turned to face the direction of Du’s gaze. Linned with the light of the setting sun, a stone circle stood distant, dark monoliths like cloaked figures on the verdant plain.

“I don’t remember a circle like that in Wales,” was all I could say, my tongue feeling thick as I suddenly imagined Cadfael’s worried face, wanting to hear him say my name.

“Not on your side of the veil there isn’t,” Du shrugged, starting towards the circle. “Not in recent human memory anyway,” he added, his pace quickening as we put more distance between the stone door and ourselves. “This is still the Sidhe side of the world, Alfild. And the circle is heavily guarded.”

“By what?”

“Whom.”

“Pardon?”

“By whom. The circle is heavily guarded by whom is the proper question . . .” He paused and tilted his head to one side, eyes darting around the narrow clearing. It was a long oval amidst dense trees, spilling down to a plain below a slight decline as if we were on a small hill. “And we’re about to see so mind your manners and let me do the talking.”

“Er . . .”

Before I could get much more than that single, asinine syllable out, the overwhelming smell of green life and rich soil and something deeper and virtually indescribable welled around us, making me stagger back with the overwhelming need to drink it in, breathe it as if it were vital to my continuing existence. Du’s hand clamped on the back of my neck and forced me to my knees, his own lithe form folding beside me to kneel in the springy, damp grass.

“So you aren’t dead,” a friendly voice laughed above us.

I darted a glance upwards, despite Du’s hand still forcing me down. The figure before me was tall, clad in a garment that could best be described as a cloak made of leaves, and wore a headdress of antlers and vines. He didn’t look like someone to be frightened of if I focused on his face but when I swept my gaze over his green and brown garb and took him in entirely, I felt the first pang of unease in my belly.

“Alfhild of the Seven Snows,” he said suddenly, his smile fading somewhat but never leaving his face. “We’ve been waiting for you. The prophecies are vague on some things but dead accurate for others. For the love of gods, Du, let her up. You can stay kneeling if you’d like,” he added, the grin growing again to make his eyes twinkle. “Come, Alfhild. We have a very anxious court awaiting your return.”

I rose somewhat creakily and, the Runes still clutched in my sweaty first, assayed a smile back at the bearded man before me. “How do you know my name?”

Du hissed at me, but the man merely offered me his hand as if to shake mine.

“Most call me Jack,” he said pleasantly, his voice low and resonating on a level that made my bones feel prickly and my senses trigger some primal need to breathe in the loamy, green scent of him. “And I know many things, Alfild. I’ve been alive longer than most people realize. I’m not as dead as most seem to think,” he added, shooting Du a significant glance.

I nodded absently, something tickling the back of my mind, my thoughts a jumble as a memory struggled forth. “Do you know my brother?”

Jack’s face darkened markedly, like a shadow passing over the plain. “Gulliver. Favorite of Iseult. We know him, Alfild. His name is as infamous as yours is famous.” He took my arm like a courtly gentleman and for the first time I saw the grandeur of his cloak. It spread behind him for yards, every color of nature represented in the spill of the material. *Leaves*, my memory whispered. *Made of living things, of the Earth Herself*. Jack’s brows shot up and he regarded me sidelong, making me realize that he had heard my thoughts or I had spoken aloud.

“Sorry,” I muttered. “I’m just not quite myself.”

“We’re always ourselves, Alfild. It’s others who are not quite as they should be.” Du fell into step beside me and Jack continued down the slight slope at a stately pace. “You are safe here, so no need to keep looking about as if you’re about to be ambushed. This is mine.” His free hand made a sweeping gesture, negligently encompassing all I could see. “The circle is just the doorway to the court. They have been waiting four days for you.”

“Four?” I asked, startled out of my tentative reverie. “I thought it was three!”

“The corridor,” Du sighed by way of explanation. “Moving between courts often takes more time than you would think, especially if they’re

feeling persnickety.” He smiled at his own words and Jack laughed. “Alfhild, Jack is . . .”

“Quite thirsty,” Jack interrupted him. He reached under his cloak and produced a horn with an elaborate silver cap. He offered it to me first and raised a brow at my silent refusal. “Ah, I’m guessing you still have not drunk or eaten of Sidhe sustenance . . . Cadfael will be both relieved and dismayed.”

He passed the horn to Du, who uttered a sigh of thanks and drank deeply, gulping aloud as he downed whatever was in the container. Jack did the same, a trickle of the sweet-smelling substance racing down his dark beard.

“Mead,” he said, closing the horn and tucking it under a fold of his robe, answering my unasked question. “Staff of life.”

Du laughed aloud at that last, visibly relaxing as we drew closer to the circle.

It looked empty but I was quickly learning that appearances meant nothing, especially on this side of the veil.

“Jackie is doing well, by-the-bye,” Jack’s low voice rumbled near my ear. “I know you’ve been concerned. She is not awake yet but she lives on. She does not hunger or thirst or need for any physical comfort. She simply lives.”

“Green man,” the words sprang to my lips unbidden as we reached the outer edge of the circle, tall gray stones that looked to be the same material as the Runes in my aching hand. “You’re a green man . . .”

“*The Green Man*,” Du said quietly, his gaze intent on my face. The sun was quickly slipping below the horizon, the sky fading from livid red-orange to a subdued, seductive purple and blue, making his eyes glow in an otherworldly way, making my skin crawl with otherness.

“Of course,” I sighed. “You’d have to be, wouldn’t you?”

Jack's brows arched and his lips quirked into a moue of mild displeasure. "I was rather hoping for a different reaction, but I suppose that's what it boils down to, yes."

I nodded, slipping my arm from his and pushing my lank, dirty hair back out of my eyes. "I'm confused, tired, hot, sweaty, hungry, and angry, in no particular order. At the moment, you could tell me that you're Santa Claus and break into the cha-cha for all I care. No disrespect intended." I offered them a semblance of a smile, which came out as more of a grimace, and I turned and trod heavily between the stone guardians of the circle.

Light exploded around me, sound swallowing me in a tidal whoosh as I crossed the threshold, the enormity of the Unseelie Court swamping me and freezing me in place. My vision cleared in seconds, only to be filled with a myriad of colorful, dancing lights that resolved into pixies, their angular faces pinched in concern and anger and general pixie attitude problems, their miniscule hands reaching for my hair, my clothes, swarming me like so many butterflies. Voices, some sweet and silvery and others rough and dark, covered me in swaths of questions and comments, all seeking my response. I opened my mouth, my vision adjusting to the brightness, the jeweled glow that was the Unseelie Court, and everything faded to black.



"I tried to stop her but she went ahead."

"She's weak and exhausted," a familiar voice replied. "How could she outpace you, Du?"

"Don't take your anger out on me, Cadfael," Du replied tartly. I felt them both leaning over me. I heard a faint chuckle at my feet and knew that Jack had joined them. "She takes big steps."

“Alfhild,” Cadfael murmured, his fingers touching my face. I felt the blood rise to my cheeks and wondered if I was blushing as badly as I thought. “Alfhild, open your eyes. You’re in my chambers.”

I exhaled slowly, fighting the now-familiar nausea rising in my belly. The room was dim save for a few candles winking and flickering just out of my line of vision, casting a bronze-gold shimmer over the room. What I could see was dark wood and thick textiles, the bed beneath me soft but firm. Cadfael’s eyes shifted kaleidoscopically as he found my gaze and held it, shifting from burnished vermeil to emerald green.

“I need to get up,” I stated flatly, hating being prone and seemingly helpless. I tossed the covers aside and swung my legs over the edge of the bed before I noticed something that made me freeze in place. “I’m naked.”

A sharp bark of laughter rose from the shadows where Jack lurked.

“How astute,” Cadfael remarked dryly. I was faintly aware of Du and Jack withdrawing but I did not break my alleged intended’s gaze to find out for sure. “The pixies undressed you, if that helps to alleviate the concern that’s marring your lovely brow.”

“I wasn’t concerned,” I sniffed. “We’re both adults. We’ve seen nudity before.” My thoughts were reeling a mile a minute, wondering when the last time I’d shaved anything was, how filthy was I, and oh my god had he seen the birthmark on my ass? “How long . . .”

“Not very,” he assured me before I could even finish my question. “You stepped in, looked around, and hit the ground before anyone could catch you. Rose is furious,” he added, raising an auburn brow. “She blames herself. She’s been regaling the pixies with her complaints since the second you touched the floor.” His lips twitched as he attempted to suppress a smile. “She’s quite the . . . what is the phrase? Dramatics queen?”

“Drama queen, and knowing her, I’d believe it.” I felt strange, not in a bad way, but like the light that had been simmering in me since my arrival in the court back in the beginning was boiling to the surface, mixing with

my blood and suffusing me with something wonderful. The glow dancing on my skin deepened rather than brightened, spilling over my limbs and shining thinly from beneath the coverlet I now clutched around my torso. “I think I’ll be okay,” I murmured, not realizing that I was speaking aloud until I heard my voice. “Where’s Hywel?”

“He’s at my mother’s side,” Cadfael replied slowly, his gaze searing down my bare arm, skipping to the outline of my leg visible under the thin fabric covering my legs. “She insisted he remain . . .”

“He’s not . . .” My throat was so dry that I was having difficulty forming words. “He’s not, ah, usurping you, is he?”

“Hywel?” he snorted, his expression amused and annoyed at the same time. “Hardly. She just feels bare without someone at her side to answer her beck and call.”

His words had a feeling of truth to them but there was something off, something he wasn’t admitting.

He didn’t give me time to ask, though, before he added, “Your Runes are safe as well. They’re in here.” He reached across me, not touching me but coming awfully close, and picked up a small, jeweled box resting on the mattress. I started for them eagerly, my hands stretching out before I recalled my state of undressed and snatched the coverlet up before it fell away from my chest. “You just have to ask,” he said in response to my guttural sound of annoyance.

“I didn’t want to have to,” I replied, taking the small box from his hands. “Did . . . did Du tell you about my hallucination?”

“Which one?”

“The one about the Runes,” I snapped, not pleased in the least by his dry, bored tone. “What I saw . . .”

“Yes,” he replied, his tone not inviting further discussion. “They’re safe in the box for now. We will discuss them later.” He pulled away, shifting so

that the mattress gave under his weight, making me roll slightly towards him even as he rose. “I have had a bath drawn for you and it is waiting.”

I wavered, wanting to continue our burgeoning argument but the idea of a bath alluring, its siren call all but impossible to resist. “Okay.”

Cadfael pointedly turned his back as I slid from the bed, clutching the coverlet around me like a shield. He gestured for me to follow him and led me to an ornately carved wooden screen. “Um, I’ll be out in a bit,” I muttered, edging past him and ducking behind the screen. I had shed the bedding and was sliding down into the deep, wooden tub full of scented water that was just this side of scalding when a shadow fell across me, blocking out the candlelight. “Hey!”

“The pixies are too wrought in Rose’s tale of woe to help this evening,” he explained patiently, though his eyes danced with something akin to amusement. “It is dark enough in here to disguise your bare form, Alfild. I’ll play lady’s maid for you this time and give you an opportunity to ask me the questions you so need answered.”

He didn’t hesitate as he picked up the soft cloth and bar of rough hewn soap resting on the edge of the tub and dipped both into the water near my knee. I stared, unable to form words, as embarrassment, lust and pleasure warred in my breast. Finally, I sighed and leaned forward against my bent knees, offering my bare back. I shivered involuntarily as the soft, now soapy, cloth skimmed my back in one long, slow stroke from the base of my neck to the curve of my hip.

“Ask me,” he murmured after a moment.

I jumped. His low chuckle made the blush staining my cheeks spread down my neck and breasts.

“What is it that you do not understand, Alfild?”

I sighed, closing my eyes as the cloth made another pass down my back, a languorous slide made heavy by the weight of Cadfael’s palm. He was kneeling by the tub, his fine sleeves rolled to his elbows and the ornate

waistcoat discarded on the wooden stool next to the screen. He wasn't watching my face but rather the path of the cloth as he dragged it back up my spine to the damp curls on my neck, his eyes fairly golden as the soapy water made its way across my skin.

"Why did Iseult let us come back to the Court? I thought she was dead set against it . . ."

"That is . . . complex." He paused for one long moment, the silence nearly palpable, before he continued. "This war between the Seelie and Unseelie is eons old. Your presence here is the product of generations of waiting, needing, wanting . . ."

Was it my imagination, or was his voice thickening?

"You may deny your heritage but it is plain to all who see you, plain amongst the Sidhe. Gulliver has spent his life aware of this, aware of you, waiting for the time . . ."

He sighed and dipped the cloth back into the bathwater again, swirling it idly as if it were the most commonplace thing for him to do, bathe a woman who had just been through hell and back.

"Your birth was an impossible thing, coming to a woman thought too old to bear a child and a husband who was told he could never again be a father. You were born when it snowed in the swamp, snowed seven times in one day."

"I know the story," I murmured. "I've heard it my whole life . . . miracle baby, yadda, yadda, yadda, freak weather, global warming, blah, blah, blah . . ."

Cadfael fell silent for a long moment before draping the cloth over my shoulder and skimming it down my exposed arm. "You are the most impatient creature."

"I'm . . ." He silenced me with a hard look. "Being quiet now sorry . . ."

"The decision to keep you oblivious to your heritage was made before you were born. Your mother knew of the past but I do not think she was

entirely aware of the implications . . . she thought her blood too diluted to be of much influence to your path. The prophecies, to her, were just old stories, dusty and nearly forgotten.”

The cloth made another path down my arm, passing perilously close to my breast. I hated the blush I felt creeping up my cheeks but Cadfael didn’t remark on the sudden crimson stain, so I did my best to pretend I wasn’t suddenly hyperaware of his presence, of just what he was doing to me.

“This war that is beginning, this is the last.”

“How can you be sure?” My voice was scarcely above a whisper. He was barely making an effort with the cloth now, trailing the soft, wet ends over my arms, down my spine, across my knees. Watching my face but rather the path of the cloth, his lips parted just slightly. I felt my heart thud heavily in my chest and a soft dizziness swept over me. It’s hunger, I told myself firmly. I’m just starving myself to death . . .

“I’m sure. I’m older than you can realize, Alfild. I have seen you in the past; I know you are the future.” He stopped the cloth on my knee, his shifting eyes finding mine, and pinning me with his gaze. “You are part of me, in this life and the last. You remember the painted man, the Runes . . . you are of the Tuatha di Danaan . . . maybe you should stop fighting us and give in to what you know is true . . .”

I turned my face towards him, ready to snap, but the breath left my lungs as I realized just how close we were. I could feel his breath on my skin, the soft rush of it against my cheeks and lips, as he bent over me. Everything in the Universe condensed to one point, burning deep in my chest. I couldn’t breathe and didn’t want to, the pain exquisitely sweet as it blossomed from the pinpoint into a wave of heat and need.

“I have no idea what I’m feeling,” I finally murmured. “I just . . . I don’t think that I want it to stop.”

“You barely know me,” he said softly, a faint smile tugging at the corners of his lips. “It’s the Sidhe blood in you talking. Calling out to me from deep in your soul . . .”

“Sidhe have a concept of soul?” I asked, inching infinitesimally closer, my eyelids heavy and legs sliding out, sloshing water from the tub onto the wooden floor.

“Where do you think the humans got it from?” His voice held the trace of a growl, his eyes half-closed as he sat perfectly still, letting me do the moving, the wanting. “It is no fault of my own, though, is it? I tried . . .”

“You did,” I agreed, my fingers moving to curl on the rim of the tub, the wave of sweet need swamping me, making my stomach tremble with something I had never felt before. “My fault entirely . . .”

“Indeed,” he replied, his voice barely a whisper, just a breath against my cheek as I leaned closer still. “I wonder if you’re truly in your right mind . . .”

“I’ve been wondering that since I first met you,” I sighed, closing the distance on a faint, nervous giggle.

He didn’t respond at first, letting my lips press against his firmly, almost aggressively, but before I could decide that this was a bad idea, that I had just made a tremendous ass of myself, before I could pull away, he parted his lips against mine and the very tip of his tongue darted out, seeking entry. I closed my eyes, squashing out Sensible Alfild, the voice that squawked about reality, logic, safety. Pain fled, worry fled, all but the moment fled my thoughts, the only thing remaining the feeling of the embrace, the cloth sliding down my leg as Cadfael dropped it, the pull of his fingers in my tangled hair as he tilted my head back, arching my throat and pressing me against the edge of the tub. The bite of the hard wood was negligible compared to the heat following his fingers skating over my exposed breast, teasing my peaked nipple to full hardness.

I started to break the kiss but he steadfastly refused to let me, his fingers splaying across the back of my head, holding me tightly to him; so wrapped up in the kiss was I that I barely noticed him sliding his free hand under my still-bent knees and lifting me from the tub, until the cold air of the room hit my wet, bare skin.

“Cadfael,” I managed, turning my face away just enough to speak. “I’m naked . . .”

“That’s usually best for what I have in mind,” he replied with no small amount of amusement in his tone. My head swam as he carried me past the wooden screen and into the nearly dark room. The candles had burned down too, and most were mere smoldering lumps of wick and wax puddles as he settled me on the bed, leaning over me as if he were waiting for something, some sign. “Alfhild . . .”

“Yes,” I heard myself whisper, my voice at once my own and not. I felt glorious, beautiful and warm and thick and light . . . so many things all at once that I couldn’t name them all even if I wanted to give them definitions. I reached for him, my fingers snagging in the fine fabric of his shirt, pulling him down until his weight was against me. Something had broken in me, some guardian was down, missing, letting my desires run free. The careful denial, the anger and pain of the past was gone, buried under whatever this new sensation was, this new way of being.

I fumbled at buttons made of small, pearly stones as he laughed softly, his larger hands stilling mine. Heat overtook me, making me nearly insensible as I fought to unbutton his trousers, to make him bare as I was bare. I found my wrists pinned over my head in one of his hands as his free hand worked the fastenings of his clothing free.

Cadfael’s lips moved in silent words, but I felt the pull of the spell from deep within, reaching the pinpoint of pain that had begun in the tub, twisting it until it followed the waves of heat and need. I was awash in living emotion, wreathed in tendrils of light so real that I could almost see

them, feel them as they moved across my skin. I realized, belatedly, that it was Cadfael, that it was his presence—, his being—, that was sending these frissons of pained pleasure along my limbs, making me lose all will to move. I felt a sudden twist of vertigo, saw myself as if from above and I wondered crazily if I had died, if this was all some fevered misfiring of synapses as I lay bleeding or ill somewhere, alone and desperate for touch, for love, for one last chance to feel something I had never had in life.

My thoughts took a turn for the primal as Cadfael closed his mouth over my nipple, drawing hard enough to verge on pain but not enough to make me cry out. He murmured against me and my eyes flew open but, instead of seeing him, his room, the place I knew myself to be, I saw a dark green canopy of fir branches, blue sky peeking between the needles. The smell of dry grass and sun-warmed earth filled my nose and mouth and I felt myself melting, sinking into the soil beneath me, a lover's embrace taking me down, down . . .

"I know what I'm asking," I heard my self say on a breath that shook more than not. "I know what this is going to do to me."

"Give over to it," Cadfael murmured, his fingers on my thighs as he lowered his mouth to the most secret part of me, my back arching in the present even as my eyes saw a time long past, lost to human memory.



CHAPTER THREE



OPENED MY EYES TO FIND CADFAEL staring down at me. I didn't play coy, didn't pretend to be unaware of what had transpired. I rolled onto my elbow and reached out, tugging a long auburn lock with a flick of my wrist. "That was . . ."

"Yes?"

"Don't sound so smug," I sighed, rolling my eyes. "I thought it was just human men who got the 'Me Big Man. You Frail Woman. We Make Beast With Two Backs!' vibe going after sex." I flopped onto my back and stared at the dark ceiling. "I saw it all, Cadfael . . . I saw the wars, I saw myself . . ." I frowned. "Why aren't I freaking out about this?"

"The longer you are among the Sidhe, even without taking our food or drink, the more like us you become. There are many among us who began life as faerie-led, to use one of your quaint human terms." His long fingers tangled once more in my hair, his thumb brushing against my neck as he traced a curl, twisting it around his hand. "You are accepting this," he murmured sleepily. "I told Lorelei you would."

"Did no former lover ever mention to you that talking about previous girlfriends is a big turn off in bed?" I was surprised at the pang of jealousy I'd felt.

Cadfael paused, his expression shuttering as he looked down at our entangled legs. "Lorelei is not my lover now or ever. Despite what she may wish or claim."



He tugged the curl in his hand again and leaned in close. "I am old, Alfhild. I am old but I am careful."

Something in his tone made me grow still. "If you expect me to believe all of this," I said firmly, "you can't lie to me."

"I haven't lied to you," he said flatly, his eyes now a bronze-copper color, pupils barely visible. "Others might have, but I have not."

"Somehow, I highly doubt that . . ." I felt lethargic but pleasant, my body wrung out and my heart still racing in my breast. "If you plan on an encore, you need to spill, Bub."

Cadfael's dark brows rose, his expression caught between surprise and confusion. "Pardon?"

I shifted, pushing myself up so that my face was even with his. "I just had sex so good that I had visions. And, unless I'm sorely mistaken, you had a profound religious experience yourself! If you want that to happen again any time in the near future, you need to tell me whatever the hell it is you're not telling me." I paused before adding "Not telling me is a lie of omission."

He snorted. Inelegantly. "By whose standards?"

"Cadfael . . ." The visions had spilled into me and filled in so many missing gaps, stories unfolding like paper snowflakes, overlapping and shading one another so quickly that I was breathless. All of them had shown me the same thing: me, by his side. And I had no fight left. I had no desire to break away anymore. I felt like a new person, a new creature. I wanted to tell him as much, to express this horrible and wonderful new knowledge, but the words froze on my tongue. Instead, I fixed him with a hard glare and waited.

He sighed and rolled away from me, keeping his hand tangled in my hair as if it were a lifeline. "In all my centuries, I have never coupled with a female."

The absurd urge to laugh struck me like a truck rolling down hill with no brakes. “Huh?”

“I have never joined!” he snapped, waving the hand tangled in my hair, making me wince with the motion. “To join is to create a bond with the other and I did not want to deal with the repercussions of that when you, ah . . .”

“Showed up?” I asked, unable to stop the giggle that escaped my throat. “I’m sorry, it’s not funny . . .” Though it sort of was. “That kind of explains the tense, stick up the ass thing though!”

“*Alfhild!*”

I gently disentangled myself from his grasp and sat up, deciding not to try and keep the damp, bunched cover over my nudity. He’d already seen everything anyway, I told myself, a new blush creeping over my features as my body leapt to awareness at the memory. “You expect me to believe that you’ve never had sex, never fooled around, in your entire existence? Just waiting for me?” I blew out a rough breath and shook my head, uncertain of how to feel, flattered, freaked out or pleased. “I’m glad that you didn’t tell me that beforehand. That’s a lot of pressure.”

“I’ve, as you put it, fooled around,” he began, sitting up, his long hair a delectable mess as he glowered down at me, and then he paused. “That is hardly the point of matters. This,” he gestured between us, his gaze sweeping once more down my nude form and lighting ever so slightly at what he saw, sending thrills of pleasure to my very core, “is our union. Ceremony aside, you’re my mate now.”

“Slow down, Tarzan. And don’t give me that look. I’m not saying this isn’t something big. I’m just saying we need a few ground rules. I accept my role here, accept that I’m now involved in this, whether I like it or not. What I need to have from you is the assurance that this . . .war . . .is what it seems.”

“Pardon?”

“I’m not a pawn. I refuse to be anyone’s weapon or toy.”

“Understood.”

The relief I felt at that one word was palpable. “And there’s other stuff . . .”

“Mmmm?” He smiled anew, the expression reaching his eyes then.

“Stuff I’ll tell you as I figure it out,” I admitted, sliding from the bed. “Where are my clothes? I can’t go out naked . . .”

“Don’t bet on it,” he muttered, handing me a long, light green shift. “There’s a kirtle for you on the trunk as well as the proper accoutrements.” He rose from the bed, at ease in his nudity, and padded to the wooden screen, disappearing behind it as if this were an every day occurrence to have me in his room, in his bed, which it had been, but not—not like this.

The accoutrements, as Cadfael had called them, amounted to an intricate, black snood studded with dark black and green beading, a silver ring inscribed with Runic lettering and a bronze one that seemed to be shaped into antlers, and a dark, silky kirtle trimmed in jet beads and large, dark emeralds. A pair of slippers completed the kit, dark black material laced with green ribbons.

“I’m sensing a theme here,” I muttered, dropping the sheet before sliding the shift over my head. A corset sort of device lay beneath the garments, designed to give under bust support. “I guess even in faerie tale land, boobs sag.”

“What?”

“Nothing,” I called back to Cadfael, dressing as quickly as I could. “Jackie would get a kick out of this,” I said aloud. “She’s got a PhD in medieval history . . .” My words died as he stepped around the screen and I saw his own costume. Black, unrelieved black, making his auburn hair look practically flame-red. Even from across the room, I could see the shifting colors of his eyes and felt them burning into me, making me feel naked anew. “*Wuff.*”

“Dare I presume this is a good thing?” he asked a tad cautiously, glancing at his own wardrobe before perusing mine once more. “If so, wuff to you, too.”

“Seriously, don’t bend over in those pants . . . something might give. Are you sure those aren’t painted on?”

He had the good grace to look embarrassed as he strode towards me, shaking his head at my fascination with the skin-tight trousers and grabbed my elbow in passing.

“What are we all geared up for anyway?” I asked, forcing myself to meet his eyes instead of wonder how I had let his ass go unnoticed for this long. “Will there be something to drink? Why am I all tingly?”

Cadfael looked at me sidelong. “A feast, yes and your magic has increased.”

“For what? What? And huh?” I was doing my best, really. It was impossible to deny the facts before me, despite that they did not jibe with almost three decades of previous reality, but it was still a bit unsettling to think of my life now in terms of magic and Sidhe and legends.

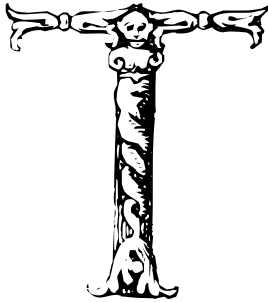
“The feast is for the heads of all of the clans and their families, the ones who swore fealty to you, remember? And likely wine, mead, water, various juices and ale. And we have joined now, Alfild . . . both of our . . . our . . .” He blinked, stuck for a word that I would understand.

“Energies? Essences? Cooties?”

“*Energies*,” he selected, brows snapping together in something akin to annoyance. “Our energies have joined. We are two halves of the whole. We are only now at our full strength.”

“Fantastic,” I sighed. “I’m a rechargeable battery . . .”

CHAPTER FOUR



THE GREAT HALL LOOKED MUCH different from the last time I had seen it; wide swaths of vermeil-colored fabric hung from the ceiling and festooned the walls. The table was covered in a cloth of deepest amethyst, matching Mabd's eyes and gown.

The table stretched from one end of the great hall to the other with several smaller tables set off to the side. I wondered if they were for food or to accommodate guests but didn't have time to ask Cadfael before Mabd swept down on us. "Thank the gods! You are finally done swivving the girl and we can begin."

"Mother," he ground out from between clenched teeth, his fingers tightening on my arm to the point of pain, "I will thank you to mind your tongue. We're in company."

"Swivving," she said flatly, "is hardly the worst of what I am going to say this evening. We have just this small grace period before the worst begins, Cadfael. We have business to attend before the end of this feast and you will do well to remember that." She glanced at me and made a moue of displeasure. "The gown works. Green was a good choice."

"I thought so, too," Jack's voice boomed from across the hall.



He was surrounded by females my mind instantly called nymphs—clad in little else than their hair and a swath of diaphanous fabric, they clung to his arms and smiled sweetly at us while he took a deep drink of the horn that now hung from his neck. “Green always looks good on a woman.”

“Mind your manners, Jack,” Mabd said, her voice carrying the length and breadth of the hall. “Your wife will have naught to do with you if she hears such things.”

“My mate is not of a mind to care,” he said, smiling at the nymphs and dismissing them wordlessly. He walked towards us, seemingly at a sedate pace but suddenly at our side, his heavy robe quite a change from the garb of our first meeting. “Alfhild, you look lovely this evening,” he murmured, bowing over my hand and brushing a kiss across my knuckles. “Cadfael, you do have the luck of the gods. No offense intended,” he added as an aside to me.

“You know as well as I that luck had nothing to do with it,” Cadfael rejoined, his fingers relaxing their grip on my arm but pulling me closer all the same, a definite proprietary gesture that I was in no mood to fight. “Alfhild, I presume you have met Jack . . .”

“She surely did,” Jack said before I could answer. “I met Du and your lady as they came to the green. The Sluagh obviously had only half a mind to have let them out there.” His eyes glittered with something dangerous and for a moment, the space between seconds, his smile fell and became a mask of anger. Before I could so much as catch my breath, he was smiling again, bidding us a good feast and turning, sweeping away in his heavy robes made of leaves, shouting a greeting to someone else.

“He’s . . . jovial.”

Mabd shot me a look. “He can be. It is nearly time for the hunt, so he is in high spirits.” Her eyes continued scanning the room as if she were looking for someone, anyone, else to talk to other than us. “The feast begins in a few moments. Take your places.”

Cadfael nodded curtly and led me to the head of the table. “You will sit on Mabd’s left, I on her right. Alfild . . .”

I laid my fingers over his and nodded. “I know. I have to do it.” I pulled away and took my place to the left of Mabd’s ornate chair. I felt him hovering behind me, wanting to say something, but he simply walked around the head of the table and took up his station across from me. I did not meet his intense gaze as the massive doors swung open at the end of the hall and a cloud of pixies streamed through the entrance, their high pitched chatter ceasing as they reached the middle of the room and got a good look at the hall proper. Heavy footsteps and rustling clothing were the only sounds as the huge room filled with creatures of every description imaginable. The same faces I had seen swearing fealty to me eons ago were made even more surreal and beautiful by their finery, and by the looks of grim determination on their features as they filed in and took places around the long table.

Pixies settled around the throne, wreathing Mabd in a myriad of colored, softly shimmering lights. Wraith-like beings, pale and thin, and nearly translucent, filled the spaces around the smaller tables set to the sides as Lorelei led in Skadi, minus the other two queens.

I felt a tremor of anticipation and finally met Cadfael’s gaze. The silence was so thick that I could almost touch it, weighing me down, pressing on my shoulders, my belly, so that I could not breathe. Now, I thought. This was it. No turning back, no changing my mind after the fact.

Mabd did not move, watching as the last seats were taken, as Skadi took a post by the door and Lorelei slid into a seat next to the dark, dripping Jenny Greenteeth at the far end of the table. Wordlessly, the Queen of the Unseelie Horde took up her silver chalice, rimmed as it was in deep amethyst stones, and held it aloft.

Cadfael raised his own bronze cup high, his gaze boring into mine. I was dizzy, breathless, raising the dark, brushed silver cup before me into

the air, the faint tremble of my hand making a bit of the red liquid within slosh onto my fingers and drip down my wrist into the dark fabric of the kirtle. Mabd shifted then, turned to look at me as she lowered her ornate chalice. I nodded, a small and barely felt movement, and brought my cup to my lips. *Now, now, now . . .*

The nearly deafening roar of approval from the gathered creatures made me choke on the first swallow, sweet red wine catching in my throat. I didn't feel different but I knew it had happened, I was bound and tied, never to set foot among humans again, never to be with Jackie again, *never, never, never.*

The feast spun around me, food put on my plate and in my hand, and once in my mouth by an over enthusiastic goblin. I tasted it all but remembered none of it, waiting for the grief I fully expected to overwhelm me to begin. It never did. Instead, I became full quickly and drunk even more quickly, the wine and ale and mead flowing freely into my cup.

Cadfael shouted something to me over the din of the feast but I couldn't hear him. Even Mabd smiled at me, which should have made me nervous but did not. The taste of the wine was still on my tongue, despite everything else, and it seemed to seep into my every pore, fill my blood and mind. *Maybe this was being faerie-led,* I thought. Maybe it was a sweet insanity, something that you could experience and never miss reality.

It was the renewed silence that finally broke my reverie. I looked up to see Mabd staring back at me, her expression relaxed but serious. "You envisioned this day," she said quietly, though her voice carried across the hall again. "When you first came to us, you saw yourself here, saw this happening. What else must be done to convince you of the truth of matters?"

"Nothing," I whispered, unable to raise my voice. "Nothing at all. I've seen the past, the painted men and the river folk. I've seen the old woman

and the Runes. I feel something greater moving inside me and it's like I'm on the edge of a cliff, waiting to fly." I blinked, uncertain where those words had come from but knowing they were my own, my truest thoughts.

Mabd's hiss of relief was clearly audible. "Thank the gods. We have wasted enough time . . ." She paused at the discreet cough from her son. "The clans have sworn fealty to you, Alfild."

"And I accepted."

Skadi was fixing me with an intense look and I was unable to look away from the snow queen, from her ice-blue gaze and pale, silvery hair. She did not look displeased, but rather intent on what I was saying, her lavender-hued lips parted as I spoke.

"I accept the allegiance of each clan present, and will honor their fealty with my strength and determination." Something twisted inside me, something like coming home, and I sat back, unable to muster any more words.

The murmurs around me grew to a fever pitch and Mabd stood once more, silencing the crowd with a wave of her fine-boned hand.

"The war between the factions has come to be. The rumors of civil strife among the lands of the Sidhe have become fact. The courts are no longer warring strictly amongst themselves." She paused, her gaze sweeping over each face in the hall. "All our lands are subject to destruction. The Seelie Court craves power, control over the Unseelie realm, and the only sure way is to destroy us all."

Her gaze came to rest on me, her voice low and soft as she continued. "The prophecies as we know them have been fulfilled. Legend has become reality. Alfild of the Seven Snows, Alfild the Seven-Born, has come to us and has joined with my son. Cadfael, Champion of the Horde, will lead the forces to battle in the morning. Tonight, we feast for the dead, those who have preceded us and those yet to come.

“Tomorrow, we meet the Seelie on Sarum Plain. The last circle still stands. The guardian of this that place is immortal and cannot be destroyed by Gulliver or the Seelie Court. This is our secret, our stronghold, and our salvation.”

She broke her gaze from mine and smiled thinly. “Tonight, feast. Tomorrow, we fight.” She sat heavily, her expression suddenly very tired. I felt ill, the knowledge of what was to come hitting me like a fist to the gut.

“Mabd,” I said as quietly as I could and still be heard over the din of the feast, “Mabd, what’s going to happen?”

“We meet them at dawn, as per tradition,” she murmured, toying with the rim of her chalice. “We are nothing if not formal.”

“Just the armies?”

“For now. We are proper but not ignorant. If laying waste to the villages aligned with the Seelie will bring us an advantage, we will do so.”

A new voice joined the conversation, whispering almost in my ear. “Alfhild, you are not to be among the fighters. Your role is here, with Mabd.”

Hywel smiled at me as I shifted to face him. He looked pale and tired but otherwise all right. “I apologize for my absence,” he added before I could ask where he had been. “I was detained performing some duties for the court.”

“Hywel,” Du said suddenly, appearing on my left. “Might I see you for a moment?” He smiled at me apologetically. “I’m afraid that, despite the feast, there is still work to do.”

I nodded, unaccustomed to the feeling of being deferred to in any sort of social matter. “That’s . . . fine. I’m feeling a bit off kilter myself.” I pushed myself away from the table and rose woozily to my feet, frowning as I seemed to be unable to control my knees. “I’m going to return to, er, some room, somewhere . . .”

I paused and realized that most of the room was standing, chairs scraping on the stone floor as everyone rose to their feet. Cadfael was at my elbow before I could look to him.

“Um . . .”

“If you will excuse us,” he said in a conversational tone, taking my hand in his, “Alfhild is exhausted from her day.”

A few ribald remarks from the direction of the trolls made their way up the table but aside from a few polite titters, no one said a word as we swept from the room, my legs moving only because I was being pulled along. It was either walk or be dragged on my face; I chose the path of least mortification.

Cadfael walked quickly, so quickly that I almost had to run to keep up, my booze-soaked body barely able to walk a straight line much less jog. He frowned but didn’t slow down as he led me down a long, brightly lit corridor leading from the great hall. I didn’t recognize any of it as we turned first one corner, then another.

My life seemed to be made entirely of corners lately, I thought morosely as we finally drew to a halt before a heavy tapestry that seemed to depict some sort of argument between unicorns. “Are they moving?” I asked as Cadfael ran his fingers along the seam in the wall. “They look like they’re moving . . .”

“It gets boring, standing too still,” he muttered, a small ‘ha’ of smug pleasure escaping his lips as he found whatever it was he was looking for. “Here we go . . .”

A section of the wall swung open and he pushed me ahead of him into a large, airy room hung with pale blue and lavender swaths of fabric, incense smoke wreathing all with pale grey fingers. My eyes adjusted to the lower light as Cadfael shut the door behind us. “She’s behind the curtains,” he murmured, pushing me gently forward. I took a handful of steps, pushing the thin fabric to one side, before I saw her.

“Jackie!” I was on my knees at her bedside before her name had completely left my lips. She lay peacefully, too still for sleep, but breathing and obviously not dead. “Jackie, can you hear me?”

“She is in a state of . . . stasis, I suppose you could call it.” He knelt beside me, close enough that I could feel the heat of his body radiating through our clothing but not actually touching me. “It may help to speak to her, it may not.”

“When this is over, she’ll be released?”

Wordlessly, Cadfael nodded.

I reached out and stroked her fine hair, wishing that she hadn’t been brought into this. “I’m sorry,” I told her. “I hope you don’t remember any of this when you wake up. Hell, I hope it’s still close enough to the same day you fell asleep on when you wake up. Time moves differently here, Jackie. I hope . . .” I paused, uncertain what else to say. “You will be free.”

Cadfael laid a heavy hand on my shoulder and turned me to face the door. “Come, you need rest.”

“Not as badly as you; I’m not quite believing that tomorrow is a scheduled battle.” I let him lead me from the room and into the hall, the door sliding shut quietly in our wake.

“Tomorrow is a formality; battles have been taking place since before we were separated at the circle. Only one circle remains unharmed and that is this one,” he waved vaguely at the space around us and I was reminded just how I came to enter the court this time.

“Are the keepers . . . dead?”

“Mostly, yes. Some are simply . . . in transit.” He frowned in patent discomfort. “They were amongst the guests at the feasts,” he added after a brief hesitation.


I thought back on the faces I had seen and blinked in realization. “They were the ones who looked like ghosts?”

“Rather, yes.” He pulled me closer, stepping into a narrow alcove off the long corridor. “Alfhild, I know that this is somewhat confusing and I don’t blame you for your anger but . . .”

“Shhh,” I breathed, closing my eyes and leaning woozily against him. “If this is some weird fever dream, let me have it and enjoy it.”



CHAPTER FIVE

N THE DREAM, I WAS WALKING IN MY HOUSE in England, looking at all of the pictures on the wall, taking stock of my memories. Images like photographs dotted the walls, set in frames, hung from thumbtacks, and taped to surfaces. All the moments of my past filled the front hall and the living room. The further into the house I went, the older the pictures became, the more grainy they looked, the more dead were with me.

My grandmother and her sisters were in many of the ones in the narrow hall leading from the large living room, pale orbs like dust motes in sunlight caught in the images, dancing around us and frozen in time. I reached the end of the short hall and paused at the entrance to the ancient receiving room, a part of the house that predated even Henry VIII.

It was dark and something moved in there, something that swallowed any light spilling from the hallway and became darker than the surrounding shadows. I stood, frozen, as it moved closer, almost laughing with relief in my dream as it resolved itself into Mabd.

“It’s just you . . .”

“Even with your blood, you do not recognize simple magic when you are faced with it,” she smiled, her dark lips curling in her perfect face.



“Your memories are holding you back, aren’t they? Instead of pulling you forward, they restrain you. They are dead, Alfild,” she said cruelly, waving her hand at the pictures covering the rooms behind me. “They are gone from your plane and live on only in your mind, your heart.”

“I know.”

“No, you don’t. You are tied to the human realm even now, even after eating our food, drinking our drink,” she paused, a raven-black brow arching, “swivving my son.”

I felt the color flood my cheeks but I managed to keep myself quiet by chanting mentally: it’s just a dream, it’s just a dream, it’s just a dream.

Mabd’s expression settled into its usual lines of cool disdain as she stepped further back into the room. My feet ignored my mental protests and forced me to followed her.

The room was still dark as pitch but I could make out shapes, what I knew to be ancient and reproduction banners and suits of armor and weapons dotting the walls and guarding the perimeter.

“Warfare is different for the Sidhe, Alfild. It is mostly brute force, but there is quite a lot of magic as well. Cadfael informed me that Iseult gave you a year and a day to find a solution to Gulliver’s problem.”

“She said,” my voice suddenly deciding to work, “that Cadfael and I couldn’t return to the Court in that entire time . . .”

“You did not return to the Court.” She smiled thinly, looking as smug as she could and still retaining the air of elegance she wore like a second skin. “It came to you. Iseult has already tried to raise a ruckus about that, but it was a loophole she created and can not close now that we have pushed through.”

I laughed, unable to stop myself. “Fanfuckingtastic . . . Jesuit arguments in the Sidhe realm!”

I turned a slow circle, even in the dream my eyes adjusted to the dark slowly, but the shapes were clearer now, at once foreign and familiar.

“Look, I appreciate my subconscious doing this for me, trying to sort out a waking fear and all that fun junk, but I’d rather go back to the dream where I’m naked and being rubbed in oil by young, strapping pirates on a deserted beach.”

I gave her my back, striding down the hall into the living area, Mabd’s footsteps soft but audible behind me. She did not speak to me again but dogged my steps even as I closed my eyes and concentrated on changing the dreamscape, part of my mind wondering why it was so difficult to make it happen in this dream when it was so easy in others.

“Tomorrow you will return to Uffington,” Mabd informed me after a moment had passed, sounding amused. “Skadi will accompany you, Cadfael, Du, and Hywel to the chalk horse on our side of the veil. You must still discover the murderer of the keepers. The realms have been breached.

“This war is not solely between the Sidhe courts, Alfild. The humans are involved now as well. The keepers are gone from the human world. The realms have been breached. The veil has been breached by one who knows our ways. Soon, the worlds will bleed together and we will diminish.”

I opened my eyes and found her to be standing inordinately close. Even in the dream, I could smell the spicy-cool scent of her, like incense and snow under the full moon. Her eyes, so like her son’s but so foreign at the same time, were petaled amethyst that seemed to bloom to life as she peered at me, waiting.

“Mabd, or dream-Mabd, I’ve accepted that I’m here now. I’m coming to terms with the whole ‘descended from gods’ thing, I’m dealing with the pressure of somehow being the vital key to winning the war . . .” I paused, something Skadi had told me in Uffington worming its way to the surface. “You want the same thing Iseult does, though, don’t you? A child of the blood . . .”

Mabd nodded, unashamed. “Cadfael is my only offspring. Seeing the line continue would be . . . remarkable.” She quirked her lips in an oddly girlish smile. “Though I would be lying to say it is my only motivation.”

“I’m sure.”

“Cadfael is the last of the royal line, for both sides. Long ago, we were one Court. If a child is presented as the blood of the Seelie, they are victorious.”

“And if it’s Unseelie, y’all win.” The realization sat like a lump of ice in my belly. “So all of this war talk . . . it’s my uterus?”

Mabd snorted inelegantly, a sound worthy of Du at his most amused. “Your reproductive capabilities are but a small part. You are important, Alfild, but you are not *termina dea*.”

“Mother . . .” We both turned at Cadfael’s annoyed tone. He stood in the archway that led from the living room and into the entrance hall, his arms folded across his bare chest, the bronze torque around his throat gleaming in the flickering light of the dream-hearth. “I thought you promised me to leave her alone and let her sleep.”

“I promised to let her sleep,” Mabd sniffed. “And as you well know, she is.” They both fixed me with the same, assessing gaze. “Aren’t you?”

“I’m really not sure anymore,” I sighed, closing my eyes. “If I click my heels together three times, will you both go away?”

“No,” came the resounding reply, in stereo. Cadfael moved past me, his autumn-leaf scent teasing my senses to full alert. “Mother, it’s high time you returned to your cabinet meeting.”

“You have a cabinet?” Again, I was the subject of the twin appraising looks. “Like a real government?”

“Of course I do, child! What did you think happened? I wave a magic wand and it all . . .” She blinked, aghast. “You don’t honestly think I have a magic wand, do you?”

“Good night, Mother.” He turned his back to her and effectively blocked my view of the Unseelie Queen, his half-naked body filling my sight.

“Technically, you *are* asleep,” he said after a moment of silence. Everything went dark around us, the scene of my home fading, replaced instead by a soft blackness that covered everything in a velvety nightscape. Somewhere, I heard a sigh and realized belatedly that it was me, my own breath in my throat, a wistful sound born of confused longing. His hands came to rest on my hips, his expression shuttered, eyes careful as he pulled me closer. “All you have to do is say no.”

“But I don’t want to.” I paused, my lips inches from his. “Despite the potentially Freudian implications of this dream, I think I’m rather going to like this part of it.”

“It is no dream, Alfild.” His breath tickled the fine hair at my neck, his tongue darting out to tease the sensitive spot beneath my ear. I felt myself quicken and warm for him, my body singing with the memory of scant hours earlier.

My fingers tangled in his hair as his tongue and teeth drove all thoughts of such mundane matters from my mind. He pressed against me, forcing me gently to step back once, then twice, and on the third step bump into something soft and high. A bed, I realized, a low moan escaping my throat. *Good subconscious . . . niiiiiiiiiiiiice subconscious . . .* I fell back, pulling him with me, fumbling for the fastening on his trousers. “Damned dream pants,” I muttered, finally pulling away long enough to catch my breath. “You’d think they’d just, like, vanish or something . . .”

He chuckled, his fingers joining mine and making short work of what little clothing he was wearing before reaching for the thin, soft ribbon that tied the neck of my nightgown closed. “You still do not believe that this is not a dream? Not as you would know one, at any rate.”

He slipped the tie from the gown, his nimble fingers pushing the fabric aside, unfastening the tiny hook and eye closures as he exposed the swells and plains of my flesh to his gaze.

“No, it’s a dream.” I smiled confidently at him. “If it wasn’t, I’d be dying from embarrassment about now.” I arched my back, pushing my breasts up for his perusal. “And no way in hell would I be so wanton in real life.”

“This isn’t real life, Alfild,” he laughed against the rosy tip of my breast. “This is a faerie tale.”

I gasped at the sudden, sharp, wonderful bite of pain that blossomed under his touch as his teeth tugged on the sensitive flesh of my nipple, his tongue darting out to lave at the spot he had marked before he moved to the other breast, paying it equal attention.

“No, it’s most definitely a dream,” I said, though whether I was assuring him or me, I still don’t know. “If it wasn’t, I wouldn’t be doing this the night before all hell breaks loose.”

“What better time is there?” he asked against the slight curve of my belly, his tongue tracing intricate and lazy patterns as his hands slid down my sides, following the curve of my waist to my hips. “No harm will come to you, Alfild. I will not let you be hurt.”

“Too late,” I sighed, my legs wrapping around his lower back, heels digging into the hard muscles of his thighs. “If you don’t hurt, you don’t live.”

He looked up long enough to raise a brow at me. “I think I prefer you this way; you make far more sense.” He bit me, turning what I was about to say into a yelp of pleasure. “And you’re far more pliable.”

“Typical male,” I hissed, raising my head to bite his shoulder as he slid up my body, his arousal hot and hard against my belly, heavy as he moved against me. “Wanting a woman to be submissive . . .”

“You can be dominant next time,” he muttered against my neck, his sudden thrust into my body making us both gasp. I arched into him, my

body moving without thinking, my senses full of him, of us together as the blackness filled with images again, images of Gormlaith, of the old woman with the Runes, of a Lorelei—not the one that I knew, but one from long ago, her dress near rags as she sat on the rock, combing and crying, surrounded by bones and broken wood and strips of torn fabric that had been sails. Flashes of things I could not name, of people so clothed in golden light that I was nearly blinded just to look upon them fleetingly, images of time shifting so rapidly that I grew dizzy in seconds, an entire universe spinning before my eyes and I knew, deep in my heart of hearts I knew, that each image, each scene, was me, was something I had done in lives before, something I would do in lives to come.

Cadfael moved with in me and I felt the golden spirals of pleasure building low in my belly even as the images spun faster and faster, vision warring with need and want and desire.

He whispered to me in a language long unheard by human ears, my name mingling with imprecations and promises as old as time as I finally broke, tipping over the edge of the high cliff that I had been walking along for ages now, falling into an ocean deep and warm and all-encompassing. His harsh cry as he stiffened against me, his back bowing as I felt him fill me with his release, sent cool trills of awareness through my veins, mingling with the hot sparks of need that still coursed in my blood. I blinked as he shifted to lay by my side, not moving away from me but letting me breathe.

We were not in the velvet blackness of my dream but the dimly lit, masculine chamber that he called his own. Sweat dampened the sheet beneath me and I knew that I was well and truly awake, that this was not some remarkably vivid dream. I opened my mouth, closing it again with an audible snap as I realized that I was entirely at a loss for words.

“Dreams are another gateway to reality,” he said near my ear, his voice low and thick. Cadfael trailed his fingers down my arm, raising gooseflesh in his wake. “Are you angry, Alfhild?”

“No,” I replied slowly, realizing as I said it that it was true. “I’m not angry. Confused, tired, a little hungry, sore in a good way, but not angry.”

“It is nearly dawn.” He sounded relieved as he said it, grasping my hand and pulling it to his lips so he could kiss my knuckles. “It begins today.”

Silence fell between us for several long moments and I began to wonder if he had fallen asleep, keeping the pattern of males the universe over. Finally, just when my own eyes began to grow heavy, he shifted away, rolling from the bed to his feet in one graceful movement. “We leave for Uffington shortly. Jack and his mate have requested to join us. We are meeting two of his, ah, people there.”

“Jack has people?” I asked somewhat sleepily, struggling to stand and disentangle myself from the bedding at the same time. “Like other Green Men?”

“Yes, but not in this case. These are simply two friends of his whom he has asked to help us. They can move amongst the human world far easier than can we.” He paused and looked at me sharply. “You understand that—”

“Yes,” I cut him off, not wanting to talk about it. “That dead horse is well beat. Though I do have a quick question for you . . .” He tensed as if expecting something painful. “Where are my clothes?”

“Ah . . .” The relief in his voice would have been comical had I not been freezing my butt off in his cavernous room. “You will need far more serviceable garments for this trip, I fear.” His gaze swept over my naked form and I blushed from head to toe. “Despite how charming you are without clothing and how beautifully you were in that dress, you will need to dress for the elements. You may have become a member of the Horde

last eve but you have yet to achieve our impervious nature towards weather and such.”

He rummaged in the trunk at the foot of the bed and rose a moment or two later with a bundle of homespun, gray cloth. “Trews, shirt, vest, and stockings. Boots are under the bed on your side.”

“I have a side?” I asked, brows arching as I accepted the bundle. “Since when?”

“Since yesterday,” he answered with a smirk, heading for the now-familiar wooden screen. “Dress quickly and make your morning ablutions. We will eat as we ride.”

“Ride? What do you mean *ride*?”



CHAPTER SIX



TOP SCARING MY HORSE!”

Epona was not, I found, a very patient woman when it came to new riders. “It scared me first!”

“Stop squeezing with your thighs!”

Du shot Cadfael a glance at that, which was quashed with a significant look from my lover.

“I am *not* squeezing!” I shouted back. “It’s just being skittish!”

“Cadfael,” Epona snarled, “she must ride with you! I will not have her on my horse!”

Cadfael sighed. “Fine. We have wasted time enough as it is.” He strode to my side as I slid gracelessly off the back of the huge, black and white beast. It rolled one deceptively sweet brown eye at me before it turned its attention back to ravaging the grass at its feet. “Come on, Alfild. We don’t have all day!”

“Horses hate me,” I muttered, ignoring the snort from Du as I was led to the huge gray steed Cadfael had brought out from Epona’s stables. The russet-haired woman watched me with a gimlet eye as Cadfael hefted and pushed my clumsy body into the saddle. “They do!” I snapped at her unspoken remark. “Just ask them!”

“I have,” she muttered. “Trust me.”



Cadfael swung up into the saddle easily and settled behind me, his thighs on either side of mine as he pulled me flush against his chest. “Just relax, Alfhild. It’s easier on all of us, horse and riders alike, if you relax.”

Du trotted up beside us on a light pony, his ears twitching in amusement. “Jack and Morgan are on the way,” he remarked, still grinning even as he nodded towards the stables.

Jack was the first person I saw emerging from the dark entrance to the large stone barn-like structure, his cloak spread across the back of the horse as he trotted forth, the brown mare practically springing as she picked her way across the narrow strip of grass towards us. My breath caught in my throat at the sight, the realization finally hitting home of just who he was. Jack of the Green, embodiment of the Green Man, the Horned King, leader of the Wild Hunt . . . And he was telling Epona a joke so dirty that I blushed just thinking about it.

“Are you embarrassing the womenfolk?” A smooth contralto asked. All heads snapped left at the sound of her voice; a woman, face pale as the moon, smiled back at us. “This one looks fit to die of her blush.”

“Ah, my dear, she will learn,” Jack laughed, winking at the woman who must be Morgan.

He held out a hand and she moved to his side, sitting straight and elegantly on the back of the black horse that was so dark it seemed to absorb all light in its immediate vicinity. Morgan herself wore black from head to toe, save for a small silver clasp at her throat in the shape of a raven, its claws clutching her cloak closed.

“I trust you slept well?”

“You would know as well as I,” she murmured, her gaze fixing on my face and holding there, unwavering. “I should like to speak with Alfhild as we ride,” she announced. “Jack, you and Du ride ahead. Cadfael, remain silent.”

To my surprise, he nodded his agreement as we started out at a steady walk, Epona watching us go with a look of mixed worry and pride on her face.

“Epona worries overmuch,” Morgan said as soon as we cleared the pasture, her voice quiet but strong. “She always has, since the days before the divide between the Courts.”

“How long has that been?”

Morgan looked up as if the answer were written on the sky. “Ages,” she finally said. “Ages upon ages.”

I glanced ahead at Du and Jack who were telling stories now, their voices cheery but subdued. “I don’t remember any legend where Jack of the Green was married to the Morrigan,” I finally said, feeling Cadfael tense behind me.

Morgan laughed. “Not everything you read or hear is true,” she finally informed me lightly, her gaze shifting to the thickening woods around us. “We are being followed, Jack,” she called. “We’re being hunted.”

“Aye, I know,” he called back, “and poorly.” We drew to a halt, the trees thick enough to obscure movement in their shadows but not so thick as to impede the horses. “They will show themselves.” It was an order, not a simple comment.

“It’s only me,” Hywel’s voice came out of the trees. “I’m late.” He stumbled into our path, bits of leaves and sticks clinging to his hair and fine waist coat. “Tried to take a shortcut,” he mumbled, tugging the reins of a rather disgruntled looking mare behind him. “Epona told me that the trail would lead to the first clearing but I guess I misunderstood.”

Morgan glanced at Cadfael but did not remark. Jack and Du sat equally silent, expressions neutral, as Hywel shot us all an abashed smile. Finally, Cadfael spoke. “We have spent far too much time here. We need to reach Uffington as soon as possible. Gain your mount, Hywel.”

With a silent nod, the Sidhe swung up and onto the saddle, walking the horse up to join Jack and Du. Cadfael sighed behind me and muttered something under his breath before nudging the steed beneath us into a fast walk. Branches whipped by, the smell of late summer in the air as we crunched through dry grass and warm earth, the forest around us humming with quiet life.

Jack started singing some song he seemed to be making up as she went along and nobody silenced him. Hywel shot a few concerned looks over his shoulder at us but he did not remark on the ersatz privacy Morgan was demanding.

We rode through the first clearing and reached the second before the black-clad woman began speaking to me silently. *Alfhild . . .*

I stiffened. "Pardon?"

Cadfael patted my arm and brushed a kiss across the crown of my head. "No one said anything, dearest . . . You must be tired."

"I'm sure," Du remarked from up ahead, earning a hearty laugh from Jack and a vague snort from Hywel. Beside me, Morgan rode on, quiet and calm.

Alfhild, you are of the Tuatha di Danaan. You can hear me as easily as I can hear you. What are the Runes Iseult gave you? The ones Mabd told us about after the feast?

I blinked rapidly, uncertain what to make of this new development. "Cadfael, do you guys have an equivalent of a pharmacy here?"

"A . . . um, no, why do you ask? Are you ill?"

I shook my head, my fingers twisting into the horse's mane as I strove to regain mental equilibrium. "No . . . but I think I might need some medication soon."

Morgan's lips curved into a faint smile as Cadfael muttered under his breath and the horses trod onwards. *I could speak aloud if you would rather but I feel this is for the best. We are being stalked.*

Er, am I doing this right? Testing, testing . . .

Yes. I swear she sighed mentally. You are communicating with me. The Runes?

I thought hard on them, recalling their shapes and describing them to Morgan. *Uruz, Raidho, Hagallaz . . . But I think they looked a little upside down . . .*

Some were reversed. She nodded, obviously deep in thought. Morgan did not speak to me again as we rode on through the dense woods, the trail forcing us to ride single file.

Cadfael remained tense against my back, his breath hot and heavy on my neck as the woods grew still. Jack, at the head of our line, stopped as we reached a wide spot in the trail, his usually jovial expression replaced by one of intense concentration.

“What is it, love?” Morgan asked, but I had the feeling she already knew.

“Our hunter.” He nodded at Cadfael and smiled grimly. “He’s closer than we thought.”

“Hunter?” Hywel asked, his voice low and tense. “We’re being hunted?”

“Since we left the Keep,” Du shrugged, glancing around unworriedly. “No doubt one of Iseult’s peons, sent to see if they can trap Alfild.” The Cait Sidhe gave me a flirtatious smile before adding, “Alas, if only I knew how to trap the fair lady.”

“Don’t be weird!” I snapped, on edge.

Du snorted, but didn’t press the issue.

“Who’s hunting us?” I asked sotto voce, trying to remember every episode of every detective show I had ever seen, wondering how to lure our perp into the open. “Is it someone from the Seelie court?”

Cadfael sighed roughly and I could practically hear the annoyance in his breath. After a silent moment, he muttered, “Doubtful.”

“Then . . . *ow!*” His pinch to my side was anything but affectionate. “That’ll leave a bruise!”

“Good,” he bit out. “Silence.”

I bit my tongue—literally—and didn’t say another word as we sat on horseback, listening to the woods around us.

Finally, Morgan glanced at me and nodded slightly.

What? I mouthed back at her, earning a look of mild consternation.

She nodded again, more broadly, her eyes widening slightly.

I frowned. *Huh?*

Morgan sighed aloud and brushed her fingertips across her forehead as if chasing away an errant strand of hair.

“Oh,” I said before I could stop myself.

Cadfael pinched me again and I bit back a cry of pain.

Morgan averted her eyes and pretended to look at the forest around us but I knew now what she had been trying to do. *Morgan?*

I did not think you knew enough to shield yourself from my thoughts.

Me either . . . I had not been intentionally blocking her thoughts—I don’t think I could even begin to figure how to do that—but I seemed to be doing a lot of things recently that I had never expected to do before. *Do you know who is hunting us?*

No . . . She fell silent, a frown blooming on her red lips as she shot me a hard glare.

Morgan? Only silence met my questioning attempt at communication.

Cadfael leaned down to whisper in my ear then, startling me from my growing concern. “Hold tight to the mount, Alfild.”

“We’re not galloping, are we?” A new fear, a much more mundane one, wriggled its way to the surface of my awareness. “Why can’t we just walk quickly? Galloping is dangerous.”

“We’re not going to gallop,” Hywel said over whatever Cadfael had been about to say. “These aren’t just Epona’s charges . . . they’re Sidhe horses.”

“What does that mean?” I demanded, unsettled by his smug grin.

“It means hold on!” Cadfael’s arms tightened around me as we lunged forward. The world seemed to turn over and inside out for a moment, the trees and grass and earth rushing towards me before spinning away and falling, blue sky opening to swallow us whole as the horses leapt, muscles bunching and stretching, running hard without touching the ground, hooves beating the sky. I may have screamed—I know that I wanted to—but the wind rushing past, pushing at my face and chest, threatening to tear me from the back of the mount, ripped all sound away.

All I could hear was the sky, all I could feel was the power of the beast beneath me and Cadfael hot against my back. I tried closing my eyes but it was no good—I knew where we were, what we were doing.

It seems Sidhe horses rarely traveled on the ground. They preferred the sky, hooves striking thunder and lightening to life, tails drawing clouds across otherwise clear days and nights.

I dug my fingers into the soft mane of the horse and prayed to any god that would listen to spare my life and I would do anything they would ask of me, just so long as I could touch solid ground again and soon.

“You’re missing the best part,” Cadfael’s voice brushed my ear, his smile obvious in his words. “Open your eyes!”

“How can you sound so calm?”

“I’ve never fallen yet,” he laughed, squeezing his arms around me. “Look at the sky . . .”

I forced my eyes open and instantly felt dizzy at the sight before me. Endless horizon, colors I could never name, all open to me, all moving around me. *Mine*, a voice whispered in my mind. *This is mine. I am queen of this, I am part of this . . .* Before I realized what I was doing, I loosened one hand from the horse’s mane and reached out towards the swirling sky, spreading my fingers as if to drag them through the colors.

“I can feel them!” I gasped, air flooding my lungs as I rocked back against Cadfael’s chest, reveling in the sensation of cool, silky ribbons of dawn spreading over my hand, seeping into me. I did not see the others but I could hear them and feel them around me, laughing in pleasure at my amazement. It filled me, spilling out of me, and I felt bereft of the wonder as when the horses moved lower, their legs pumping against the ether as they raced towards the ground. I did not fear the descent as I had ascending; I mourned it. As the world settled itself, the earth once more beneath us and the sky impossibly out of reach, I bit back a sob and bowed over the horse’s neck, shuddering hard.

“Something in you remembers,” Morgan said as we slowed to a trot, the familiar plain of Uffington and the chalk horse surrounding us. “You’re no longer fighting the blood.”

“How many miles?” I asked, my voice shaking, far more quiet than I had intended it to be. “How many miles did we cover?”

“Three hundred,” Jack called. “Three hundred in a blink.” He grinned and sketched me a half-bow on horseback. “It’s my preferred method of travel.”

I raised a brow at him, feeling more alive than I had in months, since before I even had come to this odd world. “So I gather . . . “

“Time enough for levity later,” Hywel interjected. “We have contacts to meet, neh?” He tapped his heels against his horse’s sides and trotted ahead of us, moving towards the white outline of the meeting place.

“Which contacts would these be then?” Jack asked as we drew even with him. “Not those damned pixies again?”

“No,” Cadfael promised. “It’s not pixies.” He drew the horse to a halt and I heard the chuckle in his words as he reached past me to point. “It’s them.”



CHAPTER SEVEN



“N LHIANNAN SIDHE? FANTASTIC,”
Du groaned, closing his eyes and burying
his face in his hands. “Cadfael, you dolt.”

“I suppose you have a wealth of useful
contacts given the current political
climate?” Cadfael countered, sliding from
the horse’s back before reaching up to help me down.

Jack and Morgan were suspiciously quiet and Hywel was
busying himself with the saddle of his mount, shooting covert
glances at the approaching couple.

Pointing out the male half of the pair, Cadfael added
“Gwydion is one of the the only pure humans to be mated with a
Sidhe and never succumb to the madness.”

“I suppose it helps if you’re already mad,” the female half of
the couple said cheerily. She all but bounced to a halt before us,
her fingers interlaced with the tall, lanky young man beside her.
“You must be Alfild. I’m right, aren’t I? I know these things.”

“Isn’t that the same thing?” I asked, a bit off kilter under the
onslaught of happy. “Mad and insane?”

“Um . . . “

“Alfild Seven-Snows, this is Gwydion, the most powerful
mage I have ever heard tale tell of, and this,” Cadfael said with a
smile, reaching out to tug one brilliantly blue-black curl on her
head, “is Niamh.”



“Niamh the lhiannan Sidhe,” I reiterated slowly, my stare taking in the tremendous range of shades of blue that bedecked the smiling female, starting with her hair and ending at her slippers. Gwydion smirked, his subtle squeeze of her fingers catching my eye.

“Last fortnight, it was pink and red,” he told me as if imparting a great confidence.

Niamh stuck her tongue out at her mate before turning her attention back to Cadfael. “The last circle still stands?”

“Aye,” he nodded and the relief that swept over the couple was palpable. “Jack and Morgan have granted us the pleasure of their attendance this day for our working in the circle.”

Gwydion nodded. “We’d best be quick. The battle is not far from here. Red caps were sighted by mortals bare hours ago.” He glanced at me and offered a weak smile. “Not a sight for you, I fear.”

“I’ve seen them,” I replied absently, looking past him to Hywel, standing off to one side, by himself, inside the chalk outline of the horse. “Is he okay?” I asked, ignoring Gwydion’s start of surprise at my admission about the horrific border beasts.

Cadfael nodded tersely. “There is much at stake for Hywel. No matter which side wins, he has lost. He is of both courts by blood and he feels the pull. Iseult is calling her kin homeward, just as Mabd calls to us.”

I felt a pang of worry in my breast. “And you trust him?”

“I have to,” Cadfael murmured, brushing a quick kiss across my temple. “He is my bloodkin and he has made his choice.”

Morgan raised a brow. “Cadfael, you know as well as any of us that it is fluid . . .”

“He has made his choice,” Cadfael reiterated with a strident ring to his tone. “Jack, Du, come with me. We need to return to the circle down the hill before it is too late.”

Hywel’s head snapped up at that. “I’ll come with you.”

An uneasy silence fell over all of us before Cadfael nodded, once, and turned away, striding downhill towards the standing stones at the bottom of the hill, visible only in the Sidhe realm. Niamh and Gwydion followed, leaving me with Morgan, the two of us standing just inside the horse's outline. Our own mounts had wandered to nibble at some particularly succulent grass nearby, in no hurry to leave.

“So . . . telepathic?”

Morgan made a noise that might have been a laugh or she may have swallowed a pixie—I wasn't quite sure. “No, not as you think. I am, all of the Tuatha di Danaan, can speak to one another as I spoke to you, Alfchild. We are connected.” She paused and one of her raven-black brows rose. *We are the same, all of us.* “For millenia, you have been sought.” She closed the distance between us in a blink, her proximity at once unnerving and intriguing. I felt cold but not frozen as she peered closely at my face, looking for what, I did not know. Her eyes were like black pits, bottomless and encompassing. I felt like I was falling. “This war is but a small matter,” she said softly, her fingers coming up to cup my chin, tilt my face skyward as she sought an answer in my expressions, my very breathing and life. “I can feel it, starting and building, growing down in the valley, across the water . . . your Lorelei is a brave one, did you know?”

“Wh . . . what?” I felt a pull deep in my belly, a roiling need to strike, to feel blood on my hands and taste it on my tongue. I heard, as if from a great distance, battle erupting in screams and clashing metal, the screech of a bird over it all.

“I smell the blood too, Alfchild,” she whispered, her face shadowed, her eyes black but not empty. “I smell it on you . . .”

“I'm not responsible for their deaths,” I rasped, visions of mangled bodies, the Keepers, torn and broken, blood smearing the walls of their homes, of the circles themselves, bursting into bright relief against my

eyelids as I closed them, trying to block out Morgan's terrifying gaze. "Gulliver . . ."

"He is your blood as well as Iseult's," she hissed. No longer was she the beautifully dark woman, Jack's mate and mysterious goddess. She was fearsome, angry, strength personified. "I smell the strife in you," she added, her fingers moving to my throat, leaving a cool trail across my skin. "The blood of the Keepers stains you as well as he; the outcome of all of this," she paused, her hand dropping to press against my belly, "depends on you."

"I am not," I spat before I could stop myself, "a brood mare for you people!"

Morgan's eyes widened and a laugh rang across the valley, startling the horses. "No, you're nowhere near placid enough for that task, Alfild. You are, however, responsible. You have already taken steps to insure that Iseult's intent will be nigh impossible to accomplish. It is but a small matter to complete what you have begun."

"A small matter?" I asked, stepping back, out of her reach. "Like this war is a small matter?"

"Yes," she smiled, her teeth showing in an almost feral grin, "exactly like this war." Morgan turned and looked down the hill at the dark shapes moving amongst the stones of the circle. "Cadfael chose you well. He waited for you, knew that, out of all the possibilities presented to him, you were the truth. That is why he came to you at Beltane, breaking from the festival to find you."

"He crawled out of my rosebush naked as a baby," I said with no small amount of annoyance. "It's been pretty downhill from there."

"The runes," she said suddenly, her gaze snapping back to mine. "Do you have them?"

I nodded, feeling the small weight of them against my sternum in the cloth pouch Cadfael had insisted I carry for this journey. “Yes . . . they’re safe.”

“Show them to me.” She held out a long-fingered hand, heavy with silver rings set with dark stones, and fixed me with a steady look. She would wait all day if she had to, it seemed. Trying not to show hesitation, I pulled the pouch from beneath my shirt, tipping the stones into my hand and holding them out for her to see, not giving them to her as she obviously desired. Hissing a breath through her teeth, she peered at them. “*Uruz*,” she said after a long moment, her pale fingernail tracing the shape of the u-shaped one. “It is a male symbol. It is reversed however . . .”

She pushed my hand, making me turn it so that the runes were facing the opposite direction, her frown deepening. “It is reversed—it will not change. This is magically influenced.” She paused, a faint smirk lightening her features. “Moreso than usual.”

“What does that mean?”

“*Uruz*, reversed . . . it can mean many things. In this case,” she became quiet, poking at the rune as she stared at it intensely. “An opportunity you should seize, but will cause a profound change, one that will haunt you for the rest of your days.”

I swallowed hard, my throat suddenly dry. “Well . . . isn’t that fantastic . . .”

“*Raidho*,” she continued as if I had not spoken, “is movement. Leadership.” She flicked her gaze up met mine before focusing on the stone again. “Seize it. It is ritual, it is change, it is consequence . . . if you do not take charge, you will lose control of your fate. And this . . .” She plucked the last one from my palm before I could see what she was about. “This is *Hagalaz*.” She looked at me expectantly and I felt her mind brush mine, making me cringe with the newness and oddity of it.

“I don’t know what it means . . .”

“Most people consider it a bad thing, when Hagalaz shows up,” she said, a smile tugging her lips into a pleasant curve. “At first unpleasant but then for the best, the change this bodes is one that will be a shock, something sudden and sharp and unbalancing.” She placed it back in my hand and pushed my fingers closed, covering the Runes. “These belonged to you once before. The rest are lost to time, scattered amongst others. These are all that are important to you now, Alfild.”

“So Iseult’s big deal was giving me a free psychic reading?” I asked incredulously. “All that these tell me is that change is coming, to be in charge of my own destiny, and sometimes things look bad but aren’t. Well, thank you, Madame Cleo!” I dropped the stones into the bag, suddenly very, very annoyed.

The figures in the stone circle moving moved towards us once more and that seemed to feed the fire of my anger. “The Unseelie Court Detective Agency down there is prancing around, trying to solve murders when we already *know* who the killer is, I’m being told I have a year and a day to solve it when it has been *solved* for fuck’s sake, and to top it all off, the cherry on the sundae and the sparkles on the cake, my uterus is apparently *ground zero* for a turf war!” I reeled to face Cadfael as he reached the tail of the chalk horse. “You had better invest in faerie condoms, buddy, because I’m *not* popping out little pixies anytime soon!”

Du’s sharp bark of laughter was mitigated only by Jack’s loud cackle. “What in the name of Peg Powler did you say to her, Morgan?” the Green Man demanded.

“Nothing but the truth,” she shot back, looking at me as if I had grown a second head. “Alfild . . . “

“No,” I snapped, stalking towards Cadfael. “I refuse to be a pawn. If all you need me for is to get knocked up, you tell me now.”

He stared at me. “Excuse me?”

His words dripped ice and I knew I had made a mistake, but it was too late to rein in my temper and to take back the words.

“Have I given you any reason to think that is all I want from you? I could have taken you, body and mind, the moment I first saw you. I could have come to your dreams long ago, seducing you, making you mine whether you liked it or not, when you were barely out of girlhood, but I did not.” He advanced on me, backing me further into the chalk outline, his colorful gaze a dark red and green, reminding me of fire seen through stained glass. I found I could not back any further; it was as if I had hit an invisible wall at the edge of the chalk horse’s belly. The faces beyond Cadfael blurred into one dark smear against the blue sky, the angry visage of the Unseelie prince filling my vision. “You are not the center of this realm, Alfild. Your uses to me are various but breeder is not one of them.”

I felt as if I had been punched in the stomach. “I . . . I . . . “

“Cadfael,” Niamh’s soft warning clear in the few syllables.

He stared at me a moment longer before giving me his back, striding to speak with Niamh and Gwydion, and leaving me the subject of Du’s sympathetic look and Jack’s bemused gaze.

“Niamh and Gwydion will meet us at the Court later this eve or on the morrow,” Cadfael said a minute or two later. “Du, take them to the portal and return here immediately. The Red Caps are about in the sunlight hours now and it is dangerous to be caught alone.”

“I haven’t lived this long by being stupid,” Du remarked, motioning for Niamh and Gywdion to follow him. “Do what you need to do and we will leave as soon as I return.”

“Cadfael, you were very hard on her,” Hywel said as soon as the trio had left the chalk outline. He did not bother trying to lower his voice.

“It is none of your affair,” he snapped, motioning to me as if I were nothing more than a broken down car sitting on blocks in his driveway.

“I am not an it!” I said sharply, still feeling pole-axed.

Cadfael whipped around to say something to me, his mouth open on a word, when a loud, cracking noise rent the air around us. The horses whinnied and pranced, dancing away from us but not running, bound to the Sidhe by ties unknown to humans. I felt a cold trickle of fear spill down my spine as Morgan spread her hands wide, her face tipping up to the sky.

Jack's demeanor slipped from friendly and open to the guise of a fighter, his hand disappearing inside his cloak and reappearing holding a heavy, short-handled axe with a wickedly curved head.

Only Hywel and Cadfael remained immobile, still and intent as if listening. The cracking noise sounded again, ripping and rumbling across the space like so much thunder. I felt it vibrate down into my bones, awakening something familiar and strange. The horses snickered and whinnied again, this time with a distinct note of panic.

The rumbling moved from the air around me and into the ground, shaking bits of chalk loose, sending them dancing into the shape of the ancient horse itself. Too late, I realized what was happening.

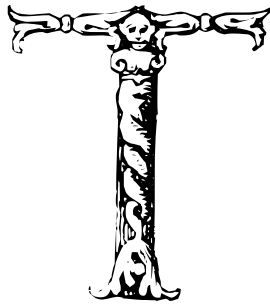
Cadfael's eyes widened and he lunged forward, arms outstretched as he tried to reach me. Hywel shouted something I couldn't understand as I turned to see the galloping white horse, a huge Sidhe mount with a golden mane and hooves tipped in silver, beating down out of the sky towards me.

The breath froze in my lungs, everything froze into the crystalline notion that something had gone hugely wrong. Cadfael's fingers brushed my back as Gulliver snatched me from the safety of the chalk outline. I think I screamed—I felt my throat burn with the need to do it—but I'm not sure. I was across the saddle, pressed between the leather and Gulliver's stomach as the mount regained the sky. I kicked, sliding groundwards, but he caught me by my hair, a silent threat of unbelievable pain should I succeed in my attempt to escape. Sobbing for air, I dug my fingers in to his leg, in part to hold on and in part to try and hurt him, maybe get him to stop the ascent long enough for someone to catch up with us, to save me.

“Stay still, dear sister. It will make this easier.” Gulliver’s voice carried easily despite the rushing wind. “That’s advice to keep in mind over the coming days.”



CHAPTER EIGHT



HEY TELL YOU THAT, IN THE EVENT of a kidnapping or assault, to fight back. They also tell you to go limp and wait for it to be over. Whoever ‘they’ are, they need to get their shit together because it makes it harder on those of us who get kidnapped and/or assaulted.

The entire journey, I cycled between screaming and fighting, or silence and limp-limbed acceptance, but Gulliver didn’t release me or even seem vaguely inclined towards the notion at a future date and time.

We landed. Everything was a swirling blur, almost as if I was watching from afar as I was dragged from horseback and slung over Gulliver’s shoulder—no small feat there—and taken into what I recognized as one of the Keeper’s cottages. Stone walls and thick sod roof, it stood silent and empty near one of the circles seen only from the Sidhe side, as was evidenced by its faint and shimmering glow.

“Was he one of you?” I asked, my throat raw from the recent bout of screaming. “Or was he human, like me?”

“You have never been human,” he said flatly, dropping me onto the hard-packed, earthen floor. I hit with a jaw-rattling thud, my arms and legs unable to break my fall.

Gulliver stepped over me and reached for a plain oil lamp sitting on a rough-hewn wooden table.



“And I suppose you never embraced humanity?”

“Only if humanity was lovely,” he smiled, sliding me a sideways glance, “and knew when to leave.”

“Charming.” I shifted uncomfortably, trying to get to my feet with a minimum amount of discomfort and failing miserably. “Why are you doing this? Other than the obvious. I mean, surely your motivation isn’t that mundane . . . “

Gulliver paused in his lamp-lighting endeavor and fixed me with an amused but startled look. “You truly don’t know?”

“The baby thing? Yeah, I got that. Y’all are a bunch of sick river folk, you know that?” I managed to get on my knees and paused there for a long moment, catching my breath against the ratcheting pain shooting up my back from my legs.

Gulliver’s glare could have frozen a rampaging red cap in it’s tracks. “The heir is but one aspect. You, my dear sister, have the blood of Danu.”

“So I hear.”

“You truly do not comprehend, do you? The blood of a goddess, in your veins!” He abandoned his attempt to keep the oil lamp lit and approached me with alarming swiftness, closing the distance between us in just two steps. “You have been given the Gift, Alfild.” His face twisted into an expression of pure hatred and I felt my blood turn to ice in my veins, choking the breath out of my lungs as he leaned in close, nearly touching me, so close that he could kill me if he just reached out. “I, on the other hand, have not.”

“How do you know?” I managed. “Maybe you have it too.”

He snarled like an animal then, and tore at the neck of his shirt, exposing his throat and a good part of his chest. “Do I shine with Danu’s light? No, Alfild, She rejects me. I do not have Her blessing, Her gift. We were both born out of time, born to this, my dear, sweet sister, but only you have Her touch on your brow.”

He did grab me then, hauling me to my feet and throwing me against the wall in one swift, merciless movement that made me see stars for a few seconds as my body tried to comprehend and process all of the pain that was blossoming in different parts of it at that moment. “Do you know why that is?”

I bit down on the urge to cry out in fear and pain, and shoved myself to my feet. I’m not very tall but I didn’t let Gulliver’s height advantage force me back. “I’m guessing it’s your attitude problem?”

I was ready this time, ducking as he swung the oil lamp at me, avoiding the splash of near-rancid oil by sheer luck.

“I didn’t choose this, Gulliver. If your little spies are any good at their jobs, you’d know how much I’ve been fighting this!”

“The sylph has paid for its indiscretion,” he informed me coolly, changing from rampaging man to calm, reasoning businessman in the space of a heartbeat. “They do not have bodies, you know, despite often appearing as human. Disposal is quite simple. Much more so than this man,” he added, waving a hand to indicate the Keeper’s cottage. “He was mostly human, only a hint of Sidhe blood—less than both of us, you know. He fought horribly. Worse than you.” He smiled then, almost kindly, and I felt sick. “The need for continuation is only part of the reason I took matters into my own hands. Iseult is too bound by the old laws, by the old ways.”

I felt my brows creep up before I could stop myself. “So you’re circumventing her?” *Typical Gulliver*, I thought, *always going over someone’s head, going around them till he got the answer that he wanted rather than the answer he deserved*. “Is that smart, brother dear? Going over the Queen of the Seelie Court? I understand that they’re not all sweetness and light, despite what the storybooks say.”

I felt the weight of the stones around my neck and the weight of something at my hip, tucked into the deep pocket sewn into my borrowed trousers. *Well, I thought glumly, I do really need it.*

Jenny's stone teased my fingertips as I brushed across it, feeling its slight but constant weight roll into my palm. Gulliver was watching me intently, seemingly waiting for me to say or do something. I stilled my questing fingers and stared back, hoping to hold his gaze with my own.

"Are you finished?"

"Lemme think . . ." I glanced at the ceiling, pretending to give it serious consideration as Jenny's stone spread a cool, itching sensation through my fingers and palm. "Yeah," I finally said, smiling brightly. "I think that's about it for now."

Gulliver hissed through his teeth, the urge to commit something violent and messy using my body for the medium visible in every line of his body. "I have mere Sidhe blood in me, Alfild. Your blood is that of Danu Herself."

"So you said," I sing-songed, feigning boredom. *Please, Jenny or whoever is at the other end of this thing, do something! Whatever it is you're supposed to do . . .*

"Your tongue vexes me." His hand moved so quickly that I almost missed the motion as he brought up a silver-bladed knife, wickedly curved and cold to the touch as he pressed it against my jaw. "I shall remove it."

My knees buckled, taking me down to the floor as he pushed. One of his hands wrapped in my tangled skein of hair, jerking my head back so that my throat was exposed. I pressed my lips together firmly but I was no match for him; Gulliver pressed his foot against my chest, forcing me to fall back onto the earthen floor, as something in my left leg snapping snapped with a burning pop deep within the tissue. I cried out, unable to stop myself, and that was the opportunity that he was looking for. He let go of my hair just long enough to grab my chin, his grasp brutal.

Reflexively, I tried to jerk away but could not. Too many things hurt, the need to escape too great and paralyzing. I felt the edge of the blade part the skin of my jaw delicately, almost like a kiss, just enough of a bite to let me know something had gone wrong a fraction of a second before the blood welled to the surface and started trickling down my neck.

“Do you remember those anatomy classes from college, dear sister?” he asked softly, his eyes glazed with lustful need. “Do you recall where all of the important bits are? You might be of Danu’s blood but you can still die, just like the rest of them.” The blade skated lightly across my other jawline, tracing from the corner of my mouth to the spot just before my ear, matching the other side. “Do you know what will happen if I strike you now? If I cause you to scream?”

I nodded slightly, just enough to indicate my response. A swift blow, a hard slap, anything to make me scream or cry out in pain, and the thin cuts would open, splitting me from ear to ear. It was sometimes called an “Irish smile” after the practice gaining prominence in some of the gangs of that country. I could feel the blood seeping, coating my neck and dripping between my breasts as Gulliver sheathed the knife, releasing his grip on me and letting me fall back once more onto the ground.

I struggled to keep my breathing calm and controlled as he squatted next to me, his fingers tracing his handiwork. “Lovely Alfhild,” he murmured, something dark and creeping in his tone. “Even if you had not wasted so much time on this, so many minutes and hours and days resisting, we would still be here. Cadfael’s choice of bride amuses the Seelie Court. Iseult is hating herself for letting you slide through her fingers like so much water.” He smiled anew, his eyes glittering in the half-light of the Keeper’s cottage. “I do her bidding, obey my queen unstintingly, but now I fear I must protect her from herself.”

I longed to make some audible response but the now burning pain across my jaw and cheeks and the sticky blood cooling on my throat kept

me silent. Let Gulliver run his course, I thought as an eerie calm stole over my thoughts.

The stone pressed against my thigh as I rolled to one side, conscious of the cuts on my face. Gulliver didn't stop me as I moved onto my side and carefully pushed myself into a sitting position. His hands were visible but I didn't trust him. At any moment, I expected him to reach for me again, to try and finish what he had started.

"We are between times, Alfild, between realms here. The Keepers exist outside of the Courts, outside of humanity . . ." His smile became more of a grimace then as his eyes narrowed, "outside of everything."

My confusion must have shown in my eyes because he laughed then, muttering an invective against my intelligence before ordering me to my feet. When I didn't rise fast enough, he grabbed me by my upper arm and jerked hard enough to make me gasp. More blood coursed down my jaw and I reached up, fingers gently probing in horror, afraid of what I would find. He snatched at my hand, forcing me to stand still, to refrain from touching the split skin as he circled me, taking stock.

"Iseult is my queen but she fails to understand that the old laws do not hold true any longer. We must change with time. We must bend, grow, become as river reeds . . ."

As he spoke, I smelled the thick, black muck of the river bank, the green and wet scent of the slow-moving water. I closed my eyes and let him prattle on, his fingers skimming across the back of my neck, the tips of my breasts, as he walked around me in slow circles.

The stone was still in my pocket, the Runes about my neck, but I had given up hope in either. The stone was just a stone, the Runes merely ironic.

The river smell grew stronger and I blew out a harsh breath through my nose, clearing my head. *Wishful thinking*, I told myself. We were inland, as far as I knew, too far away for such a smell.

A wet, sucking noise broke the monotony of Gulliver's spoken-word manifesto.

It sounded like feet in the mud, a slow and ponderous rhythm that bespoke a body with all the time in the world to get where they were going. The smell had become so thick that I wanted to cough from it, choking on the stink of rotting vegetation and the smell of deep water. It was all I could do to swallow, to keep from gagging and thus tearing open the cuts on my face.

Gulliver had stopped talking and was stalking towards the door, his face set in lines of displeasure and outrage. The sucking sound was loud, filling the small cabin until it was maddening, coming from all around us and inside us. I closed my eyes and fought against clenching my jaw but it was no good—I tensed and the tearing sensation was overwhelming.

Everything seemed to happen at once then: Gulliver yanked open the door onto the dusky plain, a horrific specter of watery gloom filled the aperture, and I fainted, everything melting together like watercolors under the tap.



“Wake yourself, girl.”

A sharp pinch to my side made me cringe, then belatedly remember not to move my face, even to take a much-longed-for deep breath. Another pinch, this one to my stomach, made me gasp and sit up suddenly, a wave of dizziness washing over me as the river smell assailed my senses anew. A narrow, angular face stared at me as I clutched at my cheeks and looked around wildly, not opening my mouth despite the mewling cries issuing from my throat.

“What in the name of Bel's forge is the matter with you?”

I gestured mutely to my face and flailed one bloody hand to take in the entire cottage. This, I wanted to scream, this is what's wrong with me!

"Have you done as those silly monks did? Taken a vow of silence?" Jenny snorted and rose to her feet. "Might've done that before summoning me to this benighted place. I had to follow the ancient underground aqueduct. Damned pixie construction makes it difficult to corner."

She sniffed again and tugged her weedy, ragged gown over her hips.

"He will not be out long. You'd best gain your feet." She frowned as I gestured to my face again, tears springing to my eyes as I tried not to cry, tried not to well up and sob as I so dearly would have loved to do. "Is this some human thing?" she demanded. "If it is, stop it. I refuse to take part."

She moved towards me then, jerking as she stepped as if she were uncertain how to manipulate her long, thin limbs. The dim thought that she was likely not used to moving on land, without the bouyancy of water to make her passage easy, occurred to me and was filed away for future reference, right next to 'alligators can't corner so run in circles when confronted by one' and 'tinfoil makes the microwave angry.'

"Get to your feet or I will leave you to him. You summoned me, the least you could do is follow me."

I rose shakily, my fingers still pressed to my cheeks, feeling the thick, cool blood there. I glared at Jenny and she rolled her eyes, reaching for my arm and pulling me towards her, her fingers cold, and wet, and clammy. I let her lead me to the door, to the small stone step that served as a porch for the Keeper.

I paused and looked back, seeing Gulliver bound with strips of bedsheets, his body slumped across the wooden table with its remains of the Keeper's last meal and bits of broken oil lamp. I looked questioningly at Jenny, who shrugged.

"He will awaken soon."

I nodded and stopped resisting. She led me past Gulliver's mount, towards the standing circle a short distance away. The stones looked new, unsullied by dirt and time, sharp crystalline traces showing in the dark gray stone. The human realm had not seen this circle for centuries, destroyed as it was on that side by their own hand, the ancient missionaries seeing evil in the simple rituals, seeing their demons in the glowing beings who joined the shadowy dances and celebrations there.

Jenny's jerking, lurching steps made it hard to move quickly without stumbling so I tripped and twisted my way towards the stones, Jenny's muttered curses and thickly voiced admonishments against reproducing and spreading my idiocy through the Unseelie Court the only sound other than my nasal, harsh breathing. We'd get inside the circle, I thought, and she would take me back to the Court. Cadfael and Du and everyone else would be waiting for me and we'd reformulate a plan and oh, yeah, we'd fix up this nice little attempt at plastic surgery from Mad Doctor Gulliver.

"Wait here," she ordered me, shoving me between two of the tall stones.

I caught myself before I fell and shot her a glare, and then wandered into the center of the circle to find the altar there, bare in this time of no time, no celebrants to adorn it with markings of the season. I had been there just long enough to wonder what was taking Jenny so long when I heard the sucking, lurching sound of her step again.

The sky had darkened considerably and the temperature dropped with the sun, making the entire setting seem at once sinister and covert. She strode as well as she could into the center to join me and held out her hand. I took it wordlessly and she nodded. I waited, expecting the tumbling, pulling, disorienting feeling that came with the mysterious means of transport to the Court that the Sidhe seemed to use, but instead I felt as if I were sinking.

Even as I thought that, I realized that my shoes were soaked through and a cold, heavy moisture was creeping up my calves. I looked down and, through the growing dark, saw that my feet and legs were rapidly disappearing into the earth. I tried to pull free but Jenny's grip was too strong, too fervent. We were being swallowed whole and she seemed as unconcerned and nonchalant as a person waiting for the elevator to reach her floor. I bucked hard as the pull reached my knees, air whooshing from my lungs as we began to move faster.

"I do wish you would stop struggling," she muttered. "I should just let you drown. You have no idea how badly I want to."

Everything went dark as the ground swept over my head and we fell downwards, plummeting within the earth.



CHAPTER NINE

“**S**TOP CRYING,” JENNY ORDERED, pushing me back against the stone wall of her home. “Cadfael will be on his way soon enough.”

“Stop hurting me!”

“The cuts are not as deep as all that. It’s all in your head,” she sighed, pushing more damp moss against the worst bits. “Gulliver is not as clever as he likes to believe.”

“What did you do to him?”

“Do you care?”

“Not really,” I admitted. “Well, not like that.”

My face felt stiff and sticky; it had been a great act of will to allow Jenny Greenteeth to inspect the cuts Gulliver had made and the knowledge that he had not done as much damage as he’d wanted me to think he had served only to anger me further, if such a thing were at all possible.

“Where did you go when you left me in the circle?”

“You left this,” she replied tartly, dropping the stone into my lap. “If you use it again, try and be near water.”

I rolled my eyes, wincing as I found that movement actually affected my facial muscles. “I’ll keep it in mind.”

The moss she was pressing against my skin smelled faintly of fish and river water, making me shudder inwardly at the thought of the bacteria and other beasties that might be currently making their way into my bloodstream.



“Why can’t you just take me to the Court? Why do I have to wait here?”

“Why must you whine so?” she snapped, her countenance shifting between a toothsome, English-rose type girl to the very definition of horrifying with lank, seaweed-black hair and a face of a corpse left too near the riverbank, pale and mottled with graveyard rows of teeth showing between bloated, mildew-colored lips.

It was a mark of how tired I was that this didn’t seem to bother me as much as a rational voice that sounded a lot like Jackie told me it should.

“I cannot enter the Court itself. I am forbidden. I do not belong to either Court though my alliances are shifting towards one over the other.” She paused and frowned, tilting her head to one side as if listening to some far-off sound. “We have a guest,” she smiled. “Not who I expected. Sister from afar,” she added, rising swiftly and gracefully to her feet before disappearing into the darkness of the underwater cavern. I sat for a long moment, listening to the wet slap of her footsteps as she moved through the dark, fading into silence, before I rose to my own feet and padded softly after her.

I couldn’t see well in the darkness and was hesitant to look for a torch, but by keeping the sound of the river to my right, I could stay on the narrow ledge of rock that served as a path towards the back of the cavern. Only twice did I have a moment of fear as the ledge narrowed to the point where I could barely fit one foot on it, but I made it past the treacherous spots with only a modicum of panic.

I couldn’t hear anything over the gentle rush of water but there was nowhere else Jenny could have gone other than into the river itself. That thought gave me pause, just long enough to start feeling a mixture of chagrin and worry, but I didn’t have long to dither.

A soft laugh sounded from somewhere ahead of me, driving me onwards with careful, sliding steps. I nearly stumbled as I reached a wide spot on the ledge and my vision was flooded with a soft, green

luminescence. I blinked, trying to orient my senses and found myself gasping, despite the pulling soreness in my cheeks, at the sight before me.

“Well met, sister,” Jenny murmured, her voice echoing in the high-vaulted chamber carved from the living stone itself.

“And you,” Lorelei replied, her golden hair muted in the glow of the tracery in the walls, her face a pale jewel of beauty despite the odd shadows cast by the room itself. I clung to the stone wall as they both shifted to look down the long, dark tunnel where the river lead to the entry way. They were quiet for a long moment, giving me enough time to prepare a lie, but they did not move towards me nor did they call out. “Is she prepared?”

“Aye.” Jenny sank down to sit at the edge of the river where it dove deeper into the earth, following a path as old as time. “She is prepared. Gulliver awaits Iseult’s pleasure.” Lorelei stood next to her, staring down into the river. “And Cadfael?”

“He awaits Alfhild. Jack and Morgan are with him. Du remained with the lhiannan Sidhe and her mate.”

Jenny shuddered visibly at that and frankly, I didn’t blame her. The lhiannan Sidhe were not known for their warm fuzzies. They reminded me of succubi; they were infamous for finding an artist, a poet, a writer, someone who was open to their inspiration, their seemingly unending wellspring of passion and admiration and beauty . . . and sucking them dry. There’s a reason there’s such a high rate of early death among the arty set. Lord Byron was even rumored to have his own lhiannan Sidhe, who, true to form, left him when inspiration ran dry, left him to die in desperation.

“What is happening?”

Lorelei made a sound of displeasure before answering. “The battles are ongoing, they say. I refuse to see them or take part.”

“Not choosing is the way of the fall,” Jenny hissed. She looked down the long tunnel and I swear, for a moment, her eyes met mine. “What will become of you if you fall?”

“I will not fall,” Lorelei sniffed. “Cadfael may have chosen another over me, but I am not so fickle in my allegiances. I must return his chosen to his side posthaste,” she said, turning away from Jenny towards where I stood, hidden. “The Court is in hiding and few are trusted with its true whereabouts.”

“And you are one of them?”

“Aye,” Lorelei answered, pausing to allow Jenny to join her. “One of the very few.”

“Does the battle touch the Horde?”

“Aye,” she repeated. “A goodly number of the Queen’s own guards have fallen at the gates. Iseult does not do things by halves.” They began their walk towards me again, slowly as Jenny dragged her feet literally and figuratively. I seized my chance and turned, heading as quickly as I dared back to the spot where Jenny had left me sitting.



“She is here.”

“What of her face?” Lorelei asked, peering at me as if I were some interesting bug she might find on her rock. “It is damaged.”

“But a small scar,” Jenny shrugged. “Gulliver is not as swift and deadly as he would like to be.”

I bit back what I was about to say, focusing instead on looking appropriately disheveled and upset. I didn’t trust Lorelei as far as I could throw her, but I wouldn’t say that in front of her. Jenny was another matter; I didn’t so much as trust her as believe that she was siding with the

Unseelie more than the Seelie in this battle. That, for some reason, went a long way in giving me peace of mind where she was concerned.

“How long have I been away?” I asked, changing the topic. “Just a day or so, right?”

Lorelei looked momentarily disconcerted before her face arranged itself into cool, unmarred lines of calm beauty. “Nay.”

“Less?”

“More. Tis been a fortnight since you were taken from the hillside. Cadfael nearly rode into the fray himself.”

“Fray? What fray?” I lurched to my feet, sudden panic seizing me. “Is he all right?” Images of severed limbs and bloody, infected wounds danced before my eyes in a sickening array. “Where is he?”

Lorelei and Jenny exchanged amused but beleaguered glances. The golden beauty answered after a pause just long enough to make my panic rise into nauseating fear, threatening to spill forth in either something disgusting or a spate of gibberish.

“He is well and unharmed. The fray to which I refer is the one which erupted upon your foolish capture. Your brother,” —she spat the word as if it were poison to her tongue— “was accompanied by several red caps and a ghoul.”

“Riordan,” Jenny breathed, the name like the sound a dying man makes in deep water.

I stiffened. Riordan, the ghoul from the Unseelie Court’s dungeon. Riordan, who had once been the king’s own bard, once a beautiful Sidhe, a poet and performer, a being of pure heart and mind, And a being corrupted by Iseult, twisted by her desires, corrupted by his own lusts which blossomed under her careful tutelage. “What happened to them? The red caps and Riordan?”

“They fought with Jack, Morgan and Cadfael. Du joined the fight as soon as he heard the shouting,” Lorelei relayed as if she were repeating an

oft-spoken message. “When Gulliver was out of reach, they ran off. Except . . .” she paused, her jeweled gaze meeting my fearful one, “Riordan.”

“What . . . what happened to him?” I couldn’t help the tremor in my voice at my question.

She smiled, strangely menacing in one so beautiful. “He is dead, Alfild. At his own insistence.”

Lorelei took leave of Jenny with mutual water-themed phrases and a squishy, damp hug that made me think of two sponges smacking together.

I didn’t speak for the entire journey back to the Court. I didn’t know what to say and couldn’t begin to fathom what to expect when I reached Cadfael’s side. Lorelei seemed more than happy to oblige my wish for silence.

Lorelei was more than happy to oblige my silence, taking leave of Jenny with mutual water-themed phrases and a squishy, damp hug that made me think of two sponges smacking together. We traveled quickly, moving through the portal at a speed which made the disorienting sensation of the trek seem even worse than usual. Upheaval greeted us as we entered the Great Hall, which seemed to have become a command station for whatever was going on battle-wise.

Goblins and pixes raced to and fro, tall and fair-faced Sidhe warriors strode past clad in garb reminiscent of the fantasy art I used to see in the metaphysical gift shops in London. Woad and torques seemed to be the order of the day and I felt woefully underdressed and overdone at the same time.

Lorelei sullenly led me to Mabd’s side and left me there with a silent glare, disappearing into the throbbing masses as they swirled past, a cacophony of sound and color that would have made me dizzy had I not been exposed to the Sidhe en masse previously.

Mabd swept a dark gaze over my face and her frown grew deeper. “Your face will stick like that,” I said after a moment of silent mutual appraisal.

“Your brother will hang for that.” She turned away and motioned for someone to come closer. A familiar pink light twinkled into existence before my face, tiny features staring back at me in horror. “Rose will see to you. Follow her to Cadfael’s chambers. Someone will be along shortly to tend more properly to your wounds.” She didn’t even turn back to see if I was following her orders.

I sighed and shrugged, nodding to Rose before setting off after the darting pink blob.

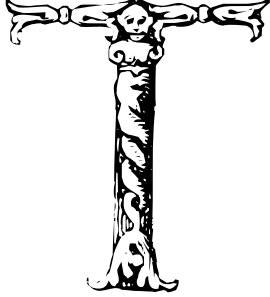
Once out of the Great Hall, the frenetic energy of the Court did not abate. It just seemed to increase, crammed into narrow corridors and funneling towards the nucleus of the chaos behind us. We fought our way upstream, Rose staying near the ceiling ostensibly so I could see her but I had a feeling it had more to do with not wanting to damage her wings or tiny dress than anything else. As we rounded the last curve in the hall before Cadfael’s rooms, the crowd thinned to a trickle, only a handful of guard-types and pixies lingering in the way.

Rose disappeared as soon as we entered the room proper, leaving me alone in the darkened bedchamber with not even so much as a glowing ember in the grate to light the way for my abused feet. I sighed and closed my eyes where I stood, taking a deep, cleansing breath and blowing it out hard and fast. I would worry later. I was barely keeping my eyes open, the bandages on my face more worrisome than the cuts themselves now, and my empty stomach demanded attention.

“Rose? Rose, get down out of the rafters. I have a list of stuff for you to do . . .” I took a step forward and ran into a wall. A warm, bare-chested wall that smelled of burning leaves. “Meep.”

“Alfhild,” Cadfael said quietly, “we must talk.”

CHAPTER TEN

“YPICAL,” I SAID, BLOWING OUT A breath I didn’t realize I had been holding. “Get me all freaked out that you’re about to pull a Jimmy Royce and all you have to tell me is that there’s a spy. Well, duh, Captain Obvious! Of *course* there’s a spy!” I rolled my eyes before falling back on the bed, unmindful of my bloody, dirty state. “It’s a war, you great hunk of handsome twit. Spies abound!”

“I do not think you are grasping the seriousness of the situation, Alfhild,” he finally said, breaking the short silence in a choked, uncertain tone. “And what is a Jimmy Royce?”

I sat up, trying not to frown and make the cuts on my face worse. They didn’t hurt so much now but they felt stiff, and the pull when I spoke even calmly was obvious. “He’s the jackass I lost my virginity to ages ago. We had sex a few times then he decided that we ‘needed to talk’ and we ‘wanted different things.’ Yeah, I’ll say we did. I wanted a relationship, he wanted fake tits and a warm pu . . .” I paused. “Anyway, of course there’s a spy.”

He frowned deeply, his gaze shadowed by the candlelight as he walked slowly towards me. I was sure that he was going to say something regarding my past sexual history, or something possessive, and I almost hate to admit that I hoped it was the latter because it sent an unwelcome warm shiver through my tired bones.



Instead, he stopped just out of arm's reach and said carefully, as if speaking to a child, "The spy is one of ours, Alfild. Not just one of the Court. One of the Inner Circle."

I heard the capitalization in the last words and the warm shiver turned to a cold knot in my belly. "Like . . . Du?"

"No, it is not Du." His eyes opened wide at that, fairly crackling with anger that I should even entertain such a thought. "Du's loyalty will never be in question!"

"Sorry, sorry." I sighed. "I shouldn't have even suggested it; I know better than that . . . who are you thinking it is, then? Me?" I waited, sure my name had been posited by Mabd at least.

When Cadfael hesitated a long moment before shaking his head, my suspicions were confirmed. "You know better about *that*, right?"

He sat beside me cautiously, shooting a worried glance at my cheek and down my battered body before meeting my gaze again. "Yes, Alfild, I know. I defended you when your behavior was called into question."

"*Excuse me?*" I winced. "Ow . . ."

"Some have suggested that your . . . reticence . . . to join the court despite overwhelming evidence and persuasion regarding your heritage and future bespoke a nefarious bent. And others have put it forth that your frequent . . . abductions could be a cover for clandestine meetings with Gulliver for, ah, clandestine purposes." He met my gaze steadily and I read the pain there, the effort it had taken to keep me from being lynched as soon as I walked in the Great Hall. That also told me why no one had returned my greetings or even looked me in the eyes other than Rose since my return. He reached out tentatively and laid just his fingertips on my jawline. "I disabused them of that notion."

"Who's this 'them' anyway?" Anger seethed inside me, making me nauseated with its intensity. It was a different sort of anger than that

which Gulliver engendered. This anger was something I could fix, something I could touch and remedy. “Anyone I know, perchance?”

Cadfael stroked his fingers down my chin to my neck, grimacing slightly at the sticky feel of the mostly-dried blood there. “I will get a healer in here soon . . .”

“But?”

“Hm?”

“I sensed a but,” I murmured, closing my eyes and feeling suddenly very, albeit pleasantly, warm. “What’s the but?”

“There isn’t one,” he assured me quietly, the bed shifting slightly as he rose. I didn’t protest, just sat and waited as he walked to the wooden screen on the far side of the chamber and poured some water into a bowl. I sighed as he returned and sat carefully beside me, bracing myself for what I knew was about to come.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured, dabbing a damp piece of cloth against my neck.

I made a sound low in my throat that surprised me but I couldn’t muster the words to express what I felt: that it was okay, that I appreciated it, that I was too tired to care anymore.

“Can you tell me about your time with Gulliver?”

I opened one eye but he wasn’t looking at my face. He seemed focused on my neck, on gingerly removing the blood that had caked in the creases and crevices there. “Any time specifically or just this most recent one?”

“Alfhild . . .”

I sighed again. He sounded pained and it sent a tiny worm of guilt gnawing at my heart to hear him so. “I think he meant to kill me, Cadfael, bloodline be damned. I think he’s finally off his rocker . . .” I relayed the encounter to him quietly, wincing as he moved the now-stained cloth to my cheeks and began cleaning away the packed moss and blood there.

As I reached the end of the short version, he stopped what he was doing and a frozen moment of silence hung between us.

Before I could ask what was wrong, though, he pressed a painfully gentle kiss to my forehead and murmured something in an ancient tongue against my skin. Something familiar stirred in me, something primeval and rich, and I felt the golden glow seep into my veins and infuse my limbs with lethargy. Before I could give in to the growing need, he pulled away and raked his fingers through his usually tidy hair.

“Cadfael?” I murmured, reaching for him.

“I will send a healer in immediately,” he said firmly, but I flattered myself that there was a hint of regret in his voice. I wanted him to stay, to sit with me if nothing else, a feeling that was at once foreign and familiar. A week ago, in human reckoning, the idea would have been laughable to me. Now, it was what I wanted above all else.

“Cadfael, wait . . .” He paused, one hand on the door and the other on his hip, looking at me with a mixture of exasperation and curiosity, faint blue traces of woad still evident on his face and hands where the skin peeked out from the fabric of his shirt. “Do you know who the spy is?”

He hesitated again, this time less out of guilt and more out of caution. “We have several ideas.”

“I think it’s Lorelei,” I blurted, feeling the blush rise along my neck and to my face, the heated sensation mixing with the stiff pain of Gulliver’s cuts. “I think she’s the spy!”

He tilted his head at me like a curious puppy. “And whyever would you think that?”

“She . . . she . . .” I shook my head, trying to verbalize the reasons and only coming up with, “She’s just not right!”

“You can do better than that,” he chided. “Think on it. I must attend Mabd. A healer will see to your wounds shortly.”

The door shut quietly but firmly in his wake, leaving me in a dimly lit room, staring at the flat, dark wood, the one barrier between me and angry, vengeful Sidhe, some of whom believed I was a traitor in their midst. “Fantastic,” I muttered. “This is just fantastic.”

Two and a half hours later, give or take a handful of minutes, I was led by Rose back to the Great Hall. The buzz of activity that had engulfed the space when I was first brought in by Lorelei had abated somewhat, the sound now a mere loud buzz rather than a dull roar, the chaos of color and movement more ordered and easier to navigate.

Mabd was at her throne, standing before it rather than actually sitting, but it was clear that she was the one in charge, despite her lack of armor, weapons or battle-hardened gaze, three things that the males standing before her had in spades. I tried not to think that the dark smears on their chest plates and axe heads were blood, but it still didn’t help the fact that the very sight of them sent trills of fear into my very core.

A familiar face appeared beside Mabd, stepping out of a knot of green and brown-clad men, and making me sigh with some small measure of relief. Jack looked intently at the trio before Mabd and murmured something in her ear, nodding to the three before meeting my gaze unerringly.

“I see that Cadfael sent a decent healer,” Mabd muttered, her eyes skimming over my face, seeing the thin red lines left by the female Cait Sidhe’s healing charms. “You will still wear a veil in public, regardless.”

“What?”

Jack nodded, his eyes bright as he studied my face and then swept a gaze down my freshly clad body. “A veil will hide the worst of it.” A bright grin tempered his words before I could voice my offense. “Not because of your injury, my lovely, but to protect you. If it seems that we are weak, we lose footing. We are moving the Court and it is rumored to be a trap.”

“Then why move it?”

“We must,” Mabd said sharply. “This place is unsafe.” Her tone told me I would get no more from her than just that.

“I know you thought I might be the spy,” I stated as casually as possible. “I hope you got over it . . . “

Mabd raised a raven-black brow at that but didn’t rise to my bait. “Send them off, Jack, and return to my side. I have need of your counsel.”

Jack sketched a half-bow and motioned to the three very large Sidhe males to follow him, striding through the crowd as it parted for him like butter under a hot knife.

No one looked at Mabd and me standing on the dais but I had the feeling it was only through a great dint of communal will that they avoided doing so.

“Why do I need to hide my face when you move the court?” I demanded as soon as Mabd ran out of things to fiddle with on her shawl and jewelry. “I didn’t before . . . “

“When the Court is moving,” she hissed, eyes narrowed like a snake, “it is visible.”

“. . . and?”

“And,” she spat, “you are a proven risk. The women of the Court will all wear veils. It will make it all the more difficult to pluck you out of our grasp, you little—”

“Mother!”

We both turned to face Cadfael and his darkly angry expression. “Hello, my intended,” I crooned in a sickeningly sweet voice. “Your mother was just expressing her concerns for my wellbeing while the Court is moving.”

Cadfael arched a brow in perfect imitation of his mother’s own incredulous look. “We are not moving the Court.”

“We must!” Mabd closed the distance between herself and her son in one sweeping step, lowering her voice to the point where I had to strain to

hear her, even less than a foot away. “Jack is moving his Green Men and the Wild Hunt—”

“The Circle stands,” Cadfael said softly but firmly. “We do not move the Court.”

“You are not yet King,” she reminded him, her tone hard and cutting. “You do not countermand my orders nor do you presume to know what is best for this Court!”

“The Snow Queens caution against it,” he said, his voice less soft but still calm.

“The Snow Queens have no say,” Mabd snarled.

A sudden flash of my last major encounter with them burst into life before my mind’s eye. “Oh, they should!”

Both of the Sidhe royals looked at me sharply, faces set in lines of regal annoyance. A plan was forming, making me fairly jitter with excitement as I began to feel accomplished and intelligent for the first time in ages.

“We need to stop the Seelie Court, right? And what’s the one thing that will stop them?”

“Alfhild . . .”

“Absolutely correct,” Mabd said, purposefully misunderstanding her son’s sigh. “Her blood will stop them.”

I shot her a glare, not feeling any patience for her threatening tone. “My death. Not my blood . . . my death . . .” I felt my new scars tug slightly as I fought a grin, the mania of excitement sweeping through me. “If I’m dead, no bloodline. If I’m dead . . . Gulliver’s failed . . .” I tried not to think too hard on the sudden, interested glimmer in Mabd’s eyes. “And think about it—the Seelie Court will go nuts about this, not to sound too vain, and y’all will either win outright or the whole shebang will fall apart.”

Cadfael’s roar silenced the entire Great Hall. “I will not allow this! I do not know how hard you hit your head but understand that I will not permit you to sacrifice yourself for this Court!”

Du's snicker somewhere behind me.

I pulled myself up to my full, if not considerable, height and stepped into Cadfael's personal space. "First of all, you don't control me or *allow* me to do anything! Got it, Bub? Secondly, I'm not an idiot, you big idiot." I turned away sharply and faced Mabd. "I need to summon the Snow Queens."

She smiled thinly, her lips nearly blood-red against her pale features. "Of course you do, dear . . ."

"Dear?" Cadfael muttered, moving to stand so close behind me that I could feel the heat radiating from him, through all of our layers of clothing. "Since when are you 'dear' to her? And what right have you to abuse me so before the Court?" If I hadn't heard the smile in his voice, the sudden realization in his tone, I would have socked him one in the eye.

"If it's abuse you want, I can give you that later. I read a book on it once, when I was in my experimental phase in college." I heard his choked laugh but I didn't turn to see his expression. Instead, I reached back and patted his hip before striding off after Mabd, the silent stares of the Sidhe in the Great Hall creeping across my skin.

I heard Cadfael's intentionally heavy footfalls start behind us as Du fell into step next to me, his lips twitching in a grin.

"What's so funny?" I murmured, smiling forcibly despite the pain growing in my cheeks.

"You are," he replied, his ears flicking with apparent amusement. "You and Cadfael both. And you," he added, stepping aside to allow me to pass before him through the open door and into Mabd's private chambers behind the dais, "are more Unseelie than you want to admit."

"Part Tuatha di Danaan," I reminded him.

"Close enough," he laughed, choking on the sound as Cadfael swept into the room behind us and moved to stand in front of me, his glare black with an emotion I could not or would not name.

Mabd spoke first, before any of us could manage a word. “The Snow Queens are summoned. Jenny Greenteeth,” she added, “has politely requested that you not use her stone again unless you are near water.”

“I know,” I sighed. “She told me. Six times.” I fingered its weight in my pocket and had a tiny notion about summoning her next time I was in the desert but quickly abandoned the idea, keeping the stone firmly away from my palm and telling myself to be good. “Um, I’m guessing you spoke to her? And Lorelei?”

Mabd nodded, her gaze flaying me where I stood. “I know of your suspicions about Lorelei and I . . . appreciate . . . your distrust, but she is not the traitor.” She glanced at Cadfael and a wealth of unspoken communication flowed between them in a handful of seconds before she spoke to me again. “Skadi has taken a particular interest in your situation.”

“How does she know what it is?” I asked, the incredulity clear in my tone. “I haven’t told them yet!”

“She knows,” Mabd assured me with a glittering hardness to her tone. “They know all to do with death.”

Cadfael’s tone was sharp. “This is not a true death; Alfhild is not going to die this night.”

“No,” I agreed. “I’m not.”

I didn’t have time to explain further. The temperature in the room dropped quickly. Our breath showed as fog before our lips and a tiny crackling noise sounded as frost raced along the surfaces of the room. A tiny shimmer, then a blinding flash like lightning, and they were before us.

Annis, Mother Hoelle, and Skadi, stood quiet and knowing, pale eyes fixed on me.

I felt suddenly queasy, seeing them there, knowing what I was about to do. Once started, I would have no control over this and I knew it. It would have to be an act of trust on behalf of the Court as well as faith in myself

that drove this to its conclusion, and that scared me more than anything, even more than giving up my humanity for the Unseelie Horde.

“Alfhild, daughter,” Skadi murmured, her beautiful face set in lines of maternal concern. “We know what you seek.”

“Then you approve,” I said firmly, wishing it into truth.

“We did not say that,” Mother Hoelle snapped, her blind eyes tracking me when I moved. “We simply know what you seek.”

Annis frowned at her compatriot and shrugged. “She is no simpleton and she has the Blood. She knows. She will do.”

“It is the chaos that comes with the doing that should be feared,” Skadi noted, brushing past Mabd to stand over me, her great height forcing her to bend her neck slightly rather than hit the ceiling. She peered down at me, her gaze like glacial ice as it examined me from head to toe. “Your blood has been spilled for this realm. There are other ways to resolve this.”

“Do you think this will work?” Du asked quietly, his voice more reverential than I had ever heard it before.

I looked over at him and found him staring back at me.

“Do you think this will work?” he repeated, this time sounding desperate.

“If she makes it work,” Mother Hoelle said quietly, her voice like snow falling at midnight. She tilted her head to one side consideringly, a crooked smile twisting her lips into a nearly mirthful expression. “Mabd, you’ve done well by your son.”

“I know,” the Sidhe queen replied tartly. “It’s high time someone noticed.” She smiled then, a genuine smile that stripped centuries of hardness from her gaze and made her seem almost sweet in appearance. Well, sweet if she hadn’t been holding a long, curved sword as casually as I’d hold a pen. She reached out a hand to Cadfael, drawing him closer. “She will do.”

“I’m so glad,” I sighed, not able to help the slight roll of my eyes. “This has to work. If it doesn’t . . .” I trailed off, spreading my fingers as if letting water slide through them.

Annis snorted. “We shall see, lass. We shall see.” She motioned to her sister-queens. “Come, Mabd. Lead us to your kitchens. We have work to do.”

Cadfael held his tongue until the door shut behind the women. “Alfhild, I forbid this!” His panic was palpable. “There must be another way.”

“You can’t change your mind or mine now,” I pointed out. “Besides,” I jerked a thumb at myself, “I’m descended from gods!”

“A goddess,” he amended, pointedly ignoring Du’s snort. “And I will not have you endangering yourself.”

“Cadfael,” I said flatly, silencing him, which was a surprise to both of us I think, “do you trust me?”

“Yes,” he replied with no small amount of suspicion in his voice.

“Then trust me. Trust me now.” I gave him a watery smile, uncertain as to why I suddenly wanted to cry. “Please? This is a good idea, Cadfael. It will flush out Iseult and Gulliver at least. We can deal with them better if they aren’t hiding behind their army.”

Cadfael’s gaze never left my face. “And if it doesn’t work?”

“Then . . .” I shrugged, trying to affect nonchalance and failing miserably. “Then.”

He reached for me, his fingers skimming the scars on my cheeks and his breath fanning the fine hairs near my ear, but he didn’t kiss me. “If you do not wake . . . Gulliver will die slowly.”

“And if I do?”

“Then he will die quickly.” He looked grim and powerful. I wasn’t sure how I felt about being party to this death, but it was too late to turn back now.

“And Iseult?”

“Let Mab deal with Iseult,” he growled, tangling his fingers in my hair and pulling me close. “She is not my concern.”

“Cadfael,” Du said softly. “We have to attend the Green Men. Morgan awaits your word as well.” I had to give him credit—he actually sounded as if he felt bad for mentioning it.

“Go,” I whispered. “We’ll talk later.”

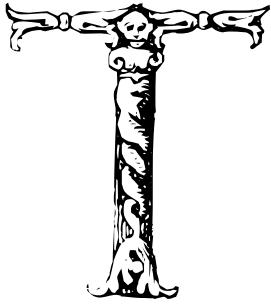
“Later, you’ll be . . .” he paused. “You’ll be indisposed.”

“Then it’ll have to wait until I’m done.” I kissed him then, hard and fast, and pushed him away gently. “Go. We’ll talk later.”

I held my breath until they left, the door swinging closed slowly behind them. Only after it clicked closed shut did I give in to my urge to cry.



CHAPTER ELEVEN



THE DARKNESS TASTED LIKE BITTER bark and earth, sharp berries and cold water. I could not feel it as it came over me but I could smell it, taste it, hear it . . .

Cadfael's voice rushed through my thoughts. *He sounds worried*, I noticed, and was almost embarrassed to be pleased by that notion.

It was different this time, the draught the Queens had prepared for me. The first time it was gentle, almost like going to sleep. This time it felt invasive, hard and heavy as it moved through my body. I could not look at the faces of Mabd, Cadfael, Du, or the Queens as I laid on Mabd's own bower. My eyes were the last thing to be overwhelmed by the potion, my vision lasting until well after my limbs became immovable and heavy as the dead. I watched as the veil was pulled over my face, a tiny thrill of satisfaction remaining in my veins as the sheer white fabric covered me. I would appear as dead, and they would mourn me.

I had made a lame joke about Snow White, asking if the dwarves would show up, and then had to apologize when I was informed by a dwarf, one of Mabd's ladies-in-waiting, that they were present and not one of them was named for an anatomical function.

Now I was quiet, still and suspended. I was not breathing but I had no need for it.



I wondered if Jackie was the same way or if her stasis was somehow different. I felt a moment of panic before I sank into numbness, a moment of sheer, unadulterated horror that I would not be able to save Jackie, that the others had forgotten about her, had neglected her importance to me, but that was soon lost as the creeping false death set into my bones.

Alfhild.

Morgan?

You are in the Between, Alfhild. It's not been long since you slid under.

I thought I couldn't hear you when I was . . . um . . . here . . .

I tried, or I thought I did, but I couldn't feel anything. It was a disturbing sensation, the lack of anything . . . not cold, hot, hard, soft . . . just absolute nothingness.

How can I hear you?

You are not hearing me . . .

Then what the hell is this?

I rule in this realm, Alfhild. Not life, not death . . . this is where I am Queen. Those who die before their time come here. Warriors pass through. There is no good or evil, just this.

I let the nothing stretch on. I did not know how time was passing but the awareness of such a thing as time seemed foreign, like I was creating the notion out of whole cloth.

That is the truth here. Time is nonexistent.

Why am I aware then? I wasn't before . . .

This is not the same because you are not the same. You are of the Sidhe realm now. You are part of the larger whole.

I wanted to feel as if I were floating but I could not. Despite hearing Morgan so clearly, it was as if she were part of me, coming from within what bit of consciousness I had.

Some call this Akasha. That is the word you will know it by, I think. The Sidhe simply call it Between. Here is where all knowledge is stored. What you call the soul originates here.

So . . . what am I doing here? Cold storage?

I waited for a reply, but one never came. Nothingness claimed me again and I lost the bit of awareness that was remaining.



“Open your eyes, child.”

I felt heavy and thick. “No . . .”

“Open your damned eyes,” a new voice snapped. It was familiar but just distant enough to be out of memory’s reach.

Pain shot through my legs and I yelped, my eyes opening onto a world that was a blur of color and shapes. “There,” the voice said, sounding smug. “She’s awake.”

“She was awake before, you jackass.” Rough hands prodded my sore legs. “And she’s uninjured. No thanks to you and your stupid torch.”

“I didn’t burn her,” the first voice spat. “Just . . . checked her reflexes.”

The blurs were starting to coalesce into solidity and I recognized the female voice. “Iseult,” I said slowly, my voice creaking in my throat. “Iseult . . .”

“Ah, her mind is not addled.”

“She has yet to move,” the second voice said. “Should I . . .”

“No!”

I tried to move my arms but found them to be weighty, as if they were made of stone. The argument continued over my prone body as I tested my limbs with little success. *Where am I?* If I was hearing Iseult, that must mean I was within the Seelie Court. *Damn it.*

“Did you say something, sister dear?”

“Ah. Gulliver.” Of course he would be the other being in the room. Or wherever we were.

“She speaks,” Iseult noted dryly. “Gulliver, light the candelabra.” A dull glow filled my blurred vision a moment later, the smell of burning bayberry tallow teasing my senses. “Do you know where you are, dear?” she asked me in a tone dripping with treacley kindness.

“The Seelie Court.”

“No,” a third voice intoned. A third, horribly familiar voice. “Don’t play games with her, Iseult. Just tell her. We do not have the time for you to make sport of this.”

I blinked and my vision cleared a little more. I could see the shape of Iseult and her golden hair and alabaster skin. I could see Gulliver, his dark form near my feet. The third, though, was behind me, where I could not see them, and so could not accuse them later. If there was a later.

A skittering memory—Morgan’s presence if not her voice—worked its way to a full fledged thought.

“Morgan. Where is Morgan?”

Iseult raised a golden brow at me and smiled. “Goddess of war, and death, and strife? She has other things to do right now, Alfild.” She motioned for Gulliver, who appeared at her side. Glancing behind me at the other person in the room, she rolled her eyes slightly. “Do you fully intend to hide this entire time?”

“Yes.”

Even I snorted at that. “How did you get me here?” I demanded again, finding that I was starting to get movement back in my toes and fingers. *Good . . . keep them talking long enough, I thought, and I’ll be able to bolt before they can do anything to me . . .*

“We had help,” Gulliver said with a proud lilt to his voice. “You lay in state in the Crystal Cave before we brought you here, to the Seelie Court.”

“The Crystal Cave?” I interrupted, “As in Merlin?” Damn it, I wanted to see that! I’d been meaning to ask Cadfael if it really existed and there I’d been, just lying there, and I’d missed it!

“Merlin,” Iseult snarled. “Overblown mage!”

“Iseult has some issues with Merlin,” Gulliver said, smiling indulgently at the queen he had planned to betray. Iseult didn’t seem to mind my brother speaking of her as if she were a child and I started to wonder, then, who was the one driving this war, the one who wanted the control.

“You lay in state,” Iseult continued through gritted teeth. “Cadfael’s own hand-picked guards stood watch. You lay for a fortnight, unchanging, mourned by the Unseelie Horde.” She dropped her voice to an appropriately solemn, funereal tone, leaning over my still-prone form as if imparting a great secret. “Cadfael is the one who caused your abduction, dear. Cadfael and his blind faith in his friends.”

“One of the guards?”

Gulliver and Iseult both nodded then, the very picture of smugness. If they’d had been wearing modern clothes and standing anywhere but a massive, stone-walled, ornately decorated bedchamber, they would have looked like those annoying magazine models you just want to punch in the eye.

“And he is only now discovering your absence,” Iseult added in the same mournful tone. “By now he has come to administer the draught from the Queens, by now he has found the empty slab and the other guards.”

“What did you do to the guards?” I asked, my voice a rasp. I couldn’t have more blood on my hands, even by this route. I couldn’t . . .

“They are dead,” the voice behind me said in a dull whisper, the same tone they had been using since I awoke. “They died warriors’ deaths.”

“I wonder,” Gulliver mused theatrically, “what the little prince will do now? Will he send an envoy? No, that’s too passive. Will he attempt to infiltrate the Seelie Court? Perhaps, but only after his first, rash action

fails.” He paused, his dark gaze fixing on mine so intently that I nearly looked away. “I’m betting Cadfael, dear warrior prince that he is, ignores all reason and attempts a massive strike.”

“It’s a shame,” Iseult added in the same tone, making my fingers itch to curl into fists and strike the smirk from her delicate features. “His spy within our ranks is false, feeding him what he wants to hear with just the right touch of truth, just enough to verify, and give him a false sense of security.”

“It is entirely possible,” Gulliver said with a horrific hint of glee, “that his little spy neglected to mention the Sluagh. Or the red caps.”

“Those are nothing,” I said with a bravado I didn’t truly feel. I could move my knees and elbows, I found with a subtle test. *Soon*. “The Unseelie won’t be slowed by those creatures!”

My skin was glowing brightly; I could see the shine rising from my torso, seeping into my vision. Iseult and Gulliver seemed to notice it too—they fell silent, and stared down at me, lips slightly parted. Iseult looked reverential. Gulliver simply ogled.

I decided to press on while I had their undivided attention. “You can’t kill me because you need the line to continue. If you want me to . . . to . . .” I swallowed hard and closed my eyes, driving the images from my head. “If you want me to do that, you have to keep me alive. And I will kill myself if you don’t withdraw from this battle.”

Iseult’s head snapped up and her eyes narrowed. “We will not cede to the Unseelie.”

“Don’t, then! Go back to how it was before! Go back to that centuries-long truce! What the hell did you need to do this for anyway?” I could feel my shoulders again, and my hips. Any minute now, I assured myself. Any minute . . .

“Because,” Gulliver answered, his tone a peculiar mix of annoying older brother and angry soldier, “too long have the Seelie bowed before the

Unseelie. Too long have we been portrayed as virtual eunuchs of the Realm—powerless and clinging to the old ways in futility!”

“So this is all because you’re tired of the PR campaign y’all started ages ago?” I demanded. My stomach quivered in fear which, oddly, heartened me. I could feel it, feel myself, feel the heaviness of my body and the pain in my joints and muscles. For a fortnight, I hadn’t moved or breathed and my body was telling me it would not be cooperative should I try to make any sudden moves.

“We were forced,” Gulliver snarled, more animal than man in that one moment. “We were made to submit to the Unseelie Court!”

“How are you submissive to them?” I cried out, doing my utmost to remain still and not give any sign that I could move if I wanted, even if it wouldn’t be breaking any land-speed records. “Neither Court gets recognition from the humans anymore! Both Courts have to hide all the time! You’re both losing ground!”

Iseult’s expression became icy with anger and eerie calm. “The Seelie Court has ceded to the will of the Horde for far too long; if we had not done so in the first place, we never would have Diminished! We never would have slipped from the eye of the world and we would still be honored and feared!”

Electricity crackled in the air around us and I cringed, expecting to be zapped at any moment, but it never came. The snap and hiss danced in the ether, centered on Iseult herself.

“We,” I said suddenly. “You both said ‘we’. Gulliver, since when are you Sidhe? Rather, Sidhe enough to be part of the court?”

“Silence,” Iseult ordered before my brother could answer. “I am the Queen of the Seelie Court. All laws and knowledge come from me!”

“Well, Miss High and Mighty, I bet there’s a deity or two that’d beg to differ,” I rejoined hotly. A sharp tug to my hair made me yelp, whoever was behind me doing their best to scalp me with a good, hard yank. “*Stop it!*”

“Are you done talking?” they whispered.

“Are you done with your bad Clint Eastwood impression?” I bit back a scream as they the person jerked my hair again, making my scalp burn and neck bloom into a column of pain. “*Damn it!*”

Iseult’s long fingers wrapped around my wrist and she dragged me to my feet. Momentarily surprised by her strength, I forgot to go limp. Realization dawned in her eyes as I staggered to keep my balance, swearing softly under my breath as her grip tightened and she swung me around to face Gulliver.

“Her time is near! Cadfael has not been able to get her with his seed!”

Without realizing what I was about to do, I thrashed harder, kicking out and catching Gulliver’s knee, making him howl with pain as my heel connected with the fragile side of the joint. Hands swept under my arms and clasped around my ribs, crushing the breath from my lungs as Iseult released me to their traitorous friend. “I’m not willing!” I screamed, the sound tearing my already-raw throat. “I will not do this!”

“You don’t need to be willing,” she said, glaring at Gulliver in a silent command for him to get to his feet. “You just need to be alive.”

The arms around my ribs slackened their hold just enough for me to take a breath but not enough for me to struggle free as I was taken back to the bed and lifted onto its surface. Iseult murmured words I couldn’t understand and something wrapped around my ankles and wrists, holding me in as tight as a mummy. The glow of my skin was nearly blinding me now and I was vaguely surprised that it was not hot or painful. It should be, I thought. Something this bright should hurt me . . .

Iseult’s face appeared above me and I gasped, the sight of her sending ratcheting pain through my breast, down my belly and into my legs. I arched in futility against the bonds holding me down and tried to scream again, only to find my voice muted. “You will remain here until we return,” she informed me as one would tell a child to sit on the time-out step and

think about what they'd done. "There are none of your little, abominable pixies about, none of your selkies or what-have-you. Your mate, for ill or naught, has made his presence known."

"How?" I demanded, my voice barely a whisper and only that because of exceedingly great effort on my part.

Iseult smiled benignly, a sight that made my blood run cold. She tilted her head to one side and held up her finger, a silent order for me to listen. After a long moment, I heard it: distant shouts, thumping and crashing noises. "He's brought company."

Gulliver moved closer to me, his thighs pressing against my bound arm as he looked down; his face shadowed and demonic. "I'll guard her, my queen."

She turned a sharp, steady gaze to my brother and her lips parted as if she were about to say something, but silence reigned for nearly a full minute. Something in her expression triggered a notion in my fear-addled mind, and I felt a tiny trickle of smug calm begin to quench the shaking fire threatening to send me gibbering to my fate.

I mustered my strength, pushed past the nearly overwhelming feeling of suffocation, of being pressed down and silenced, and forced the words out. "Are you jealous, Iseult?"

I felt the spell snap like a rubber band, air whooshing into my lungs and my body my own once again. She snarled like an animal, reeling on me, her hand moving so fast that I almost didn't see it, striking me across the face and drawing blood with her long, perfect nails. A hissed curse behind me just seemed to enrage her further; she struck out and made contact with someone solid, eliciting a grunt of pain.

"Are you jealous of Gulliver's sick little fascination with me?" I twisted, wishing that the ropes gave as easily as they seemed to in movies where the heroine just gave a very feminine grunt and shimmed twice and voila, she was on her feet and kicking ass. These ropes seemed to be growing

tighter with every spasming kick and undulation and for a moment I feared that they had been enchanted or some such to make them do that, but I soon realized that it was simply my panic making things worse.

Gulliver grabbed my ankles to stop my movement and jerked hard, making a loud pop issue from somewhere in my knee area. I yelped but didn't stop struggling, working my wrists against the bonds where they bound me. I could feel the skin chaffing and starting to bleed but I didn't stop.

"Gulliver! See to our guests!" Iseult snapped, shoving him away from me in a very unqueenly fashion. "Hywel and I will stay here with Alfhild!"



"Hywel." The name left my lips on a sigh, not so much in surprise but in resignation. "Hywel."

He sighed as well, and remorse and a sense of loss swept over me. Gulliver's departure was marked by the slam of the chamber door, leaving me with Iseult and Hywel for company. "My cousin does not understand," the now familiar voice began, only to be silenced with a glare from Iseult.

"You have put us in danger," she said softly, untying my legs before moving up to my wrists. "You have nearly ruined it all for us, but no matter. It will be remedied soon."

I forced myself to take a deep breath and steady my racing, shimmering thoughts. "I'm sure you realize that my brother wants control of the Court for himself, right?"

"Gulliver sought me out years ago, by your reckoning," she said flatly, pulling me gently into a sitting position, her gaze sweeping over my face before moving down my body and settling on my wrists. "Hywel, bring me the ewer of water and a soft cloth."

She appeared, for a hint of a moment, as a gentle and concerned woman, no traces of malice, or avarice, or power-mad hunger in her eyes. Then she met my gaze and I felt hatred pouring from her like salt into an open wound, the pain of it making me gasp and writhe.

“The trace of purity in your blood opens you to it,” she said in a near-hiss. “You feel it keenly, the Diminishing. You are Diminishing, too. The loss is keen, is it not?” She dabbed at my wrists with a frightening gentleness, keeping me on edge with the fear she would grow violent, tear at the already tender flesh with her sharp nails.

“I didn’t feel it before I came to the Unseelie,” I replied, my eyes never leaving hers. “I feel it now, feel it in my blood. And I know how to stop it, how to make it whole again.”

Hywel moved into my line of vision but would not meet my gaze. “It cannot be stopped, Alfild. The division between the Courts began so many ages ago, and now they both wither and die.”

I shook my head slightly, wincing as Iseult began dabbing at my other wrist, the torn flesh there deeper, more rent from my efforts to escape. “No, they won’t.”

“You are delusional if you think there is a way to save both Courts,” Iseult informed me as she began wrapping my wrists in thin, almost transparent bandages. “The Seelie Court will survive. The Unseelie Horde will bear the brunt of the Diminishing and through their demise, we will grow stronger. Through your blood,” she added, smiling beatifically down at me, “we will grow.”

“I thought I only had a trace of that pure blood you need,” I replied with a hint of smart ass in my tone. “Now that’s good enough for you?”

Hywel was the one who answered me then. “Your blood and Gulliver’s will give the offspring enough to carry on the line.”

“Why are you doing this to the Unseelie, Hywel?” I asked, starting at him so hard I’m surprised he didn’t burst into flames from the intensity of it. “Why are you turning your back on Cadfael, on family?”

“I’m not.” He finally met my gaze then. “I am of both courts, Alfchild. The Unseelie has never given me what I need . . .”

“And with us,” Iseult finished, “he is as a prince.”

“This is because Cadfael is a prince and you’re not?” Even in the supernatural world, I realized, all motivations came down to three things: power, wealth, and sex. The notion sickened and heartened me at once; I could deal with known quantities and deity-in-charge only knows how often I’d had to deal with Gulliver and his craving for all three of those things. “Hywel, you can’t destroy an entire kingdom because you want to wear the fancy pants and sit on the throne.”

Iseult snorted softly. “It is more than that, stupid human. To rule is to be immortal. Gnomes and norns and trolls and goblins . . . the rest may all live for centuries but eventually, they too shall pass into the earth, vanish into the air, their line continuing through their offspring. The Sidhe rule the Courts, rule this realm, and only we are immortal.”

“Nothing is immortal,” I said, tucking my wrists under my thighs as she moved away from me to replace the ewer and cloth in a small, stone stand just a few feet away. The sounds of fighting were louder now, but still indistinct. I couldn’t make out voices, just a low rumble punctuated by the occasional wordless shout, and creeping, cracking, shattering noises like a ship’s mast in a hurricane. “Everything dies.”

“Not us,” Iseult smiled sweetly. “I have been alive for thousands of years, Alfchild. Do you know how I came into power?”

“Pixie dust?”

Hywel snorted under his breath at that but averted his eyes before Iseult could pin him with her glare. “The Courts’ divide became final. My

sister, Mabd, my dark half, took the throne of the Unseelie. I took the throne of the Seelie.”

I blinked. “Why do you have children then? Why do you need to carry on the line?”

“Even we grow tired. We are older than any other creatures in existence save for the gods and the Light Bearers. We will become as they are one day, ascending the physical, and when that happens, we need an heir.” She raked her gaze over me once more and settled on my belly. “You, who bear the last traces of the blood of Danu, will give us that heir, that last mark of power. I cannot breed off Gulliver, nor any other Seelie male.” She shot Hywel a look and I had the most disturbing mental picture pop to mind. “Or Unseelie, for that matter.”

I spread my fingers beneath my thighs, feeling the mattress’s slight give. It was not too soft, I noted, and I wasn’t too high off the ground . . . “Gulliver wants your throne, you realize. Do you know why he killed those humans, before he came to this realm? He wanted their power, their wealth. He coveted things that were not his.”

She didn’t argue with me, but looked vaguely unsettled, her expression shuttered as she flicked a glance from Hywel to me and back again, as if seeking some sort of support or confirmation from the traitor.

“He killed the Keepers as you asked because that would mean he would be one step closer to true power. He can’t rule in the human world, not like he can rule here. You let your own greed blind you, Iseult. You let it suck you into Gulliver’s sickness. Y’all are a match made in Heaven—he doesn’t give a fuck what happens to you because with you gone, he can assume power. He’s your consort and will just step right in, say a few mournful words and then . . .” I shrugged, letting my smile grow edged despite the still-faint pull of the scars on my cheeks. “Then the Realm is his. He will kill me, kill any spawn of his, just to ensure he remains in power. The Immortality is his, isn’t it? If he’s your consort, if he rules, he won’t die

either, not till he's destroyed." I glanced at Hywel and found him starting at me in horror. "You two can't possibly be that dumb, can you? Did you honestly think that Gulliver would just follow you meekly?"

Mirthless laughter bubbled to life in my throat and spilled from my lips as the two glared at me.

"Didn't you know anything about Gulliver before you accepted him, Iseult? Or are you so used to the old ways, the old times when people fawned over you and bowed at your feet?" A flash of a vision sparked before me, the painted men handing me into the bower, the expectation of my death leading to their bounty. I shuddered but pressed on. "He found you, he requested an audience, and now he owns you, doesn't he? It felt good to have human worship again, huh? He said the right things, bowed and scraped and promised and obeyed when it suited him, but think about it Hasn't he started demanding more, pushing for more?" I knew I had hit the last of her buttons then.

She yowled like a scalded cat and leaped at me, hands out as if to throttle me. I moved then, my legs protesting as I shoved myself from the bed and hit the floor rolling, lurching to my feet and staggering past a startled Hywel. I grabbed the first thing I could reach that wasn't bolted down and was heavy enough to do any sort of damage: a small, stoneware lamp. The flame atop it flickered as I swung it high and I realized that I had made the best and possibly most gruesome choice of all the available weapons in the room. I spun about to face the pair of Sidhe, Iseult's bitter screeching of invectives deafening me as panicked laughter burst forth from my lips. I threw the lamp at them both.


The thin stone exploded on impact and sent a spray of flaming oil over them. Iseult's screeches turned to howls of pain as her gown caught. Hywel shouted, tackling her to the ground.

Neither noticed as I leapt over them and ran for the door, jerking it open to flee only to be stopped by a body laying prone at my feet. I

hesitated but a moment before stepping over it and running towards the sound of the fight.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

T WASN'T AS HARD TO FIND THE UNSEELIE as I feared it might be. I followed the trail of dead and dying guards. Most had deep slashes across their throats, to the point where it could be considered decapitation. More than a few had gaping holes in their chests, something vital and obvious missing. That's how you kill a Sidhe, I thought. *Not the iron of myth but this, simple and brutal.*

I spotted Lorelei first, her face tracked with silvery tears but her lips curled into a cruel smile as she swung an axe at a red cap, sending his head flying with an ignominious thunk into one of the corridor's walls then rolling after an ignominious thunk against one of the corridor's walls. She wiped the tears from her cheeks with her blood-spattered sleeve and saw me standing several yards away, my mouth hanging open in shock. "I was not always the Lorelei," she said by way of greeting. "Before the curse I was actually quite a good butcher."

"After, too, apparently," I muttered, forcing myself forward. "Hywel is the traitor. I'm sorry for thinking it was you."

"I expected it," she shrugged, her sweet voice at odds with her gruesome appearance. "This is but a small fight. Niamh returned with Gwydion bearing the news of chaos in the human world; around the Circles and Stones throughout your former realm there are all kinds of odd sightings and mysterious happenings." She chuckled, swinging the double headed axe easily as we picked our way over the trail of red cap bodies.



“That’s it?”

“For now,” she shrugged again, seeming more at ease and happier than I had ever seen her; I was reminded, forcibly, just what her day job was—luring men to their deaths in order to satisfy her curse. When I tripped over a rolling head, she sighed. “Red caps are infinitely predictable. They never expect females to wield power. Or an axe.”

“So few of us expect the latter,” I said, unable to quell the roil of nausea at the sight of the increasingly gory floor. “Where are the others?”

She pointed down the hall, towards the sounds of the fight. “That would be Cadfael, Du, and Jack. Morgan has been at her throne since the battle began in earnest over a fortnight ago.”

“Hywel—”

“We know,” she said sharply, cutting off whatever else I might have said. “Stand down,” Lorelei said suddenly, elbowing me against the near wall. Her axe came up swiftly and I narrowly avoided being hit by the handle. I couldn’t hear anything over my own breathing and the rumble of the nearby fight, but Lorelei tensed, ready for something. After a long, silent moment, she lowered the axe. “Where did you leave Cadfael?”

“Finishing up,” Du’s voice came out of the darkness. “Alfhild?”

“I’m here,” I replied, cautiously stepping out of the shadows. “I don’t think I killed Iseult and Hywel but I’m sure I hurt them pretty bad.”

I quickly relayed what I had done, leaving out a large part of the talking beforehand, and received identical expressions of surprise from both of the beings before me. “What?”

Du shook his head. “I didn’t think you were the wilting damsel type but that surprises even me.” A howl of pain rent the air and I shuddered. Du looked over his shoulder and sighed. “Not Cadfael . . .”

“Gulliver,” I breathed, hoping and fearing at the same time.

“Gulliver is here?” Du asked sharply. “Where?”

“He . . . Iseult sent him to stop Cadfael,” I replied. “He’s not in the fight?”

“Nay,” Du said after a brief hesitation. “Maybe . . .” Still frowning, he turned away from us and started walking, then jogging, back down the darkened corridor, neatly maneuvering around fallen guards.

Lorelei rolled her eyes in an almost girlish fashion and grabbed my sore, bandaged wrist to drag me after. I bit back my start of pain and let her lead me, trying not to think of what I was slipping in and what was brushing my ankles as we hurried.



The fight was not as large as it sounded, but the throne room was decimated. Cadfael and Jack stood amongst a small pile of bodies, mostly red caps but some Sidhe, all decapitated or with their chest cavities torn open, a bloody pile of quivering tissue nearby attesting to just what had been removed. Neither saw us at first and I was silently grateful. My vanity wished I’d had a chance to clean up, to make myself presentable before seeing Cadfael again but a larger part of me was dancing for joy and practically doing cartwheels that he was unharmed. I spoke, breaking the silent spell that held us all still, making him look up and see us for the first time in a long time. “I’m sorry my plan didn’t work.”

He inhaled sharply and, for one swift moment, he looked enraged. Blood matted his hair into knots of dreadlocks, the woad that had painted his body in ancient patterns from head to toe—patterns I knew from lifetimes before—was smeared in some places, missing in others, but stood out starkly on his face, making me see him not as something human but more, something ancient and almost frightening, and altogether powerful.

A tremble started in my belly and spread through my torso then out to my limbs. My gold glow went from a bright and gleaming shine to something burnished and warm. *Great*, I thought, *mood glow* . . .

“Alfhild.” My name was barely a breath on his lips as he crossed the chamber to me, all thoughts of Du, and Jack, and Lorelei, and or anyone else forgotten. The breath left my lungs in a sudden gasp as he grabbed me by my upper arms and hauled me up against his chest, his lips crushing mine in a brutal kiss that left me pained and panting as when he pulled away all too soon.

I could taste salt-sweat and blood and *him* on my lips, the sound of his breath against my ear making me whimper shamelessly. I fervently sought his mouth with mine, drinking of his scent, his presence, everything hungrily, barely noticing as he set me on my feet again, not breaking the kiss but grounding me in truth and practice. I felt the trembling center on my knees and my balance threatened to abandon me. He pulled away gently then and I felt a flush creep up my neck to my cheeks.

“Um, sorry . . .”

“Don’t be,” he said quietly, glancing past me to Lorelei. “She was coming to find you—”

“I understand,” I cut him off before he could explain further. “You had . . . er . . . some, um, killing to do . . .” I took a deep breath, clearing my lust-addled thoughts. “Gulliver was supposed to find you but Lorelei said he didn’t show . . .”

Jack spoke from behind Cadfael. “He never showed his lying hide.” His voice was nearly a growl, dark and feral. “The Hunt will find him if he’s left the Court.”

“He hasn’t.” Du’s voice was soft but urgent. We turned to face him, standing amidst a pile of meaty, red organs and bits of bone. “He would not leave the Court without what he came for.”

Lorelei swiftly relayed what I had told her of my time in Iseult's chamber, earning me a look of mixed appraisal and fear from Cadfael and, to a lesser degree, Du and Jack. She paused, adding in a rush, "Alfhild may not realize it, but she has brought this to a head. We can fix this and quickly. I just ask that I be allowed to give Gulliver his ultimate punishment."

"Mabd might beg to differ," I said as Cadfael offered my name for the one who would decide Gulliver's fate.

"Or neither one of you," Du said, moving in to stand beside us. "He watches from above." As if on cue, we all tilted our faces up, peering at the gallery overhead.

Ornately hung with festoons of shimmering fabric, the gallery served as a viewing platform of sorts for Iseult and her immediate court, those who would oversee the goings on of the lesser members of the ruling class. It served to set them visibly and psychologically higher than the others, reinforcing the practice that she and her chosen others were indeed above them all.

It was dark past the lush hangings but now that Du had said it, we all knew Gulliver was there, biding time. No sound came from the gallery, no sign of his flight to a more secure hiding spot. I pressed closer to Cadfael and waited, fear bitter on my tongue.

"Gulliver," Cadfael called. "Are you a coward now, along with your other transgressions?"

"No," he called back easily. "Not a coward but not a fool. I will not fight five of you against one of me."

Even Cadfael had to hear the laugh in his voice, the tinge of enjoyment at the chaos before him. "If you want to seize power so badly," Cadfael called up to the gallery, "you fight me, no one else. You want to Diminish the Horde in favor of your benighted lover's Court? Fight me!"

The last was said on a shout, Cadfael flinging his battered, bloody sword towards the gallery in a sudden, swift movement. Gulliver's wordless cry gave me some satisfaction, thinking that maybe Cadfael had hit home before my brother had even gotten a chance to attempt a dirty trick or three.

"Come," Lorelei whispered in my ear. "We'll move to the door so Gulliver does not claim unfairness."

At that moment, I didn't care about fair or unfair but I let her lead me just outside the door to the chamber, past the pile of red cap heads, to stand with Du and Jack. "Is this going to be a duel?" I asked in a loud whisper. "Du, is this like those old fashioned sword fights?"

"That," he sighed, "all depends on your brother."

I tried to press forward, past Jack, to see better as metal slid against metal, but he wouldn't move.

"Nay, lass, you've seen enough this day. You're still an innocent." He paused, his green gaze deep and smothering. "Innocent for the time being."

I started to protest but Du pushed me back even further, forcing me to stand next to Lorelei. "They will forget soon," she murmured. "Cadfael will do his usual and they will forget we're here and we will be able to push forward."

It was easy to forget how shabbily she had treated me at first, how howlingly depressed she had been when she discovered that Cadfael had chosen me, despite the fact I was fighting it every step of the way. I wondered what had brought on this change, if it was some enlightenment or shift in the universe or something more mundane, but I did not have time to ponder it overlong before I felt a tug on my tangled, lank hair. "Shhh," I hissed to her. "Not yet."

"Why not?"

My spine jerked straight. “Hywel.” I licked my lips but didn’t scream; I didn’t want to distract Cadfael.

The distinct odor of burned flesh and fabric mingled with sweat and blood and incense as Hywel pulled me further back into the hall.

Du shifted suddenly, turning to face me, his eyes going wide as he saw what was happening. As he opened his mouth to shout, I shook my head slightly. “No, don’t,” I pleaded. “Please!”

I glanced at Lorelei and saw her placid, unconcerned face. “You are a traitor, aren’t you?”

She shrugged. “I am my own. I no longer have a need for Cadfael.” Flicking a glance at Du, she added, “Nor the rest of the Horde.”

“What did she promise you?” Jack asked softly, his back to us but his attention fully riveted. The clang of metal and grunt of male exertion rang loudly in the hall, a warlike pulse under the thread of our conversation. “Power in the Court?”

“Nay,” Lorelei smiled. “Freedom. Freedom from the Realm.”

Du hissed between his sharp teeth. “Just kill yourself and be done with it then! Why do this to us? To Alfild?”

“I do not want death,” she spat. “I want to be *free*!” She lunged forward at this last, lunged as Hywel jerked me back by my hair. “Is Iseult dead?”

“Not dead,” Hywel promised her. “Grave but not dead.” He jerked again and my neck popped loudly and painfully. “She awaits your pleasure, Alfild.”

“She can keep waiting,” I said flatly, taking a deep breath and shoving back with my elbows while stomping down with my heel on his instep. He loosened his grip just enough for me to break free, tearing a clump of my hair out in the process. Lorelei, tangled with Du, staggered in surprise as I swung from Hywel’s grasp, darting towards Jack before changing my course.

I don't remember consciously making the decision to do so but I started running down the hall, slipping in the drying blood, my legs screaming protest and head throbbing in pain, but I didn't stop. I sprinted as best I could for the large pile of red cap bodies just out of reach, just past the last pool of torchlight.

Hywel snarled invectives in tongues I had never dreamed of hearing at my escape, but I would not slow down. I reached the cadavers as Hywel reached me, his fingers wrapping in my shirt as I dove for the gory pile. Before he could drag me up, I found what I had been hoping for and closed my hand around the long, hard length of it.

I was thrown off my feet and sent flying into the corridor's wall, my skull cracking hard against it before I slid to the floor. I saw stars for a moment as Hywel advanced, Du's howling and cursing assuring me that Lorelei was being kept busy just long enough, giving me just enough time.

"Release her!" Iseult's voice snapped from the down the hall. "She is mine!"

"No," I cried, my voice hitching and breaking. I shoved myself to my feet, refusing to look at the approaching Seelie queen, focusing everything on Hywel. "I am nobody's!" I swung then, putting my entire weight into it, making up for what I lacked in strength by what I could provide in momentum. Time slowed and hung on the tip of a blade then, everything became a blur as the heavy axe in my hands dropped, gravity and force pulling it true. Hywel's guttural, animal cry snapped the world into clarity then, and I saw it all in vivid color.

The burnished glow from my skin exploded into my own personal supernova of light as the axe broke through his neck and his body fell to its knees, spurting great fountains of blood, his head hanging by a few tendons. I stumbled forward, the axe flying from my hands as I twisted sideways and fell, landing in the growing pool of blood.

The glow covered me and I felt my body arch and twist before my voice was torn from my throat in a harsh and panicked scream. I heard Du call for me, heard Jack call for Cadfael, and then all went black.



You are not dead.

Was there any doubt?

I was charged to tell you that. Skadi said I must for you are a very melodramatic creature.

I am not!

You are in the Between once more, Alfchild.

Impossible. I can feel. I hurt . . . Goddamn, I hurt . . . What happened?

Silence met my question but a familiar glow danced into life before my eyes.

Am I about to have another vision?

No . . . it's more of a visitation . . .

I felt as if I were falling but before I could panic, I was sitting in the Snow Queen's home, near the hearth, a warm cup of something before me. Everything was cast in golden shadow and I felt oddly warm and at peace.

"I'm glad."

I blinked and looked around, unable to see the speaker but knowing that they were near. "Skadi? Mother Hoelle? Annis?"

A gentle, husky laugh sent chills of pleasure down my spine. "No, child, I am none of them but they are all me. Just as you are, and Cadfael, and even Iseult and Gulliver."

The name came to my lips and was spoken before I could fully understand. "Danu."

"Your blood is my own, and you called for me in your need, asked for me without speaking a word. I know you are tired, daughter, and you have

been through so much, but soon it will be done and you will choose which life is your own. Cadfael and the Horde, or your life among the humans. You killed to protect the Horde, daughter. Such a thing is not a sin amongst the Sidhe as it is amongst the humans; it must be done to protect, to defend those weaker than the perpetrator.”

“What about Gulliver?” I tried but I couldn’t muster sorrow or pity for him now, not when I had seen the last vestiges of sanity stripped away from his mind, when I had seen what lengths he would go to just to have power, such a transient thing.

“He is alive. As is Iseult, incidentally.”

“And Lorelei?”

“She, alas, has been freed from her curse.”

I nodded to myself, the glow growing brightly for a moment before fading to a dim shimmer. “And Jackie?”

“She is awake. She has been visiting with Du for a while now.”

“A while?”

“It’s been many moons since you destroyed Hywel, Alfild. Morgan brought you here, ignoring her nature and duties in order to save you.”

I felt my heart contract painfully at that. “But I’m not dead, am I?”

“No, not dead . . . but you hovered at the brink for a very long time. You are alive, Alfild, and they are waiting for you.”

The shimmer vanished entirely and a cold wind swirled around the room, moving in spirals of golden ice crystals and snowflakes, growing harder and faster as it centered on me, sending bone-numbing chills deep into my body. I gasped when it became sheer pain, and, in that moment, I was jerked away, the kitchen and hearth falling past my feet as if I were lifted out of a dollhouse.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“**S**O . . . I’M VERY SORRY I THREATENED to have you neutered.”

Du’s soft laugh teased my ears as I dug my fingers into the soft quilt covering me.

“It was of no mind,” he murmured brusquely.

I frowned. What was I hearing?

“I’m just trying to understand,” Jackie said softly. “Alfhild wasn’t mad when she told me she had faeries then?”

“Well, she might have been mad but . . .” he laughed.

“Don’t listen to him, Jackie,” I muttered, my tongue feeling thick and cottony in my mouth. “He’s a bad faerie . . .”

Deep quiet fell for all of (and I counted) ten seconds, then Jackie shrieked. “*You’re awake!*”

“And deaf,” I groaned, but gave in to the embrace that was smothering me. Du called for Cadfael as I clung tightly to Jackie, breathing in her soap scent and familiar, giddy chatter.

A soft, low voice urged her aside and long fingered hands probed gently at my face, my torso, and I laid back and let them. After a moment, I put a name with the face. “Gwydion,” I said quietly, smiling. “How are you? And Niamh?”

He grinned. “We are well. She is most upset that she was not here to stop Gulliver—she offered to seduce him and drain his life away, but Cadfael would have none of it.”



He paused, and then leaned in to whisper, “We’re expecting soon and she’s been overdoing it, you see.”

I nodded. From the brief moments I’d had with Niamh, I could believe it, remembering her exuberant life force and determined attitude. “Invite me to the baby shower, huh?”

Gwydion laughed. “If she has her way, we’re naming the child after you. You’ve become something of a hero since the Battle at the Seelie Court!”

I blinked in surprise as the mage and healer sat back. “The whowhatnow?”

“Gwydion, don’t overdo it,” Cadfael said from the direction of the door. We were in his chamber, apparently converted to a convalescent room while I was unconscious. “She seems to have picked up a rather nasty habit of fainting and prolonged visits to other realms without telling her mate.”

I met his gaze and smiled shyly. It was so, I decided. I didn’t need to think on my choice, because he was it. From the very first, surreal moment I saw him climb out of my rose bushes, part of me had known, part of me had called to him as he had called to me, and despite all of the weirdness and mayhem of the past . . . “How long?” I asked suddenly. “How long as it been?”

Jackie tore her gaze away from Du long enough to answer me. “It’s been almost a year, Alfild. We’ve been here for so long . . . Du says your home is hidden from human eyes now, part of the realm. And . . .” she paused, her lips turning down in a definite frown, “and we’re thought to be dead. The story is that your brother killed us both . . .”

“Where is Gulliver?” I asked, almost dreading the answer. “Is he . . . did he get free?”

Du cleared his throat gently. “Jackie, would you like to see pixies?” Gwydion followed them from the room, leaving just Cadfael and myself in silence.

“Cadfael, where is he?”

“He is . . . safe. He will not harm us anymore.”

“Is he dead?”

“No, my love, he is not dead . . .” He sighed and reached out to touch my hair, pushing a now-smooth strand from my eyes. “He is imprisoned. Mabd has given him to the Sluagh.”

I gasped. That was a fate worse than death, the eternal existence of the damned. “He got his immortality,” I breathed. “He’ll never die now . . .”

“And he is of the Sidhe,” Cadfael added, his fingers stilling on my chin, tilting my face up. “Iseult has been . . . relocated.”

“She’s still alive,” I said, a statement rather than a question. At Cadfael’s raised brow, I smiled faintly. “I spoke with Danu . . .”

“Ah. Well, yes. Iseult has a new task in the realm . . . She has taken over for Lorelei, now that the previous one has been freed from the curse.”

I bit back a sharp, bitter bark of laughter. “God, you Sidhe don’t pull any punches, do you? Condemn them both to live in their own little hells . . . neither dying but both ultimately powerless . . .” I paused then, a thought occurring to me. “Who will rule the Seelie now, Cadfael?”

He smiled slowly, leaning in to brush a kiss against my lips, then my nose and forehead. “Mabd.”

“They . . . the court didn’t Diminish?”

“No,” he smiled more broadly now. “We are as of old! We are one Court once more, under Mabd—”

His words were cut off in a sudden crushing kiss as joy and excitement swept over me.

He laughed against my lips and pressed against me, pushing me into the pillows as my arms came around his neck. Oxygen was an unfortunate necessity, causing us to break the kiss after what seemed like eons and yet not long enough.

Cadfael buried his face in my neck. “Now what do we do, Alfild?”

I smiled, new confidence coursing through my veins. “We sleep.”

“And then?”

“Then,” I sighed, closing my eyes, “I would like to meet my subjects.”

He laughed. “You’ve met them before. Twice, at least.”

“Yeah, but that was before. I’d like to do something formal, you know? A party, a ball, something fancy. If I’m going to be a faerie princess, I want to have a big party and wear a fluffy dress.”

“They’ve placed the axe you used to kill Hywel in a place of honor, you know.” He kissed my neck and smiled against my skin. “There are songs in your honor, mostly about how you destroyed the traitor to the Horde.”

“Mmm. I’d love to hear them.”

“While you wear your fluffy dress?”

“Mmmm, you know me well, Cadfael . . . you know me well . . .”

