

BOOK THREE OF THE CROWN OF THE FAE KING

CROWN

OF



WINGS AND
WHISPERS

L.L. MUIR

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WHISPERS

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GREENTOED FAIRY

*For my children...
for not running
when mom pulls
a questionable-looking
rabbit out of her hat*

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PROLOGUE: "TULLOCH ARD!"

"Tulloch Ard!"

Wickham woke to the MacKenzie battle cry and jumped from his bed, fearing that the enemy had indeed come to Hope House. It shouldn't be possible, since he and his sisters had only renewed the protection wards on the estate hours ago, before the ceremony!

But why else would someone raise the cry in the house?

He hissed at Ivy. "Find the lads. Keep silver in yer hand. Hide as best ye can." He pulled his longsword free from beneath the bed, grabbed the hilt of his silver dagger from the nightstand, and shook off the scabbard. When he plunged into the near-dark hallway, Urban was there, armed just as Wickham was, in nothing but his boxer briefs.

"Who gave the cry?"

Urban shook his head. "Sounded like one of the brothers."

Together, they headed for the heart of the house and turned right, down the main corridor. No surprises came as they made their way past the kitchen to the door beyond. A quick peek at the back drive proved the threat wasn't coming, so it was already inside.

Back-to-back, they hurried for the other end of the house, prepared for an attack from any quarter. Brian caught up to them. "It's Flann. Something horrible, something dangerous. That's all I ken."

Persi and Lennon came from the lass's wing and waited for him and Urban to pass. No sign of Flann. Had Orion taken the man and fled? No doubt he was desperate for news since the hidden microphones had been discovered. But how had he breached the wards?

The foyer was empty, so they moved on toward the study. Wickham's stomach dropped when he realized the enemy wouldn't have come for hostages, but for the boxes! If he already had his hands on them, it would take a mighty distraction to keep Orion from popping out with them. Perhaps he already had.

Wickham paused only a second or two to listen at the door, then kicked it open, weapons at the ready. "Stop!"

Beside him, Brian hit the switch. In the blinding light, he could tell the room was empty. No Orion, no monsters, and no Flann. And one of the Fae king's boxes was missing!

"Can ye find yer brother?"

Brian shook his head. "Won't answer."

Urban scowled. "Or maybe he cannae."

Brian shook his head more adamantly. "It's not that he can't. I don't understand."

Wickham shoed them all out the door again. "Spread out. We'll find him." He headed to the foyer, intending to search out front, but just as he was about to turn the handle, Brian's gasp stopped him.

The Irishman hurried into the parlor. Wickham followed suit. Flann sat in a chair, calm as could be—until Wickham looked closer. The man's face was ghostly white, his gaze fixed on the floor. Thankfully, his chest rose and fell to prove he was alive.

Brian grabbed his brother's shoulder. "Ye gave me quite a scare. Just ye wait. I'll pay ye back in kind some mornin' when ye're sunk deep in yer warm bed."

Flann didn't react.

"Brother?"

Wickham's gaze caught on the metal box resting on the blue couch before the fire. His relief was brief, replaced by surprise to find the lid was ajar. He moved in for a closer look, then glanced back at the man in the chair. "Flann? This isnae the first box. How the devil did ye get it open?"

Flann stiffened, his jaw flexed, but still, he kept staring at the floor.

Brian nudged his brother's shoulder again. "Don't tell me ye've been the Fae King all this while and not said a word."

"*Found him!*" Persi's voice came from just outside the door, and the team, most of them in nightclothes, began to filter in and find seats.

Wickham was conscious of his own state of undress, but he didn't dare leave the room. Not just yet.

He laid his weapons on the sofa and carefully eased the lid off to peer at the book inside. A large, black Bible sat alone in the shadows. It was old, but not by more than a couple hundred years. He reached inside and flipped up the wood cover without touching the box itself. There was a list of family members—a Muir family Bible. He rifled through the first batch of pages but found nothing out of the ordinary.

Flann began to blink more regularly. Bodies moving into the room finally drew him out of his stupor, and though he avoided all eye contact, his gaze was no longer fixed.

An alarm tripped in Wickham's head. "Someone's crossed the wards. Leavin'." He grabbed his weapons again, then looked around the room. "Lennon? Where's Lennon?" He'd seen her in the hall, knew she had answered the cry. She'd been fully dressed...

Urban stood in the doorway. "Must still be lookin' for Flann. I'll guide her back."

The older man's grip on the chair was so fierce his knuckles were bone-white, and Wickham could ignore the obvious no longer.

"Flann," he said, and squatted before the chair. "Tell us what happened. What's upset ye so?"

Flann bit his lips together, but his eyes flashed to the left, to the fire, before he turned his head purposefully to the right. It was enough.

Wickham moved fast, kicked the burning bits of wood apart, then grabbed the poker to examine what was left. And there, beneath the andiron, was a scrap of what had once been a folded card. He snatched it out of harm's way and knocked off the red bits still gnawing at the edge. A mere two inches remained.

He turned and waved it to catch Flann's attention. "This it, then?"

The Irishman swallowed.

Wickham opened it. The scratch was too difficult to read, so he took it closer to the sconce on the wall. The words were random, all that remained was the right side of a message, written in the old *Seanair*'s hand.

...have been...

...braver...

...my dear...

...DeNoy...

...vive...

And on the back,

...lock...

...find ye.

Wickham turned back to Flann. "DeNoy?"

Flann swallowed again, looked at his hands, and nodded.

Urban came to the doorway, breathless, still in his underthings. "No sign of her outside."

Wickham looked at Flann again. "And Lennon?"

Persi came out of her chair. "What? Lennon's not a DeNoy! She can't be."

He waved her back. "No one said Lennon was a DeNoy."

Flann's gaze shot up and locked with Wickham's before he gave a single, sickening nod.

Wickham threw his head back, closed his eyes, and cursed the Grandfather for his cruel, cruel trick. Then he shouted to the world, "Find her!"

The team scattered. Brian remained at his brother's side as if he thought he needed protecting. Wickham shook his head to let the man know he had nothing to worry about.

"That's not all," Flann said.

"Right, then. Tell me."

The man described everything that had happened in the past hour, while the rest of them had been abed, up until the moment Lennon had handed him the note.

"Do you remember what it said?"

Flann nodded. "My Dear Lennon, No doubt ye have been brave, but ye must be braver still. For ye, my dear, are the last of the DeNoy. And ye absolutely must survive."

Wickham exhaled loudly and shook his head. "It makes no sense. It was he who insisted any DeNoy must be killed immediately. Man, woman, or child—"

"Only one explanation," Brian chimed in. "Sometime after yer visit in the past, somethin' happened to change his mind."

Flann hunched his shoulders. "There's more."

They waited and waited.

A tear squeezed out of the corner of the man's eye and jumped from wrinkle to wrinkle until he batted it away. "On the back of the note—a postscript. *Just be certain ye lock yerself before the Fae find ye.*" Flann shook his head again, knocked his fingers against the scrap of paper still in Wickham's hand. "I remember...Lennon never turned the card over. She didn't see the postscript."

"Two guesses who's been waitin' to scoop her up," Brian said. "And the first guess doesn't count."

PICKING MY EXECUTIONER

*F*inally, she's mine.

The indecisive storm clouds hovering over Oxford offered a smooth escape out of the city. The hour was early, and the mist clinging to the campus meant few Fae could have seen Griffon pause on the rooftop of Christchurch. But he'd had no choice, couldn't ignore his need to look into Lennon's eyes to see if she was toying with him.

He wouldn't take her another foot until he knew it was *him* she was after and not the child he still held hostage.

But no. One glance and he knew her heart was well and truly broken—and if that's what it took to send her into his arms, he'd take it and be grateful. Her heart would mend, and he was the one who could do the mending.

“Why?” he demanded. Why had she summoned him?

She swallowed back a fresh wave of tears. “Because I...I am...DeNoy.”

“I know,” he said, and pulled her tight against him as he plunged back into the sky in a new direction. It was too soon to take her to his favorite sanctuary, where Fallon and her grandmother would be preparing for a morning trip to the sea. They'd be disappointed when he didn't show up, but it couldn't be helped. Fallon would miss the beach today.

As he intended, Lennon was rendered unconscious by their rapid ascent. He took advantage and kissed the top of her head. Her hair was cold against his lips, reminding him she didn't have his same capacity for enduring weather changes. Winter

was on the horizon, and for her, flying would need to cease for a while.

But at least they were together. Sailing through the heavens or grounded on earth, what did it matter to him?

In his mind, he sorted through a dozen places he could take her. Most were too far away. The mountain retreat they'd once shared for a day wasn't plausible. She'd nearly frozen to death that first time. And they had too much to discuss to be distracted by the cold.

They needed somewhere warmer. Yet close.

He stopped thinking altogether as his wings canted, taking his decisions from him. He would take his precious DeNoy... home.



I WOKE ONCE AND FOUND MYSELF IN A FAMILIAR POSITION, draped across Griffon's arms as we rose and dipped in the air. Thanks to the taste of salt and the kiss of humidity on the wind, I didn't have to look to know we were over the ocean. I swallowed back my fear of falling and drowning—if he wanted me dead, he would have dropped me already.

Why didn't he want me dead?

The wording of The Covenant had been clear. All DeNoy must be destroyed in order to protect...someone. And the recordings from the *Seanair* were even clearer—if you find a DeNoy, man woman or child, kill first, question after.

But then, in that cryptic note enclosed with a Bible, the old man had insisted I must survive. Why the change? What had he known? And why hadn't he explained?

Could it be that Griffon knew the same thing? Was that why I was still alive? He'd known I was DeNoy, but for how long? Before he'd kidnapped me and used me for bait? If so, the least he could have done was tell me when he let me go.

I swore to myself that if I lasted through the day, I was going to find out.

The air shifted, but I kept my eyes closed.

“I know you’re awake,” he said, close to my ear.

I opened one eye and found him looking down at me with mocking laughter in his eyes. For some reason, he was awfully pleased with himself.

“Shouldn’t you be watching the road or something?”

He laughed and beat his wings a few times before gliding again.

I turned my head and saw a long dark stretch of cliffs in the distance, closing fast. The morning sun was up, the sky clear. I had to ask, “Won’t someone see us?”

“Mortals? Not unless I want them to. The Fae and the Uncast are a different story. Perhaps witches.” He winked at me, then thankfully turned his attention to where we were headed.

The black cliffs grew tall and menacing and I assumed our destination was yet another hideaway that would be impossible to escape, like the one in the mountains had been. But I couldn’t complain. This time, I’d come to him, invited him to take me away from my friends and kill me. And now that the shock of the morning was wearing off, my instinct to survive was returning, and I was grateful I was still breathing.

Griffon’s grip on me tightened just before he dove closer to the water. Though he hadn’t moved much, it increased our speed and the wet spray of the ocean dampened my skin as we flashed past hundreds of waves. The cliffs rushed toward us too, growing suddenly, like some grizzly bear jumping to his feet to loom over us. It was then I realized my winged escort was stoking the drama for my benefit. He was trying to impress me.

We shot up the face of the dark rocks to find civilization once again. To the right, the ruins of a castle stood on a small island in the bay. And before us lay lines of buildings

compressed together, each of which was painted a different shade of pastel.

The cliffs, the speed, the drama all ended with a shock of playful color. Like a platter of dark chocolate brownies topped with sherbet ice creams of pink, orange, blue, lavender, and yellow. At the heart of the bay, it looked like the medieval castle was trying to rise from the dead and gobble up a more modern building painted a pale misty green.

And then it was all behind us.

The ocean fell away, along with the stretches of cheerful paint, replaced by squares of farmland quilted together in various shades of greens and tans, separated by tufts of treetops. The days of harvest were gone, but it would probably take a hard frost to kill off all that healthy foliage.

I made a mental note to tell Griffon that if he ever took me in the air again, I would prefer sleeping through the landing. Watching the ground rise up to meet us, I was certain this was what skydivers felt like the first time they plunged back to earth.

Maybe Griffon sensed my terror because he slowed down drastically, his wings beating back the air until we all but hovered over a small dirt road with a vibrant green stripe of growth between the tire tracks. Instead of putting me on my feet immediately, he just started walking, carrying my heavy body like I weighed no more than a pillow.

“Hey.”

“Yes?”

“You can put me down now.”

He stopped short. “Oh. Forgive me. I’ve just grown used to...”

“Hauling me around?”

He set my feet on the ground but kept hold of my shoulders while I steadied myself. “Holding you in my arms,” he said quietly.

I looked up into his eyes. They were so close. His lips within reach, waiting, but coming no nearer. I had a ridiculous desire for him to pick me up again, so we had no choice but to stay that close.

That's what he'd been trying to say.

I laughed lightly. "I was getting used to it too."

"No more of that for a while, though."

"What do you mean?"

"We've passed the equinox, which means it will be far too cold to fly with mortals."

"Mortals? What about DeNoys?"

His smile fell away and he glanced from side to side as if fearing we might be overheard. "Whilst we are here, we mustn't speak of it, even if you believe we are alone. Can you do that?"

I nodded. "But you are going to explain it all to me...first chance we get?"

"First chance we get." He leaned quickly, gave me a peck on the lips as if he couldn't help himself any longer, then started down the road.

A permanent grin grabbed my face and I wondered if I would ever get it off again. Since he marched ahead of me, dragging me along, I didn't bother hiding it. Ahead, the corner of a roof peeped out from a brief gap in a mass of tall trees. Otherwise, I saw no other structures, no barns, no farmer's fields.

"Where are we?"

He slowed so I could catch up. His grin matched my own. "Home, Lennon Todd. We're home."

THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME

The house I'd seen through the trees was modest if I compared it to the last two places I'd lived. A mansion if you dropped it on a lot in Hazelton, Idaho. Two stories tall with a high-pitched roof, the house was covered in periwinkle paint that would have fit in perfectly with the cheerful buildings on the coast. A deep porch ran along all sides and was littered with mismatched chairs and benches, and a long white swing wide enough to seat four people.

The trees and shrubbery acted as a protective wall around the place and allowed enough room between it and the house for a view of the flower bushes and enough parking for a dozen cars. But each bush seemed to lean toward the building as if nature were eager to take over the place. Even the trees tilted slightly toward the roof, but I couldn't say whether they were guarding or menacing.

Three cars were parked along the far side, hidden in the early morning shadows of the house.

"I take it you don't live alone?"

Griffon scowled slightly, confused. Then his brow cleared and he laughed. "When I said home, I meant...this is my mother's home."

I was instantly nervous and began second guessing my wardrobe choices. I'd had no time at all to decide what to wear. It hadn't mattered when I thought I was headed to my

death. Now, I looked like a vaguely human-shaped laundry basket. I hadn't even brushed my hair!

He pulled my hands away from my head and gave them a squeeze. "You look like you've been hurtling through the sky. She'll expect nothing less."

"Great." I rolled my eyes. "You fly a lot of women out to meet Mum, do you?"

He just laughed and hauled me toward the front steps. Halfway to the porch, he stopped and tried to push me behind him. Someone rose from a rocking chair, took a step toward us, then stopped.

Archer.

But now, there weren't bars between us, and I felt like I'd stumbled onto one of Orion's monsters and forgotten my silver blade. I tried to soothe myself with the knowledge that Griffon would defend me, as he had in the dungeon, but my panicked heart wouldn't listen.

"Griffon," he said, but the voice wasn't right. And his hair was too light. The jeans and plaid shirt weren't his usual fancy-monastery style.

"Muddy."

The man sneered. "That's Mully, to m' friends," he said, then smiled at me. "Colm Mulrooney, but Colm will do fine." He scowled at Griffon and waited for an introduction. The friendly smile cinched it—he definitely wasn't Archer.

The screen door flew open and a short rotund woman shot out of the house. "Griffon!" she shouted. "Oh, Griffon!" She rushed right off the edge of the porch and threw herself at him, trusting he could catch her, which he did, after he flung my hand away. "Archer found ye, did he?" She looked over Griffon's shoulder, obviously looking for Archer, and found me instead. "Here, now." She pushed out of his arms and he set her on her feet while she eyed me up and down. "Oo's this, then?"

Her Welsh accent was charming, the way she stretched out all her vowels, giving her words an extra syllable or two.

Griffon retreated a few steps and pulled me up next to him. “Mother, this is...Lucy Morgan.” He gave me a little squeeze at my waist that warned me to go along. “We’re together,” he continued. “She’s from the States. Lucy, this is my mother, Bridie Trahern.”

“Together, is it?” Bridie reached behind her, untied her apron, and after she pulled it from around her neck, tried to straighten her iron-colored curls. She then grabbed my free hand, hauled me up the last two stairs, and wrapped her arms around me, pinning mine to my sides.

Colm watched closely.

“That’s enough, Mother. Don’t frighten her away.” Griffon nodded toward the other man. “What’s he doing here?”

With her apron, she waved dismissively. “He was the only one answerin’ his phooone.”

“You tried to call me?”

“I did. I thought ye must have gotten the message, since ye’ve come. Archer and I decided we need to hold a wake for yer sister. He’s out there trying to find ye.” To me she said, “Welcome to our hooome, lass. Sorry I am to greet ye with a wreath on the dooor, but I’m sure ye’ll take the good with the bad when it’s Griffon ye’re keen on.”

I didn’t understand, though I did notice the black ribbon wreath hanging on the door just inside the screen. I turned to Griffon, hoping he’d explain, but Colm beat him to it.

“Ye see,” he said, “*our* Daphne went off the radar months ago, and we’ve just learned she died. Poor Bridie—”

“Lucy knows about Daphne,” Griffon hissed. “Don’t you have somewhere else you need to be?”

The man grinned like a cat with a belly full of canary. “I promised Archer I’d stay until the wake tomorrow. Help yer mother with anytin’ she needs.”

“Well, I’m here now.”

“Aye, so ye are. And with a new pet on yer arm. Why don’t ye mind yer pet and I’ll mind yer mother.”

Bridie narrowed her eyes. “Ye’ll be on yer best behavior, Muddy, or I’ll thank ye to leave.” Her eyes flew wide. “Oh, no! I meant to say Mully.” She gave Griffon’s arm a harmless slap. “See what ye made me do?” When she turned toward the door, she gave me a quick wink that convinced me she’d called him Muddy on purpose.

I loved her instantly.



GRIFFON LET THE SCREEN SLAM SHUT AFTER US, BUT COLM opened it and let himself in like an obnoxious neighbor kid who refused to take a hint, taking advantage of Bridie’s reluctance to be rude. He tagged along, at a safe distance, as the woman gave me a quick tour of the house that took us to the second floor. And as the minutes passed, Griffon’s scowl grew darker in direct opposition to Colm’s widening grin.

Finally, at the bottom of a stairway that led to a third floor, Griffon turned and growled, but Colm had disappeared.

Bridie chuckled. “Muddy was always foolish,” she told me, “but never stupid.”

We followed her slippered feet to the top of the stairs. At the far side of a small landing, she opened the door to a large room with angled ceilings and a wide bed pushed against the outer wall between two gabled windows. Piled in the corners were the kind of things you’d expect to find in an attic. Suitcases, a stack of paintings on the floor tipped against the wall. Boxes labeled with markers, but not a speck of dust.

“Griffon’s room,” Bridie said. “It’s become a bit of a catch-all, I’m afraid. I can assign Lucy to Daphne’s room, I suppose—”

“She’ll sleep here, Mother. I’ll be comfortable in the barn.”

The woman looked relieved and nodded before she padded to the door. “Ye’ll find a shirt now, Griffon, and stop embarrassing the lass. I’ll just see where Muddy’s gotten to.

Not the kind of Fae ye want wanderin' 'round yer house unsoooperised."

As she went, she very intentionally left the door half open.

Griffon marched after her and just as intentionally pushed it wider, then gestured to the hallway with a nod. "Kissing behind closed doors will insult her sensibilities."

"Oh. So you're *not* going to kiss me?"

"What do you think?"

He went to the chest of drawers, produced a decadently soft-looking sweater and pulled it on. It had blob-shaped patches of gray, white, and black that overlapped. He slowly stalked back to me as if daring me to run. I had to admit I was tempted, just so he could catch me as he'd done before. The entire female sex would be disgusted and disappointed in me, but I couldn't help myself. I wanted him, and just as badly, I wanted him to show me how badly he wanted me.

I took a step back, just to worry him. He laughed and closed the space between us in one long stride. When his mouth came down on mine, there was nothing gentle about it, and with his arms, he clutched me to him like he might never let me go.

It was perfect. No matter what happened afterward, I would at least have this.

We had inched halfway to the bed before we came to our senses. Griffon cleared his throat and led me to the window instead, to point at a small barn out back. "I'll be there tonight. You see? Not far at all." He glanced at me, watching my response. I didn't know if he was inviting me to sneak out of the house or trying to reassure me. "Anything happens, anything at all, you open this window and holler, do you understand?"

A shudder ran through me. "Colm won't be staying in the house, will he?"

"Over my dead body."

“Then I should be fine.” Something worried him and I asked what it was.

“Wickham does not know about this place. My father’s enchantments are much more powerful than any witch’s. They cannot come after you here.” He nodded toward the open door, where sounds of distant conversation were little more than a murmur. “Colm only got through because my mother invited him. Without an explicit invitation, he couldn’t find the place though he’s been here a dozen times.”

“I don’t understand. Who is he?”

“He and Daphne were together for a while. A few years ago. Until she realized he was just a gilhooly.”

“Gilhooly?”

“A person with questionable instincts. Full of bologna.”

“Ah. I didn’t realize Fae would have those too.”

He leaned down to kiss me, but I kept it short, knowing how little control I had left. I stepped away from the window, pulled a chair from under a desk, and sat down. The only seat left was the bed, which he took.

I scanned the walls, the shelves for any hint of his childhood. “No old toys? No old yearbooks? I was hoping to find out more about the young Griffon Carew.”

“My youth wasn’t spent here. Same with Archer and Daphne. My father had many wives, but Bridie is the only stepmother we cared for. Though we were full grown, she insisted on treating us like her own children, despite her youth when they married. She gave us a place to call home. None of the others bothered with us.”

“I see.” I tried to keep my tone neutral, but something caught his attention and his eyes narrowed.

“What is it?”

I decided to be honest. “I don’t know why, but I...I had it in my head that your mother was...a mortal.”

“And that made you happy?”

“I don’t know. I guess it did.”

“My mother *was* mortal. Most of my father’s wives were.”

I cheered up immediately, but I wasn’t going to confess that it gave me hope that someone like him could commit to someone like me. But then again, I wasn’t a mere mortal anymore.

Griffon rolled his eyes and wagged his head. “You think too much.”

“Is your mother still alive?”

“No. My father never divorced. Maybe that’s why he married mortals, so he could get a new wife every seventy or eighty years.”

I realized he was teasing me and laughed. “Every seventy or eighty years? Just how long is the life expectancy of a Fae?”

His brows bobbed. “Biblical.”

“No, really.”

“Yes. Really. I don’t know any of us who died of natural causes, so I can’t say how long the average Fae lives.”

I didn’t dare ask how old he was, preferring to think of him as ageless instead of ancient. “How old was...your sister?”

“A young two-hundred and...” he tapped his lip a few times, “twenty-three. Archer is five less than that. They had the same mother, but they chose to use the Carew family name.”

“And where do you fall?” I could have kicked myself for asking, but it just slipped out.

“Eldest, from four wives earlier.”

I forced myself to swallow and tried to act like I could totally handle *biblical*. “So, did your biological mother die of old age?”

“If you want to know my age, Lennon, ask me.”

I sucked in a deep breath and let it out, then shook my head. “I...don’t want to disappoint you.”

“*You* disappoint *me*?”

“I’m just getting used to the whole winged savior thing. My reaction might not be...reasonable.”

“Four hundred and eight.”

I gasped, then laughed. When I started sounding hysterical, the worry on his face made it easy to stop. “Four hundred and eight? You’re a baby.” It was a lame attempt to make up for the laughter, and I could tell his feelings were hurt. “See? I knew I’d disappoint you.”

He scoffed. “I think it is you who are disappointed. No doubt you’ll reconsider kissing an old man.”

“I don’t know.” I stood up and started pacing in front of him, looking him over like a promising piece of horseflesh just arrived at the racetrack. “How old do you think.... someone like me...might live? Maybe four-hundred years is nothing.”

In a split second, he was off the bed. He grabbed me and laid a hand over my mouth, then shushed me just before his lips pressed against mine. It wasn’t his attempt to keep me quiet though. After a minute, I realized he was testing to see if I really might push “an old man” away. I couldn’t possibly be the one to end the kiss without hurting him seriously, no matter how long it lasted.

The clearing of a masculine throat ended it for us. Colm stood sideways in the doorway. “Ye’re to come down for brunch,” he said, then disappeared.

Griffon’s teeth worried at his bottom lip.

“What’s wrong?”

He shook his head once. “Just wondering what he might have overheard. You remember what I told you when we landed. We mustn’t speak of anything whilst we are here.”

“We were talking about lifespans.”

“Aye. He kens my age, but we’ll not discuss mine *or yours* again. We have much to discuss, but we must put the wake behind us first. The house will be full of eyes and ears, and my sister’s friends were rarely friends of mine. And I worry...”

“About what?”

“When Archer arrives. He won’t know to call you Lucy.”

“He’s coming for sure?”

“No doubt my mother has already called him home again. We can’t hold Daphne’s wake without him.”

“Yeah? Well, maybe I shouldn’t be here. I mean, considering...everything...I’m probably the last person who would be welcome—”

“My brother knows you’re not responsible, despite how he acts. Maybe tonight we can bury some hatchets.”

“Let’s not bury them, let’s hide them before he gets here, along with any other sharp cutlery we can find.”



THERE WAS NO MORE TIME TO PIDDLE AROUND. WE’D BEEN summoned. And like so many grown men, Griffon seemed to revert to his boyhood, anxious to make his mother happy. He took my hand and headed for the door, but I resisted one last time.

He frowned at me, then sighed. “What is it?”

“Do you realize you haven’t even told me where we are?” I thought of the pastel buildings in the harbor. “Is this some sort of fairy land?”

He grinned. “Some people call it that. Most call it Wales. A place called Tenby.”

“Oh.”

“You’re disappointed again.”

“No. I’m not. I should have known. I knew you were from Wales. Uh, oh. My *friends* know you’re from Wales!”

He stepped close, reached for my face, looked into my eyes. “I meant it. They cannot find you here.”

“And what if Archer kicks me out?”

“Archer is no threat to you, love. If he hasn’t earned your trust just yet, you can at least trust me in this.”

I forced a smile. “All right.”

“Good lass.”

“Lass?”

He shrugged. “My mother’s influence is powerful.”

“I’ve noticed.”

He tugged on my hand. “Come now, before I’m tempted to lock the door and disappoint her.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t let you.”

“You think you can resist me?”

“Never expect me to choose you over food,” I said, pushing him out of the way so I could reach the stairs first. “Especially when I’m starving.”

BAKING WITH THE ENEMY

The dining room was set off the kitchen and opposite the living room. The round table could have been hundreds of years old with odd grooves radiating out to the edges, made smooth from heavy wear. I could almost imagine how many thousands of elbows and dinner plates were required to polish them that silky smooth.

Bridie's version of brunch consisted of cold breakfast food, little tea sandwiches, and berries and cream. Back home, it would be called leftovers. I was just glad she hadn't gone to a lot of trouble to feed us.

Colm rambled on for five minutes non-stop, then tapped one of his slightly dry sandwiches on the side of his plate by way of complaint. He opened his mouth to say something, but looked over my shoulder and snapped it shut again.

We all turned to find Archer standing in the doorway to the kitchen. "Couldnae wait for me, Mother?"

Bridie bounced out of her chair and hurried to greet him with a kiss on his cheek, as if she hadn't seen him for a long time. "Sit next to Luuucy," she said, then went to the painted yellow hutch to get him a plate.

Archer looked his brother in the eye as he walked around the table. "Griffon," he said, coolly. "I see you've brought *Lucy* home to meet Mother. How charming." He passed the empty chair and stepped next to me, reached for my hand, then

kissed the back of it. “Good to have you back in the family *clutches*, my dear.”

If he looked me in the eye, I missed it.

He pulled out his chair and sat, dragged a napkin across his lap, and turned to face Colm. With his voice still cool and even, he asked, “What are you still doing here, Muddy? I clearly remember telling you to go to h—”

“Ere now. None of that,” Bridie sang, delivering him a plate overflowing with baked beans and cold sausages. “I told him he could stay until the wake. He said he could lend a hand whilst ye were gone. Couldn’t have known I’d have both my lads back under my roof before noon, could I?”

“Well, we’re here now, Muddy. So go. If you’re still inclined, I invite you to return for the wake tomorrow night. Eight o’clock. Not a moment before.”

Colm laughed as if Archer were teasing, but when the latter only stared at him with deadpan eyes, he turned to appeal to Griffon.

Griffon dismissed him with the wave of his hand. “Goodbye, Muddy.”

The man glanced at Bridie, but a narrow look from Archer warned him not to try again. He tossed his dry sandwich onto his plate and stood. When he finally dragged his butt out the side door, the woman called sweetly, “See you tomorrow night, Muddy dear.” When she failed to notice her slip, the brothers laughed so hard there were tears in their eyes.

For the rest of the meal, Archer treated me as if I were invisible, which was better than trying to kill me. Thankfully, Bridie didn’t notice our lack of direct conversation since Griffon was quick to bridge any obvious gaps until we pushed aside our plates and settled into our cups of tea.

Bridie waved her hand for attention. “If anyone sees funeral candles, I don’t want to be knowin’ about it, I don’t.”

I had no idea what she was talking about. “Funeral candles?”

Archer forgot to ignore me. “On the way to a funeral, if ye see the ghost of a candle along the path, it warns that another shall die. Multiple candles mean multiple deaths in the same family. A small weak candle flame might mean a child.”

“That’s horrible!”

Bridie nodded vigorously. “Just why I doonae wish to be knowin’ about it.”

Griffon reached over and squeezed my hand. “Don’t take it to heart, love. It’s just superstition born from plague times, no doubt. Though a plague was hardly needed to wipe out a family.” He looked at his mother and winced when he found her staring with her mouth hanging open. “No offense, Mother. Americans just don’t understand such ancient traditions.”

I wanted to defend my countrymen, but I didn’t have any clue how to do it. The only tradition that had been handed down in my family was “how to care for your new pet rock,” and even then, we couldn’t speak freely about it. My mother didn’t even know Hank had been handed off to me until my grandmother was gone. Even then, she never entertained the subject.

Bridie seemed mollified and turned her attention to me. “Can ye cook, Lucy?”

“I can follow directions.”

“That’ll do fine, then. Maybe ye won’t mind helping me in the kitchen whilst Griffon’s gone.”

I tried to hide my panic. Though I’d heard Griffon talking to his mother alone in the kitchen, he’d said nothing to me about leaving. Did that mean he’d be taking Archer with him? Or would I need to stay close to Bridie for safety?

Griffon’s hand tightened around mine again. “If we’re to have a proper wake,” he said, “Mother will have a bit of baking ahead of her. I’m sure she’d appreciate any help you can give. Besides, didn’t you work at a restaurant?”

Ah. So he wasn’t going to explain why he was leaving. I really would be on my own with my enemy, with only an

aging mortal to use as a shield.

“I have a talent for pouring coffee, and like I said, I can follow a recipe or follow orders, whichever you like.”

“That’ll be grand,” Bridie said, and her face wrinkled into a smile.

I felt like the term *American* had cost me any brownie points I might have earned by being Griffon’s guest. But I was determined to earn them back.

Griffon stood and picked up his plate. “I’ll be off then. Now’s as good a time as any. Would you like me to drop the dishes in the bay?”

Bridie rolled her eyes. “The sink will do, son.”

He hurried toward the kitchen like a kid trying to escape without doing his chores.

“I guess I’ll see you later,” I called after him, hoping he’d take the hint and tell me what the hell was going on.

He didn’t turn but hollered over his shoulder. “I’ll be back before ye can learn Donald, Where’s Yer Trousers!” A few seconds later, a screen door slammed shut.

“Donald, where’s your trousers?”

Archer shook his head, unwilling to explain. He didn’t look any happier to be stuck with his enemy than I was.

I stood and picked up my plate, then offered to take Bridie and Archer’s with me. I stacked the hand-painted things carefully and carried them into the kitchen. Griffon’s sweater hung on a peg by the back door, and I couldn’t resist pressing it against my face to inhale the smell of him. When I realized Archer and his mother were speaking quietly in the dining room, I froze and strained to hear.

Bridie whispered loudly, “*It’s so pressing, is it? Goin’ to visit those others?*”

“*Ye’ve always complained he never gave his heart away, and now he has. Ye might have been wise to specify how many he should love at the same time.*”



THOSE OTHERS.

The words rang in my head for hours. Each time I completed an assignment—mixing, measuring, washing bowls and pulling things in and out of cabinets—they’d come back again.

Griffon had left me alone so he could go shirtless to “visit those others.”

I was grateful when Bridie gave me a bag of walnuts to take outside and crack open with a hammer. It helped me vent, and in no time, I was back at the small kitchen table with a bowl of nuts and broken shells to sort through.

Later, with nothing but two cakes left in the oven, she demanded my promise that I would remove them on time, then begged off to take a nap. “After all, I havenae worked this hard in ages. And there’ll be more to do on the morrow, so there will.”

I swore she could count on me. She smiled and patted me on the head before shuffling off down the hall.

I wasn’t familiar with wakes, but I’d seen enough on TV to know that a body was usually involved. The only thing that kept me from freaking out was the fact that Daphne’s remains weren’t available. So hopefully, the locals would just be stopping by for drinks and snacks. Maybe a dirge or two.

Or did they only sing dirges in Ireland?

I was hoping Archer might follow his mother’s lead and slink off for a nap somewhere, but I wasn’t that lucky. He leaned back against the old Formica counter and watched Bridie disappear down the hall. The second we heard her bedroom door click shut, I knew I was in trouble.

He’d avoided direct eye contact with me since the moment he’d arrived. Now, he glared. His gaze focused across the seven feet that separated us and bored into my brain like he was hoping his hate could set me on fire.

This time, however, I wasn't locked in a cell, at his mercy, fearing what he might do to me. In fact, I could walk out the door and never come back if I wanted to. I didn't have to put up with his bullying. But then I remembered what Griffon had said. *If you can't trust him, trust me.*

So I glared back. "Look," I said. "I had no idea your brother was bringing me here. I didn't know about the wake, obviously, or that you'd be here—"

"Haud yer wheesht," he said quietly, and held up his hands. "No apologizin'."

"Uh, I'm not apologizing. I'm explaining why you shouldn't kill me—"

Archer pushed away from the counter and came at me, hissing and glancing between me and the hallway. "Dinnae say such things. Ye think I'd do anythin' to hurt my family?" He shook his head as he pulled out a chair, then dropped onto it like he'd just run a marathon.

"I'm not buying it."

"I beg pardon?"

"Your mouth says you won't hurt me—"

"Aye—"

"But your eyes say eat rocks and die."

He blinked a few times, then he smirked. "Eat rocks, ye say?"

"Yeah, well, we Americans haven't had a thousand years to perfect our insults."

"Obviously."

We sat in silence for a minute with the occasional tink of a shell hitting the side of the bowl as I tried to concentrate on my task at hand. Eventually, the promise of a truce settled around us like a delicate layer of snow that could melt instantly from the warmth of our own breath. To my surprise, the longer we sat together, the stronger it grew, and I didn't so

much as jump when he reached over and grabbed a handful of broken walnuts.

He set the pile in front of him and hunted for bits of the meat, adding them to my growing collection. My relief was more profound than expected, and after five minutes of true peace, the emotions of the past twelve hours rolled over me in one large, unexpected wave, leaving me blinded by my own flood of tears.

In a move he must have learned from his brother, Archer urged me out of my chair, swept an arm under my knees, and carried me into the living room while I fought for air between near-soundless sobs. I found myself sitting on the green cushioned couch tucked up under his arm while he tried to console me by awkwardly patting the side of my head.

“I lied,” he said, trying to distract me.

I took a couple of deep breaths. “What about?”

“It seems ye *are* owed an apology.”

“I won’t stop you.”

He laughed, then loosened his hold on my shoulders and made some space between us. “I’ve been...cruel to ye, when it is Daphne who deserves my anger, for takin’ her own life. And I blamed ye.”

“Well, don’t forget that beating you took...because of me.”

“Auch, aye. So, ye prefer I stay angry with ye?”

“Well, no—”

“Ye cannae help bein’ contrary, can ye?”

I laughed. “I’ll...work on it.”

“We’ll all appreciate it.”

With my wave of emotions played out, I sighed and wiped my face. “It’s pretty hard to take you seriously,” I said.

He gasped and pretended to be offended. “How so?”

“Not too intimidating in your stocking feet.”

Bridie had insisted we remove our shoes so our movements wouldn't make the cakes fall. He lifted his feet off the ground and wiggled his toes. There was a small hole starting at the tip of his big toe, which we both noticed, then laughed ourselves silly.

“What in the bloody hell is going on?” Griffon stood in the doorway wearing his sweater again. His hands rested on his hips, his brows raised at the sight of Archer's arm lying casually around my shoulders.

A beep came from behind him, and Archer and I flew off the sofa. More worried about the cakes than him, we pushed Griffon out of the way and trod carefully back to the kitchen.

Archer opened the oven door and I pulled the perfectly fluffy cakes out like I was handling newborns. I placed them on the cooling racks as I'd been instructed and held my breath to see if they would fall. After a minute, I finally exhaled, as did Archer, and we laughed again.

“As a favor to me,” Griffon said, from behind us, “would the pair of you go back to being enemies?”

Archer and I looked at each other for a long minute, if only to tease him. Then the old sober Archer returned. “We've called a truce is all,” he grumbled, heading for the back door. “By the way, brother, how is *Yarmouth* these days?” Then he stepped outside and was gone.

I hurried to catch the screen door before it could slam. When I faced Griffon again, I gave him exactly five seconds to explain where he'd been. When he missed the chance, I walked around him to turn off the oven, then headed for the backdoor myself.

He caught my arm and turned me, then leaned down to kiss me. But I pulled away and searched his face, wondering if I'd been the last woman he'd kissed that day.

“Who's in Yarmouth?”

His eyes closed and he hung his head, but he didn't release me. I decided to give him another minute or two to confess who *those others* were. The seconds that followed seemed like

minutes as I imagined him weighing my importance against someone else's.

Finally, he looked up, resigned. "A girl," he said, breaking my heart out loud. "There's a girl in Yarmouth. A girl...and her grandmother."

WELCOME TO FAIRY

“*F*allon? You mean Fallon and Annag!”

He answered with a wink. “My brother thinks I have regular assignations with other women, and I prefer he go on believing it.”

“He doesn’t know about Fallon?”

“I trust him in all other things. But if he’d known about Fallon, he might have gone to Orion and offered her in exchange for Daphne’s return. He is loyal to me, yes, but he was just as loyal to Daphne. Maybe more so. It pains me to keep anything from him, but I hope, in the end, he will understand.”



FOR A QUICK AFTERNOON TEA, BRIDIE SERVED US A STEW SHE called Cawl, and a funky thing called lava bread. Archer warned me not to ask what it was made of. Griffon didn’t appreciate the fact that we were on speaking terms, illustrated by the fact that he scowled each time Archer and I spoke to each other.

Bridie laughed at her sons, watching them exchanging dirty looks, and said it reminded her of the good old days. When the three of them started looking through old photos of their sister, trying to choose a few to display, I excused myself and went out to the patio. It was hard enough hearing the purple fairy’s name, but so much harder to look at her face.

It was a faint and odd consolation to me that she didn't look particularly happy in most of the pictures I saw. Maybe two hundred and twenty-three years of being unhappy meant there was more to her giving up than just being caught and caged by a pissed-off witch.

I'd been sitting alone for an hour when Griffon joined me on the porch. He didn't sit. "Mother would like to speak to you upstairs," he said, his face void of expression. "Alone."

That last word sounded like a test, but I laughed it off. "I'm not afraid of your mom. Unless you're telling me I should be."

"Certainly not."

"Okay, then." I dragged my hand along his arm as I passed, still smiling. When he didn't return my smile, I braced myself for an unpleasant conversation. If the woman asked me to leave—if she'd caught wind of my involvement in Daphne's death—I would obviously respect her wishes. I just didn't know where I would go.

Or maybe she would warn me away from Griffon and tell me I wasn't good enough for her son. In that case, her wishes be damned.

I had just taken the first step on the second staircase when Bridie called out my fake name. She was standing in a doorway, waving me to her. As soon as I looked inside, I knew it was Daphne's room by the half-dozen shades of purple on the walls, the bedding, and a hundred knick-knacks displayed on a wide, tall set of bookshelves. For a grown woman—or Fae—her obsession with the color seemed adolescent.

A sudden dread gripped my chest and made it hard to breathe. Almost like an afterthought, Hank began hissing in my head. Some new, inner alarm warned me to turn around and never return, but for Griffon's sake—and his mother standing in the middle of the room waiting—I stepped onto the purple carpet.

Hank hissed louder, if only to be heard, since the hissing of a half-dozen other voices rushed into my head, then swirled

around together like fish in a jostled bowl of water. I reached for the door jamb and stepped back into the hall. It didn't help. The hissing contest continued.

“Take the stairs too fast, did ye?” Bridie's soft hand grabbed mine and firmly led me to the bed. “Sit down a'fore ye fall down.”

I heard her clearly above the rustling voices. Apparently, my ears still worked despite the music-less concert in my brain.

“I'll fetch ye some water,” she said, and was out the door.

I got to my feet, checked my balance, and then started searching. I knew just what I was looking for.

Pet rocks.

The sounds came from the menagerie-filled shelves, not the closet. I shouldn't have been surprised by the age and antiquity of some of the knick-knacks, but I was. Old jewelry, clever gadgets with pointy tips I assumed were weapons, carved statues of imaginary animals, men and women whose importance I couldn't guess at. A small painting of a dragon with a woman on its back.

If it weren't for the age and cracking of the paint used, I would have thought the latter was memorabilia from a popular TV series.

I moved a couple of figures out of the way so I could reach a long black leather box at the back of one shelf. The leather was slightly padded, the box well-made and modern with a simple swing latch that looked like the firing arm of a pistol. No locks. As soon as I touched it, I felt vague vibrations, but I ignored them and flipped the latch, determined to look inside before Bridie came back.

I lifted the lid and found just what I'd been expecting—a row of pet rocks similar to mine, though they were different colors of muted stone. Their gems had been chiseled out and there was no trace of the gold webbing that encased Hank. Two of them once had the same nine stones embedded in them. The other four had anywhere from three to five holes

where gemstones had once been. Now they looked like children's ceramic projects gone bad.

Though the hissing never changed, I somehow felt the message was different. They weren't calling to me, they were begging me, pleading with me—to reach in and touch them, and I was reminded of the four bookmarks at Trinity Library. Daphne had insisted they didn't want to be touched, but she'd been wrong.

While I was tempted to do what they asked, Hank demanded the opposite, his hiss warning me to drop the box and go. It was odd to assign an actual message to the sound, and I wondered if it was just all my imagination. After all, he'd never communicated with me in nearly twenty years, other than demanding I not leave him behind.

“You're talking to me *now*?” I said, my sneer directed at my pocket. “Are you kidding me?”

I took one last look at the stones in the box and closed the lid. The last thing I needed was more petulant rocks in my pockets.

“They're a strange lot, they aaare,” Bridie said behind me. She held out a glass of water, and when I accepted it, she took the box from me, opened it, and pulled the rocks out one at a time, examined each one briefly, then put them back. Her bare touch earned no reaction at all. “Daphne was obsessed with huntin' these, but they never performed for her. She called them star stones.”

I choked on the water, wiped away the drops that had come out of my nose, and fought to hold back my excitement. “They perform?”

She shrugged. “Never did anythin' but lie there. Daphne said there was a way to oopen them, but devil if I can see hooow.”

She tried to hand one to me—one with an orange cast—but I knew better than to touch it with my bare skin and shook my head. This was no time to be tempting fate. In fact, I was surprised I'd come so close to touching them in the first place

and wondered if they'd tried to cast some spell on me with that hissing.

“The Irish call them *cloch realtas*, but she forbade me from ever speakin' that name to anyone outside the hooose. Thought they came from the very staaars, she did. When she got wind of a new one, she'd sometimes be gone for years, huntin' it doon. They always disappointed her in the end, poor dear. Now, just tell me how a simple rock can disappoint a person.”

I shook my head and played dumb instead of sharing the fact that, at that very moment, *I* was disappointing *them*.

Bridie put the long box back in its place and I moved the figurines to where they'd started.

“Lucky thing she never found another,” she said as she shuffled toward the closet.

“Why's that?”

“No more room in the box.” She slid the door open to reveal a large closet jampacked with clothes, most of which reached the floor. “Griffon says ye have no rigout with ye.”

I'd been around Scots enough to know rigout meant outfit.

“I do not.”

“Then I hope it won't bother ye to wear somethin' of Daphne's tomorrow niight. Some of these she never found occasion to wear, I trow. But tell me they're not lovely.”

I didn't understand what she meant. As she ran her hand along a row of gowns, each and every one of them looked plain and colorless—so plain, in fact, that I couldn't believe they belonged to the woman with flashing grape-colored eyes and swirling fingernails.

I had no choice but to pick one. I knew nothing about wake protocol, but I was pretty sure jeans would be inappropriate. And since the gowns all seemed to fit a style called *Sackcloth and Ashes*, or maybe *A Bad Year for Peasants*, I suggested she pick for me.

She rolled her eyes. “Come now. Which do ye fancy?”

Archer chuckled from the doorway. “Ye should help her choose, Mother. *Lucy* cannae see a thing, yeah?”

Bridie’s eyes flew wide, and she searched my face, then glanced briefly at the rest of me. Her hands fluttered and covered her blushing cheeks. “Oh, forgive me! I just assumed...” She looked desperately at Archer, begging him to save her from some mysterious *faux pas*. He shook his head and disappeared. A wake of mocking laughter trailed after him.

“I don’t understand,” I said as she hurried me out of the room.

“Of course ye don’t. But I’ll not be the one to explain it to ye. *Griffon!*”



A MINUTE LATER, GRIFFON MET US AT THE HEAD OF THE stairs, worried. “Archer is laughing, so that can’t be good.”

“Just so,” Bridie said, and pushed me toward him. “I assumed she could see. Maybe ye can remedy the situation as yer father could, without...” She gestured toward his crotch and wiggled her hand. “Oh, blimey. I don’t want to know.” Then she fled back to the bedroom, holding her hands to the sides of her head.

While I waited for a beet-red Griffon to explain what was going on, I was vaguely aware that all hissing had ceased, Hank’s included.

“I don’t understand. She was showing me dresses—”

“My mother assumed we’ve been intimate.”

Caught completely off guard, I choked. “What has that got to do with picking out a dress?”

Griffon glanced up as if seeking divine help. “If... someone, anyone has been intimate with a Fae, or if they commit to or become enthralled, the Fae world becomes...

visible to them. It's not easy to explain. Better to just show you."

He reached for me and I instinctively stepped back. He chuckled and a teasing glint in his eye made me retreat another step. His voice turned low and seductive. "Come, now, Len—Lucy. You know it's inevitable." He lunged and caught me, then laughed when I squealed. Daphne's bedroom door slammed shut and he laughed even harder. When he couldn't catch his breath, his grip loosened and I could have easily stepped away, but I didn't try.

"You're full of crap," I said. "You're making it all up."

"No, he isnae," Archer sang from the bottom of the stairs.

"Fine," I said, calling his bluff. I started lifting the hem of my shirt. "Let's get it over with. Or did you want Archer to do the honors?"

Archer sputtered and coughed as he fled, and we heard the screen door slam.

Griffon laid a hand on mine to stop my half-hearted striptease. "Not necessary," he said, "though I reserve the right to revisit the subject later." He pulled me tighter and kissed my lips briefly. "Your bravery is noted, but my mother was right. I can open your eyes without such...ceremony."

I let neither my relief nor my disappointment show. "The question is do I *want* my eyes open?"

He looked worried for a second or two, then his face cleared. "You do. You must. Someone *like you*..." He meant a DeNoy. "Cannot afford any possible blind spots, not when we don't know what we're working with in the first place."

"You mean...you don't know either?"

"I know a little, but don't worry. We'll unravel it all soon enough."

I sighed and laid my head against his chest. "I wish we could have a real conversation."

He gave me a squeeze, then set me away from him. "Soon. When we're away from here. But I'm confident this will help

distract you until then.” He laid his hand sideways over my eyes. I heard him whispering in Irish, but I understood none of it. When he dropped his hand away, he was grinning. “Welcome to Fairy.”

I grabbed Griffon’s forearms to steady myself, sure I would fall. Unlike all those instances when I’d stepped out of *Time* with Wickham, I wasn’t going to another place—another place had come to me, slipping under my feet and surrounding me, replacing Bridie’s comfortable home with something wild.

“I...I don’t understand. We weren’t in a house?”

“Still in the house. Now you see it as it really is. You’ll be able to see all things Fae as they truly are, as we Fae see them.”

“And if I wanted to go back to the other version?”

“Impossible now.” He ducked to catch my attention. “Is it so horrible?”

I shook my head, half in answer, half hoping the world would right itself. “Sensory overload and all that.” I realized I was shouting over the shushing of the waterfall flowing away from us, alongside the staircase now made of stone, with ferns and flowers encroaching from both sides. My senses filled with the smells and tastes of grass and earth and moss. The railing I’d used coming upstairs was now a long smooth vine suspended in air.

I looked toward the other end of the hall, where another staircase used to lead to Griffon’s room. There, too, was a trickling waterfall that pooled before feeding into the stream that led to the one near our feet. More stone steps replaced the wood ones that led up and out of sight.

The only things that hadn’t changed were Griffon and me. He still wore his black jeans and pretty sweater. My clothes seemed inappropriate for this house made of nature, but I couldn’t imagine what appropriate would look like. Maybe something made of fig leaves?

“Ready?” Griffon nodded toward Daphne’s bedroom door. The white paint was now a slab of polished wood half-covered

in ivy, a wall of shrubbery to either side. I remembered the star stones and couldn't wait to see what they might look like in this new world.

"I'm ready." I watched my steps and soon realized that the former hallway was still a straight path, and I never would have stepped in the water or on the plants because invisible walls would have stopped me.

He opened the door and stood back. A dark universe stretched away in all directions. Blue and yellow pricks of light floated in swirled purple galaxies and circled around white stars in their centers. The bed was in the same spot, less than ten feet away. But the bedding was much more impressive, including a duvet that might be an actual cloud. The violet rug had been there before, but the texture was finer.

Beside the bed, Bridie stood alternately wringing her hands and smoothing the skirt of her simple black dress that ended mid-calf. Her fluffy slippers had been replaced by sparkly black ones, and I remembered she was in mourning.

Griffon leaned close and spoke in my ear. "Mortals usually see what they expect to see. Considering the...*connection* between us, I had supposed you saw things as they really were."

The hissing resumed as soon as my foot cleared the threshold. I watched to see if Bridie reacted. She didn't. And Griffon said nothing.

Once his mother was convinced I could see straight, she sent Griffon away and led me back to the closet. The dull clothes had all been replaced by jewel-encrusted things with dramatic collars and vibrant colors that switched back and forth when the fabric moved. Some of the fabric seemed to move on its own!

Bridie assured me everyone attending the wake would be wearing something similar, that none of Daphne's dresses would be out of place or overboard. And though I couldn't quite believe it, there were no understated options.

I chose a gown with irregular vertical stripes of orange, russet, yellow, and green and refused to consider anything with purple in it. Only after I'd tried it on and committed to wearing it did I realize that bit of orange was the exact shade of my old café uniform. And though I'd sworn off that color for the rest of my life, I wondered if it might be a helpful little reminder, of who I really was.

A simple girl from the western states playing dress-up in a gown meant for a queen.

QUIET AND DISQUIET

Naturally, I was happy to do anything to make Griffon take a second look, so I accepted Bridie's offer to lend me something from her jewelry case.

While she went to fetch some options, I dug through Daphne's top drawer full of odd things and found a small handkerchief to wrap Hank in, then I tucked him into my bra under my left boob. I hurried back to the bookshelves—now made of smooth branches and twisted vines—and dug out the black leather box once more.

I flipped the latch and opened the lid, braced for anything. But the stones lay just as they had. Nothing extra glittery about them. Still, no gold adornments. And though everything in the house now glistened or sparkled, the rocks looked no more impressive than before.

"You can stop hissing," I whispered to them. "I'm not going to touch you." I closed the lid and slid the box back. By the time I resumed my place in front of the full-length mirror, the only stone hissing at me was Hank.

Bridie swept back into the room holding up a necklace of brown teardrops. The light reflected off thousands of facets and hinted at their stunning value. "Chocolate diamonds. What do ye think?"

"I couldn't possibly—"

"Nonsense. Ye can't run about naked, now can ye? And without adooornments, that's how ye'll be seen."

I took the “adornments,” the dress, and a pair of green shoes up the waterfall steps to Griffon’s room. The space hadn’t changed in size, but it now resembled the inside of a treehouse with the drastically angled ceiling and tree trunks making up parts of the walls. The paintings and boxes were still there, along with the dresser and desk, and when I checked out the window, the small barn was still a small barn, right where it was supposed to be.

I doubted I would be able to sleep anywhere else in that wildly overgrown house that resembled some hidden glen in the Scottish Highlands, but here, in Griffon’s private treehouse, I believed I could.



THE REST OF THE EVENING WAS TORTURE. MOST OF THE conversation revolved around Daphne and other people—or Fae—I didn’t know. But what I did remember was holding Griffon’s hand.

We held hands on the porch and watched the sky change colors and finally darken. At that point, I was too cold to stay outside, so we all moved into the large living room where Archer built a fire in a stone fireplace. I kept my eyes peeled for magical things and wouldn’t have been surprised to see pieces of wood walking themselves into the fire. Other than the natural setting, however, nothing remarkable happened.

Griffon and I sat as close as possible on a smooth wood bench and held hands like we were afraid someone would try to separate us. At one point, when his fingers started massaging mine, Archer rolled his eyes and left the room. When I realized his mother was also growing uncomfortable, I laughed and pulled my hand away. Griffon settled his arm around my shoulder and tapped his fingers on the back of the bench instead.

Finally, he got to his feet. “I’ll just take Lucy up to her room, then, shall I?”

“Good idea,” Archer said from the doorway. “Then you can come kiss our mother goodnight. She looks done in. But dinnae fash. I’ll stay up to make sure all the fires are good and out.”

The way Bridie blinked, we all realized he was right. She did look worn out. And we knew he wasn’t just talking about the actual fire.

“I think it’s better if I find my own way,” I said and told everyone goodnight. Griffon let me go, though reluctantly. I think he realized, just as I did, that he’d end up leaving his mother waiting too long if he came upstairs. It was hard enough keeping our hands off each other with his family in the room. If we were alone, we’d be in trouble.

On my way up the second waterfall, I reached down to scoop some cold water onto my face. It was soft and cool, and dried almost instantly.

Enchanted water. I made a mental note not to drink it.



THERE ARE DIFFERENT KINDS OF SILENCE.

In my apartment in Idaho, the building creaked and cracked like pine wood in a firepit. In Wyoming winters, the wind blew more days than not, so there was always a shushing noise in the background. In the summer, crickets, insects, and the song of frogs made it through the open windows, even in the bigger cities.

Life was noisy.

Bridie’s house was like Wyoming with the windows open. I couldn’t put my finger on the songs of specific insects, but there was a definite hum to the place. Tree trunks creaked as if their tops were teased by the wind. And though I was plenty warm inside my room, I still felt as though I was outside, camping.

I found a blue t-shirt in the chest of drawers. I knew it was Griffon’s because I could smell him when I buried my face in

the thick, soft cotton that looked new but felt like it had been worn a thousand times. I undressed and put it on. The hem reached halfway to my knees.

The nearest bathroom had solid walls and all the modern conveniences. I lucked out and found a stack of new toothbrushes in the cabinet. When I returned to Griffon's room, a set of four three-foot-tall dolls had been propped against the desk. I couldn't imagine why.

There was no way I could sleep with them staring at me, so I sat on the edge of the bed and tried to decide if I should turn them to the wall or set them in the hallway and risk offending someone.

Then one of them blinked and I ended up standing on the bed with only a pillow for a weapon.

All four of them put their hands over their mouths and giggled. The one in pink took a little step forward. "We've come to collect your clothes."

"My clothes?" They were in a pile on the desk chair.

The one in green folded and draped them over her arm. "We help Bridie from time to time."

They weren't little people—they were miniature, as if they'd been full grown women shrunken down to three feet by a machine. The skirts of their dresses flared slightly, and little petticoats peeked out from under them.

Dressed like dolls.

Though their faces were cute, their cheeks round and smooth, there were wrinkles around their eyes that reminded me of Wickham's sisters, who were technically a hundred years old.

I thanked them for their offer and climbed off the bed. "I'm...Lucy."

The one in pink shook her head. Was she calling me a liar? Had she overheard Griffon or Archer call me Lennon?

"You hear the whispers of the *cloch realtas*," she said. "But we shall not betray you."

“You...you hear them too?”

They all went wide-eyed.

“Oh no. We are *The Queevna*. We are memory.”

Great. Little people who remember everything. No wonder Griffon didn't want to talk about dangerous subjects until we were out of there.

They giggled again, as if they'd heard my thoughts, which was hardly a new concept for me. Wickham's sisters and Brian and Flann had that talent. So why couldn't a set of Fae quadruplets?

I smiled but shook my head. “No mind-reading, please.”

They blushed and nodded. “As you wish,” said the one in green. “I am Cré.” She introduced the one in pink as Blath. The one wearing sea-blue she called Farrig, and the one in white, Goy. “Though we have met before.”

“We have?” I was pretty sure I would have remembered.

They smiled secretly, which gave them away. They were still reading my mind.

Blath shooed the others toward the door. “We will leave you to your rest.”

“You are safe here,” said Goy. “Better to stay to the room until the sun is up.”

Farrig, in blue, paused at the door. “Resist the urge to speak to the *cloch realtas*. Others may hear.”

Cré reappeared to drag Farrig away, then she peeked in again. Her grin was so familiar, it was going to drive me crazy. “I realize the stones, too, like to be touched. But they shouldn't be encouraged.” After one last giggle, she was gone.

I couldn't shut the door fast enough, and when I found no lock on the door, I decided to take Goy's word for it, that I was safe as long as I didn't leave the room. I took one long look at the barn and decided any thoughts about Griffon would make it impossible to sleep, so I thought, instead, about how little sleep I'd had since the backyard ceremony.

My eyes and my body were instantly heavy. I turned off the light and found the bed.

I couldn't find words to describe how soft the sheets were—like they were made of enchanted water from the waterfall—slightly cooler than my body temperature, indefinite to the touch. I went to sleep with a smile on my face.

I dreamed of little flowers and bugs drawn on pages, with eyes that opened and blinked. “They don't like to be touched,” Daphne said, over and over again. The dream went on forever, niggling at me, prodding my memory. Then finally, I bolted upright and dragged myself out of those intoxicating sheets.

THE HOUSE WAS QUIET. APPARENTLY, EVEN BUGS HAD TO sleep.

Despite Cré's warning, I left the room and picked my way down along the first waterfall. I figured, if there really was a danger outside my room, Griffon would have warned me about it.

I opened Daphne's bedroom door and stepped inside. No hissing, thankfully. With what little light came from the universe swirling around her bed, I found the dresser with no problem and pulled out the top drawer. My subconscious had noticed something I'd skimmed over earlier when I'd been looking for a handkerchief. At least, I dreamed it had.

I pushed aside the underwear and small bits and bobs, but didn't find what I was hoping for. The drawer groaned when I pulled it out further to reach all the way to the back.

My hand found something large and hard, and I pulled it out and lifted it up for a better look. The small clear box was the right size. The lock was right. The box was empty.

If I were Daphne Carew and my job was to watch over the Fae books, and I felt they were in danger, I might have taken my favorites home with me, to keep them safe in a house with protections around it. And if I had favorites...they would have been the little bookmarks.

It seemed perfectly reasonable to take those bookmarks out of their protective box...if they weren't bookmarks at all. If they were actually little fairies who didn't want to be locked up anymore.

“Ye didnae see any danger in leaving yer room?”

I recognized the voice and a cold chill shimmied up my spine. Twenty-four hours ago, this man was my enemy who wanted to kill me with his own hands.

“Am I in danger?”

Archer leaned in the doorway. His eyes were hidden in shadow, but his smirk was clear enough. “Too fearless for yer own good.” He pointed to the box with his chin. “Mean something to ye, does it?”

“It does.”

“Then keep it.”

I shook my head and returned the box to the drawer. “I was just trying to jog my memory, that's all.” I closed the drawer and faced him again. “Sorry if I woke you.”

He held his hand out to me, wiggled his fingers. “Come on. I'll take you back before some fairy decides to tease you.”

“They already have.”

He was instantly on guard. “What happened?”

“Nothing bad. When I came back from the bathroom, there were four little women in my room. They said they came to collect my dirty clothes. Any chance you know who I'm talking about?”

He relaxed, then nodded. “Call themselves *The Queevna*. Just before she disappeared, Daphne sort of gifted them to my mother, to help out around the house. But they only help when they feel like it, and they like to speak in riddles. Most of the time, they dinnae come when she calls.” He gestured to the growth that made up the walls. “Easy place to hide, ye ken?”

He led me back to the steps. Something small squeaked and rushed into the plants on the far side of the waterfall. All I

saw was the trail of jostled leaves.

“Ye see? They’re everywhere. Nothing more troublesome than a bored fairy.” When we reached my room, he stood aside and let me go in alone. “Dinnae fash. Nothing would dare come in this room. Sleep well.” He reached for the door.

“Archer?”

“Aye?”

“Thank you.”

“For?”

“For forgiving me.”

He let out a breath and nodded. “Back atcha.” Then he closed the door.

It took a long time to fall asleep again. My mind kept generating questions I wanted to ask the pages—*The Queevna*. If they knew where answers could be found in the Fae books, then it should be a lot easier to question them now that they could speak! But how could I ask them about the DeNoy without actually saying the word?

I finally decided I should speak to Griffon before asking anything, and that led to other thoughts that might have kept me awake for another hour or two if I hadn’t been so sleep-deprived. The dreams that followed left me restless and impatient in the morning. I wanted answers, I wanted coffee, and I wanted Griffon, not necessarily in that order.

MIND THE WATERFALL

I stood at the top of the waterfall and listened for Griffon's voice, but the sound of the water drowned out any noise from lower in the house. I ended up pacing for almost an hour before he came looking for me, all smiles and innocence.

"I didn't want to wake you," he began, then trailed off when he read my expression. "What is it?"

"They stole my clothes." I held out my arms to show off my nightwear. "I couldn't go downstairs like this, could I?"

"Who stole your clothes? Not my...family."

I grunted. "No. It wasn't Archer. In fact, he was very sweet last night—" I bit my lips together when I realized how that sounded. "Four women. They call themselves—"

"*The Queevna* stole your clothes?" He looked doubtful.

"They said they were helping out."

He shrugged. "Most likely they were, but they have no sense of time passing. I'm sure your clothes will be returned as soon as they realize the sun is up. Wait here." He left me for only a minute or two and returned with a pile of primarily purple clothes. "There is a jogging suit among other things. Might be a tad large, but at least Archer won't be able to see your figure."

He tossed the pile of clothes on the bed and grabbed me, pulled me against him, and kissed me senseless. When I

finally had a chance to catch my breath, I sighed dramatically and said, “Archer who?”

Griffon growled and swatted my butt, then he left me again. My mood was much improved when I entered the kitchen a few minutes later. Griffon handed me a cup of coffee and pointed to the dining room. I found Bridie sitting at the table picking at her breakfast. Across from her, a full plate waited for me.

“Oh, there ye are, dear. Griffon told me those fairies hid yer clothes. I’m sorry to hear it.”

“It’s okay. He brought me these.” I showed her the gray sweatpants and hoodie, then took my seat. “I’m sorry if you waited for me.”

She handed her plate off to Griffon, who took it into the kitchen. “I mean to send the lads out to deliver invitations to some folk I’d forgotten. Ye won’t mind helpin’ me in the kitchen again t’dee?”

“Not at all.”

“If we’re lucky, those fairies will arrive with yer things and we’ll have more help.”

And I could pull them aside and ask some questions.

After breakfast, I followed a bare-chested Griffon out to the porch and told him about *The Queevna* knowing my secret, probably because one of them saw me talking to Daphne’s pet rocks. He didn’t look happy about it. When I started to explain about the bookmarks, he stopped me.

“We’ll save that for tomorrow’s conversation.”

“But they have all kinds of answers. We should ask them while we can.”

“Yes, well, we’ll have to think of a way. After the wake is over and the guests have all gone. Stay on their good side if you can.”

“You mean don’t bite their heads off for stealing my clothes?”

“Exactly.”

“Deal. If you kiss me again.”

Archer announced his arrival on the porch with a heartfelt groan, then turned his back to us. Griffon rolled his eyes, stepped away from me, then reached around his brother’s neck and grabbed him under the arm. I’d never seen his wings appear out of nowhere before, and I gasped. It was like watching bronze flowers bloom with a time lapse camera, full blown in only seconds. My mouth was still hanging open when the two of them shot into the sky.

“I really don’t belong in this world,” I muttered.

Bridie came to stand beside me and squeezed my arm. “But ye’ll suffer through it, I reckon, to be with my laddie.”

I took a deep breath and nodded. I couldn’t imagine choosing anything over him.



IT WAS LATE BY THE TIME GRIFFON AND ARCHER WERE BACK and time to get changed. He took clothes from his closet and disappeared. Bridie called up from the second floor to say someone would be coming up to do my hair shortly.

I took a quick shower and slipped into the glittering dress. I got the zipper up just as there was a knock on the door. Bridie strolled in with Farrig, the little sea-blue fairy in tow. Today, she had strands of little blue seashells decorating her sleeves and draped around her waist. Two small ones hung from her ears.

“Hello,” I said, resisting the urge to ask where my clothes were.

Bridie shook her head. “She likely won’t speak to ye. This is Farrig. She’s here to do yer hair, so she is.” She ordered me to sit on the floor so the little maid could reach me, then she walked over to the dresser and collected the jewelry.

Farrig pulled a small stool from the closet and placed it behind me, then she climbed onto it. It was she who placed the necklace around my neck followed by the matching bracelet. Each stone was the size of my thumbnail. I hardly dared breathe.

Bridie handed me the earrings. “Earrings last,” she said. “That’s how you’ll know she’s finished.” She headed for the door. “Leaving ye in capable hands,” she sang. “See ye downstairs in a bit, yeah?”

I tried to catch Farrig’s eye in the mirror, but my hair took all her concentration. The dramatic cut didn’t seem to bother her as she wove thick strands in impossible ways and got them to stay where she wanted them, thanks to tools and pins she pulled from her pockets. She left my bottom layer in the back alone, letting it hang straight, while the rest of my hair became a nest of curls and twisted ropes.

Each time I tried to talk to her, she pressed a finger to her lips. I finally gave up trying.

When she finally pulled her hands away and studied my reflection, she looked a little skeptical. I bit my lips together and waited to see if she intended to start over again. After a minute, she nodded and held her hand just above my hair. Something came out of her palm, and I froze, terrified, while tiny green vines snaked all around my head, weaving in and out of my updo and sprouting little iridescent leaves that dangled like jewels themselves.

By the time she was finished, my head weighed a ton. “My neck won’t last long,” I said, “but it is lovely,” I added.

Farrig glared at the complex bird’s nest that was now my hair, then nodded again. A wave of her hand turned all those vines into tiny green strands of twisted, glistening wire. The change removed all the excess weight. The dazzling leaves shrunk a little but remained.

She looked at my reflection, saw how relieved I was, and grinned. Then she pointed to the hand holding the earrings. She gestured for me to put them on myself, then waited

patiently while my shaking hands finally got the posts through the holes.

She hopped off the foot stool and dragged it around in front of me, then started on my makeup. Her no-nonsense demeanor warned me not to question her choices. After all, she knew better than I what was the current style for Fae. The black eye liner was thick and dramatic and looked like cat-eye glasses when she was done, but I had to admit, it was kind of fun and a little bit freeing.

When she finally took her stool away, I got to my feet. She stood beside me as we admired the reflection in the mirror of some important Fae woman with millions of dollars' worth of diamonds dripping off her.

The tall collar stood straight off her shoulders and made her look like some diva from a Disney movie. The winding green stripes of the dress brought out the green woven in her hair. The shiny black borders between the colors reinforced the dark contours of her hair. The only thing familiar about her was the smirk on her face and something in her eyes...

Maybe this is what a DeNoy looks like...

I had no intention of going downstairs to be mocked by Archer until I had to, so I fished the green shoes from the closet and swished my beaded skirts over to the bed to sit down. I hoped to draw a promise from Farrig to speak to Griffon and me later that night. But I was suddenly alone in the room.

And still, no jeans in sight.



SADLY, IT WAS ARCHER WHO CAME TO FETCH ME. HE WAS dressed all in black with a collarless shirt, so no tie. He wore an open vest with a glistening crisscross texture that proved he wasn't too cool to wear sparkles like any other Fae. He wore a purple poppy—a brilliantly colored one—over his heart.

He didn't tease me, for which I was grateful.

“Relax,” he told me, offering his arm. “That rigout was never Daphne’s style. Never wore it. But it looks like it was meant for ye.”

“Thank you,” I said, remembering that Everly taught me to accept compliments promptly and simply. “You look rather dapper yourself.”

One last glance in the mirror was a mistake. I looked like a float made for a Mardi Gras parade.

We descended the first stairway slowly while I got used to the shoes. The short train of my gown skimmed the edge of the water but never got wet. We paused at the top of the final set of steps and surveyed the crowd below. Griffon was cornered by three females who sparkled and shined like I did, but with much more black to their outfits, though there was nothing somber about them. One wore a tiny hat with eighteen-inch feathers that shot off to the side and threatened to poke her friends’ eyes out if she moved wrong.

Griffon watched us descend, paying particular attention to my hand wrapped tightly around Archer’s arm, but I was worried I might trip in my borrowed shoes and wasn’t about to let go.

The three women realized they’d lost Griffon’s attention and turned to follow his gaze. Two of them looked hungrily at Archer before narrowing their eyes at me. The one with the feathers watched every breath I took. Her smile was pleasant. Behind her eyes, she was seething.

I looked over her head at Griffon and lifted an eyebrow. He smiled, then murmured something to the women which made them move out of his way. Their mouths fell open when he hurried to the bottom of the stairs and reached out, eager to take me from his brother.

He waited until I was on flat ground before he lifted my hand and kissed the back of it. “You look lovely.” Then he kissed my cheek and whispered, “And miserable. Just remember, this won’t last forever.”

The fancy wolves started toward us and I spoke through a forced smile. "I'll survive if you don't leave my side."

"Done."

I was touched by the way Archer moved to stand on my other side, choosing to lend me a little support instead of taking advantage of all the women vying for his attention.

Griffon turned to introduce me to his stalkers. I forgot their names instantly and on purpose. "Ladies, this is Lucy Morgan, my better half."

Lots of gasping followed, from more than just the three women in front of us. I gave Archer credit for hiding his own surprise, and I tried to do the same.

His better half? I didn't know exactly what he'd meant by it, or if it was just some message he intended for the crowd. The fact that he'd called me Lucy made me feel as if he were talking about someone else, and my only reassurance was the gentle squeeze of my hand.

Feathers was pissed, which made me feel mean and happy at the same time. Her friends shifted closer to Archer. And though it wasn't my place, I decided to remind them why they were there by asking, "Were you friends of Daphne's?"

"For ages," Feathers said, flipping her "r" like a true Scot. "I dinnae recall seein' ye before..."

"Different circles. She's American," Archer said, without any hint of disparagement.

Feathers couldn't manage the same. "American?" She sneered. "Then the lack of nobility—"

"Letitia." Griffon's tone made her take a step back. "You mustn't speak of things you do not understand."

A murmur rattled through the crowd and all eyes turned to the top of the stairs. The three of us turned. Bridie stood at the top step, smiling politely down on our heads, like a queen waiting for her escort. Her collar stood much taller than mine and every inch of her black gown sparkled and swirled like the galaxies on Daphne's fingernails had done. Stars in an inky

universe, outdone only by the white diamonds that covered her neck and cascaded to her cleavage.

Daphne would have approved.

Archer bounded up the steps, stood next to his stepmother, and offered his arm. Her guests clapped for her as they descended, and I wondered if that happened only at wakes for Fae. Or maybe the lack of a body laid out in the parlor made it a less solemn occasion than normal.

A few steps shy of the bottom, Bridie stopped to thank everyone for accepting her invitation and mentioned how happy Daphne would have been to see them. Judging by some grimaces, I suspected the last bit was a lie.

“Archer has agreed to sing for us,” Bridie said, and the crowd oohed and aahed like it was a big treat. He helped her down the last steps, turned, and went back up a few so everyone could see him. Without any sort of accompaniment, he started to sing. My natural reaction was to be embarrassed for anyone in his position, but as soon as he opened his mouth, I was captivated.

His voice was deep, unhurried, the texture both odd and beautiful. I felt the lower notes of the dirge rumble in my bones. His Scottish accent made me think of my friends and the sad fact that I might never see them again. Combined with the words, I was a melting chocolate mess.

Before my bones I let them lie

Before my spirit I let fly

Long, I bid ye, dinnae cry

For I'm a' goin', gone

A SHROUD FOR WARMTH BE ALL I NEED

A grave but deeper than for seed

For stone or tomb I'd call it greed

For I'm a' goin', gone

*THE WASTE OF LIFE WILL NOT BE MINE, IMAGINED THAT I HAUNT
yer days*

Ye mustn't lose a drop of time on me

*Look not for signs that I yet bide, turn not yer thoughts
back to my face*

Ye mustn't toast a drop of wine to me...

At this point, Archer lost control of his composure, but only briefly. While the crowd fell apart in sympathy for him, he sucked in a couple of deep breaths and continued the song, his voice louder and stronger than before.

YE'LL PROVE YER LOVE WITH JUST A TEAR

The rest will be but wasted here

Nae final words will reach my ear

For I'm a' goin', gone

TOSS YER THISTLE ON THE GROUND

Lift thy eyes and turn ye 'round

From me ye'll ne'er hear a sound

For I'm a' goin', gone

Oh, I'm a' goin', gone

NOW KISS MY LIPS AND LET ME GO

The time has come, dear, let me go

For I've a fairer place to go

I'm a' goin', goin', gone

THE GUESTS PUT THEIR HANDS OVER THEIR HEARTS AND pounded in an odd, muffled form of applause. Archer thanked them with a nod.

A wet-eyed Griffon handed me a handkerchief and pressed a kiss to the side of my head. I dabbed carefully at my face, trying to save as much of my makeup as possible. My tears hadn't been for Daphne, but at least some of them had been for Archer, Griffon, and Bridie, who truly mourned her.

Archer led his weepy mother into the large living room, and Griffon and I followed. The stone fireplace was dark now, and the furniture had disappeared to make room for guests. The daylight was long gone. Nothing to filter through the leaves. Instead, dozens and dozens of small lights moved around on the low branches like lanterns being carried by little fairies trying to spy on the party.

And when the lights moved, so did the shadows below, which made me question my eyesight.

There, in the surreal clearing, we acted as a reception line so everyone could have a word with the family. Someone short caught my eye and I watched for another glimpse. It was Cré, the fairy in green, carrying a platter of food. Her gown was adorned with shiny strands of ivy, each hem and seam bracketed with the little green leaves.

Griffon followed my gaze and gave my arm a squeeze to let me know he was paying attention.

"They look like the fairies in Sleeping Beauty," I said into his ear.

"Who do you think inspired Disney?"

I swatted his arm. "You're so full of it."

His chuckle was confession enough. As a distant clock chimed eight, we watched Blath carry a tray of empty glasses toward the kitchen. Her pink dress was trimmed with darker pink flowers that matched the patches on her cheeks. She glanced around and when our eyes met, her face flushed pinker still. Then she scurried away.

"Blath, Cré, Farrig, Goy. Odd names, aren't they?"

“Just old ones.”

Murmurs and gasps ran from one end of the room to the other, and we turned toward the dining room to see what was going on. Two men walked beneath arched branches that delineated the spaces. One was Muddy, whose face was much darker than before my eyes had been opened. He also had a pair of horns on his head that lay flat along the sides of his skull, making his pale hair stand out even more.

He'd changed into dark robes—or maybe they'd been robes I'd been blind to. But Muddy was instantly forgotten when I realized who his taller friend was.

Golden curls hung against his head like short cornrows. Though the subdued light of the room left it no brighter than twilight, Orion's face radiated with what I could only guess was life force. He was...beautiful. I hadn't been able to see it before, but now that my eyes were open...

He had *Beauty*, and he'd kept it for himself!

My heart staggered with relief. Wickham hadn't killed the Fae King. Orion had!

WHAT DO YOU MEAN JUMP?

Draped in gold robes that dulled in comparison to his face, Orion nodded to a select few as he waded through a tide of bows and curtsies. Panic filled me when I realized Muddy was leading him our way. He'd recognize me just as I recognized him!

I turned to Griffon, gripped his arm, and found him just as horrified to see who had entered his mother's home. Beyond him, Bridie watched, oblivious to the danger. On her far side, Archer turned wide eyes to me.

"I have to get out of here," I said.

Griffon searched my face, then shook his head. "He won't recognize you like this. Just breathe, keep calm."

I put my hand to my chest. "But I have Hank!"

He frowned, not comprehending.

"Shite." Archer understood. He'd been in that taxi when Daphne had been searching for my *cloch realta*. He shook his head. "No time. We'll figure it out. Maybe he won't sense it —" He didn't bother smiling as Muddy reached us. "Muddy."

Muddy rolled his eyes, then stepped up to me, the first in line. He took my hand and lifted it, then clapped his free hand behind the back of my upper arm to make sure I couldn't recoil while he kissed my knuckles. Then he grinned like he'd won some sort of game. "You'll know my plus-one." He smirked. "You never specified whether guests were allowed, so..." He stepped closer to Bridie and introduced her to Orion, King of the Fae.

“Oh!” She bent her knee and began to curtsy, but both her sons lifted her up again.

“Not with your knees, Mother,” Griffon said.

Orion inclined his head in her direction, but his eyes shot to me. He might have passed me by without notice, but then Hank had hissed.

He scowled as he studied my face—my wild hair, my colorful eyes, my mouth. But Farrig’s makeup job left nothing familiar for him. He shook his head and his attention dropped to my barely concealed cleavage. “What is that hissing?”

He lifted his hand toward me and Hank hissed louder.

“Behold! The true King of the Fae!” Farrig appeared between myself and the enemy. Breathless, she threw herself on the forest-like floor, giving both of us no choice but to take a step back. Even prostrate, she took up a mere three feet.

All around us, people hit their knees, as if they feared their bows and curtsies might not have been enough.

A little green dress stretched out beside the sea blue one, forcing Griffon back beside me. Then Blath fell next to Cré. Goy pushed her way through the crowd to take her place on the floor beside Farrig despite the whiteness of her gown.

“All hail, King of the Fae!” Their chant, in unison, stroked Orion’s ego despite their interruption.

“Welcome to our home, Sir.” Griffon barely inclined his head, unable to move much else.

Orion’s eyes flashed and turned slowly from golden brown to black. “I had to pay my respects to such a...loyal family. Though, I had hoped there was a way to bring Daphne back...”

Griffon inclined his head, then moved slightly closer to Bridie. “But with all options exhausted, our stepmother needed closure.”

Orion’s attention turned to me again. His foot moved, but he couldn’t take a step with Farrig in the way. “Here, now. Up

with all of you.” He looked from side to side, listening, and honed in on Hank again. “What am I hearing?”

Archer opened his mouth to speak, but Farrig beat him to it. “Relics! You hear the relics of the DeNoy, my lord!”

Her sister fairies chimed in. “Only one with the Naming Power—”

“Only the true Fae King—”

“Can hear the relics!”

He shook his head and pointed at my chest.

“The gown is from the relic room, my lord.” Farrig bowed deeply and reached up to take Orion’s hand. “Come. Let us show you.”

His scowl remained, but he gave in.

Goy hurried to Orion’s far side. Blath herded him from behind and urged Muddy to fall in beside her. Farrig stayed where she was, in front of Griffon and me, and waved them on. She was all smiles until they turned the corner, headed for the waterfall. Then her smile fell away. With all other guests watching Orion or following in his wake, she looked up at me.

“Go,” she hissed.

I shook my head. “You can’t let him touch them!”

“My sisters know better.”

Griffon was at a loss. “What is going on? Who is Hank?”

“Her *cloch realta*.”

He winced as if he’d been smacked on the nose by a newspaper, but he recovered quickly. “You have one? Of course you have one.”

“She must go.”

He shook his head. “Not without me.”

“No.” Archer stepped close and blocked Bridie out of the conversation. “If he comes back and ye’re both gone, he’ll smell a conspiracy. Same if I take her. She must go alone.

We'll say she was overwrought by the excitement and left. He'll never be able to find a Fae named Lucy Morgan."

Griffon scoffed. "You just want to split us up—"

"No. Archer's right," I said. "If you come with me, he'll punish you, maybe hurt your mother to do it. I can go alone. I'll be fine." I reached behind my head and unclasped the necklace. It was almost a relief to have it off, and I wasn't about to take it with me. I put it in Archer's hands, then added the bracelet and earrings.

Griffon watched the corner of the room, knowing Orion would be back. He finally agreed to let me go alone.

"She'll never jump," Archer said, then dug in his pocket and pulled out a key. "She'll have to take my car. It's the black one."

"What do you mean, jump?"

Griffon ignored the question and pulled me close. He kissed me hard and fast, then pressed his forehead to mine. "Listen to me. When you cross off the property, you'll find yourself in town. Leave the car behind, just in case. Do not call Wickham!"

"I promise. But how will I find my way back?"

"You can't. Besides, Orion will be watching for you." He walked me toward the door. "You remember where I delivered you back to the big Highlander?"

I nodded.

"I'll come to you there when the coast is clear. Ditch the dress as soon as you can."

Blath suddenly appeared beside us and handed me a duffel. "Your things."

I thanked her and she blushed and ran away.

Griffon grabbed my arm. "Trust me, love. *You must drive off the property.* No matter what you see, follow the road and go. Trust me. You will end up in Tenby." He kissed me again.

Archer pushed us apart and hissed, “Let her go.” He dragged me to the door and winked. “There’s money in the glove box. Take it all. You might be on your own for a while. Just...be careful.”

“You’re a softy!”

“And ye’re a pain in my arse.” He swatted my butt as I stepped away.



THE LIGHTS ON THE PORCH LIT THE WAY AS I RAN FOR THE three cars parked on the side of the house. I’d driven in the UK enough to be used to it now. Thankfully, the engine was quiet, and no one came running as I pulled along the house and headed out between the black shadows of large trees. Just on the other side of them, however, I hit the brakes.

Twenty feet ahead of me, the ground fell away with nothing but the ocean waiting on the other side, a blue, starless sky above it.

No matter what you see, Griffon had said.

I jumped out of the car and ran to the edge, assuming a switchback road would take me to the little town. But I was wrong. A hundred feet straight down, the ocean slammed and splashed at the feet of the massive cliff I was standing on, angry white waves in the darkness. I could easily imagine a woman’s mangled body down there, on the rocks, dressed for Mardi Gras.

I scrambled back, terrified. I hated heights. But mostly, I hated the idea of falling a hundred feet to my death. Griffon would just have to give me better instructions.

I turned around to see if anyone was after me yet, but the house was gone! The little spit of land the car sat on was now a tiny, towering island in the middle of the sea with nothing visible in any direction. Not a mountain. Not a seagull. Not even a fairy holding a little lantern.

She’ll never be able to jump, Archer had said.

No shit.

“He knew I couldn’t jump, so he gave me his car. Why did he give me his car?” I looked at the vehicle like it was the first clue to a treasure map, and the treasure was my life. I hurried to the door and climbed back inside, worried the car might disappear too.

Drive off the property, love. No matter what you see, follow the road and go. Trust me.

“Follow the road and go. Follow the road and go.”

I couldn’t just sit there and hope to drum up enough courage to do a Thelma and Louise, or Orion would be right behind me. There was no time. I had to trust that I understood what Griffon had tried to tell me.

I put the car in gear. “Boy, is he going to feel dumb if I crash on the rocks.” I let off the brake, screamed, and hit the gas...

THE BURDEN OF RICHES

I closed my eyes and braced for my stomach to fall along with the car, but it didn't. The car never tipped, though the air pressure changed, and my ears popped. When I opened my eyes, I was speeding down a narrow lane with a colorful village, muted by darkness, coming up quick. A harmless looking bay sat a safe distance away.

Tenby. Just like Griffon said.

I wasn't going to die...at least, not if I let up on the gas, which I did. And as I toodled down the road, I couldn't help but feel sore from the mental whiplash of the last forty-eight hours. After the big ceremony in the backyard, I hadn't slept much before the storm woke me, and I ended up in the war room with Flann, taking one last look at the boxes.

From there, I'd gone from Uncast to DeNoy in a matter of minutes. And as a DeNoy, my minutes were numbered. All I could do was choose who should kill me.

Thanks to Griffon, I'd gone from death's door, into his arms, then on to his mother's enchanted house where I'd helped make food for the wake of an enemy. I'd also faced yet another Carew who had recently wished me dead, only to be saved by him when Big Bad walked through the door.

And seconds ago, I'd had to drive off a cliff to escape. Now, here I was, alive and relatively safe again. All I had to do was stay out of Orion's sight and sneak over to Ireland. Once I made it to the hotel in Dublin, I might just sleep and

recover until Griffon came for me. No life-or-death decisions. Just eat, sleep, and pretend I was no one. It sounded lovely.

I kept a close eye on the rearview while I looked for a good place to leave Archer's car. I was shocked that Muddy wasn't on my heels, but I wasn't going to waste time looking a gift horse in the mouth.

I made my way back to the brightly colored buildings that stood above a sandy beach. The bay wasn't very big, and I realized there weren't going to be any ferries leaving Tenby for Ireland. What I needed was a phone. Unfortunately, Kitch had taught me that a phone is the most dangerous thing to carry when you're at war, so I was out of luck.

I turned onto Warren Street and looked for an empty parking space. I finally found one outside an ancient church and pulled in. Parallel parking on the left, with a steering wheel on the right was like parallel parking with your face against a mirror, and I drew way too much attention as I inched forward and back, forward and back, until I was safely off the street. I knocked the sun visor down in front of me and sat there, avoiding eye contact, until all the witnesses finally wandered away.

If it weren't so dark, I might have thought it was my crazy hair that had drawn their attention and not my parking skills. And if I didn't remedy the situation, anyone in town would be able to lead Orion straight to me.

Minutes dragged by while I pulled out all the little wires and leaves, undid all the twists, and finally ran my fingers through my hair. It was far from smooth and straight, but at least I wouldn't turn heads. My dress was another matter. I grabbed my bag and wondered if ancient churches might have a modern bathroom where I could change. I had to be prepared to never come back to the car.

Archer had said there was money in the glovebox. I glanced around to make sure no one was watching, then leaned over and unlocked it. I opened the compartment and slammed it shut, looked up and down the street one last time, and opened it again.

Stacks of colorful British bills and Euros had been stuffed inside. I couldn't imagine why Archer would keep so much cash on hand. But I reminded myself that a two-hundred-year-old Fae's attitude about money wouldn't be close to mine.

Take it all, he'd said. *You might be on your own for a while.* Judging by the thousands that were there, he must think I was going to be alone for a year!

Sharp footsteps sounded on the pavement and brought me out of shock. I found the zipper on the duffle bag and dragged it open, then stuffed the money inside with the clothes Blath had recovered for me. At least twenty-five stacks with who knew how much in each. There was no time to thumb through one and make an estimate. If I wanted to hire a small plane to take me to Dublin, I could—but I couldn't risk leaving that kind of a trail.

Once I was ready to go, I took a few seconds to sit and think, to remember everything Griffon and Archer had said before sending me out of the house. A quick glance proved I wasn't leaving anything behind.

I tossed the keys under the seat, locked the doors, and got out. When I looked up at the church, however, I realized what an obvious choice it was. If Muddy found the car, he'd probably look in the church first, especially if the car was still warm. And since I was naturally drawn toward the beach and the center of town, I turned and hurried in the other direction.

Change first, borrow a phone, find a ferry.

The longer I stayed on the sidewalk, the more people would see my shiny costume and remember it, so I searched for a light on, an unlocked door, or a dark alley, it wouldn't matter which. I made it around the corner, out of sight of the car, and relaxed a little. But when a shiver ran up my spine, I ducked into the first business with a light on. A solicitor's office.

A lean man with gray temples, a loose tie, and a stylish blue suit sat behind the only desk. He looked up with a smile, then lost it again when he noticed how I was dressed.

“I need to change. I’m...being followed.”

He jumped to his feet and hurried to the window to pull his vertical blinds shut. Then he pointed to an inner door. “Toilet’s just through theere, so it is,” he said, with a thick accent like Bridie’s. He moved to the entrance and turned a lock. “Ye won’t be botherrred.”

I had no reason not to trust him, and I was grateful he’d taken me at my word when I said I was being followed.

I thanked him and went into the back. A small hallway had two doors, one of which was cracked open. It was a small bathroom with a bucket and mop sitting in an empty tub. Stacks of yellow legal pads, printed forms, and giant envelopes sat on shelves above the toilet, topped with a thin veil of dust. Nothing shiny in sight. Even the mirror was pocked along the perimeter with spots of rust.

I was definitely back in the mortal world.

My hair looked surprisingly decent if I was going for hanging curls. My dress, though, looked even more garish compared to my surroundings. My makeup made me look like one of those characters from the Johnny Depp version of Alice in Wonderland, where no one looked good.

I found an actual washrag in a drawer and started scrubbing. If Orion came hunting for Lucy Morgan, she was about to be washed down the drain. If Muddy saw me, though, he would remember what I looked like that morning when we met, so I was in trouble there.

Too bad there weren’t hair salons open late at night. I couldn’t turn myself into a blonde myself because my hair was too dark, but maybe I could go red...

Once I was back in my own clothes with the Fae washed off me, I pulled a hundred euro note from one of the bundles. I paused in the hallway to listen, but the office was quiet. No one pounding on the windows. No one calling the police.

I stepped out and found my host pacing in front of the windows.

“No one searching the street.” He pointed to his computer screen that showed four camera angles outside the building. “Do you need to stay for a bit?”

I shook my head. “I think it’s better if I get out of town.” I waved the money, then set it on his desk.

“Here, nooow. Take that back. Unless ye need tax or investment advice, yer blunt’s no good heeere.” He came around the desk and held out his hand. “I’m Jamie, Jamie Godstone. I should call it a day myself. Can I drive ye somewhere?”

I wasn’t dumb enough to tell a stranger I was headed for Dublin. “I don’t suppose there are any ferries out of town?”

“Not Tenby, but Pembroke Port is only twenty minutes west. Happy to drive ye. Four hours to cross the channel, if ye don’t mind Ireland.”

“No. No, I don’t mind Ireland.”

“Trouble is, it doesnae leave until niine in the mornin’. Ye’re welcome to sleep on the sofa here. Or ye might be more comfortable on the one in my flat, upstairs here.” He pointed to the ceiling. “Sounds dubious, but I’m neither a molesterr nor a murderer.”

“No? Well, I might be.”

He chuckled and looked me over, then searched my eyes for a minute. “I’m a fair judge of questionable clientele. A killer, maybe. Not a murderer, though. Considerin’ yer muscle tone, I assume ye can manage yerself against anyonnne?”

“Yes,” I said, to all of it.

He searched my eyes again and sobered when he realized what I’d admitted to. Then he plucked the euro note off the desk and tucked it into the side pocket of my duffle. “Ye’ll need this more than I will.”

“You’re being awfully generous.”

“Aye, and why not?”

“Well, it might be dangerous to know me.”

He snorted. “Is the mafia after ye, then?”

“Worse.”

He snorted. “What’s that? Fairies?”

I lifted my eyebrows. He started to roll his eyes, then thought better of it and crossed himself. “Well, then, don’t go wavin’ that dress around. They’re draaawn to shiny bits.”

Had I not known, firsthand, how often fairies came up in daily conversation among Brits, I might have worried. Instead, I just said, “Tell me about it.”



WE STEPPED OUTSIDE, AND I WATCHED THE STREET WHILE HE locked up. Another ten feet down the building, he unlocked a door that led to the upper floor apartments. Following him went against everything I’d ever been taught about “stranger danger,” long before they had a rhyming term for it. But whatever might be searching for me was a lot more dangerous than Jamie Godstone.

The flat was small but tidy and didn’t smell like aftershave, which was good in my book. Creeps like Andy Weaver always wore too much aftershave. The furnishings were functional. Very few hints of sentiment and not one speck that glittered.

Back in the seventh grade, I’d played on the junior high basketball team. I remembered what it was like to be so exhausted that I was grateful when the coach took me out of the game to sub one of the other girls in. Grateful for the chance to sit on that bench and breathe. That’s how I felt at that moment, to leave that other world for a little while and catch my breath.

“Not terribly homey,” Jamie admitted, turning the deadbolt and sliding the chain into place. “But after I lost my wife, I didn’t see a need for rattlin’ around a big house alone.”

“Lost her?”

“Died. Depression got the best of her.”

“I’m sorry.”

“And just what should I call ye?”

“Um...um...” Someone might come looking for Lennon or Lucy, so those were out.

He shook his head. “I’ll just call ye Joey, shall I?” He went into the next room. “Be out in a shaaake.”

I moved back to the door, tested the lock and slid the chain, making sure I could open it all quickly if necessary. Then I locked it again. The couch was twice as big as the spare, Swedish-looking one in the office, not that I expected to get much sleep.

My stomach growled, reminding me I hadn’t had so much as a piece of cake for dinner. All that baking and I’d never made it to the food table before Muddy brought the enemy into the house.

“Fish and Chips?” Jamie came out of the bedroom wearing jeans and a wrinkled pullover. “Or there’s Chinese takeaway, Pizzaaa, or an American diner that’s quite good. All at the bottom of the street. Up at the top, we’ve got Tendoori.”

“You choose. I’ll eat anything.”

“Right, then. I’ll be back in a bit.” He grabbed a tan coat, unlocked the door, and suggested I lock it behind him. Then he was gone, and I was alone in a place no one would guess.

I went to the front window and checked the street. All the parking spots were filled now, probably by people who lived in apartments above the local businesses. Like other coastal towns in the UK, Tenby was quite deceiving. You couldn’t look at a house and assume it was a house. It might hold a dozen apartments or half a dozen businesses. And now that my eyes had been “opened,” I expected to find surprises everywhere.

But it wasn’t just the fairy influence that hid the truth. While we’d been eating our Cawl the day before, Archer had explained why all buildings near the bay were brightly colored

—the paint slowed the rot and kept out the moisture from the sea. Sadly, that knowledge dulled a little bit of the charm.

I watched Jamie as he headed down the street, his phone to his ear. I assumed he was calling ahead, so he didn't have to wait at whatever restaurant he'd chosen. Of course it was possible he was calling someone else...to talk about the stranger he'd left in his apartment. But if he was hoping to turn me in to someone for a reward, he would have taken my hundred euros and hoped there was more where that came from.

I pictured that bill sitting on his desk, beside the monitor that showed the camera angles, and my stomach took a kick. Forget the disgusting implications—if he had a camera in the bathroom, he would have seen me filling the sink with cash so I could get my clothes and boots out of the bottom of the bag and replace them with the shiny stuff!

I'd done a little counting, a little guesstimating. Between euros and pounds, there might be fifty thousand dollars in my bag. What was a hundred euros compared to that?

I had to get out of there. Yes, humans were much easier to understand than Fae. Much easier to predict. But they weren't any easier to trust.

I scolded myself for not listening to my instincts. If Kitch knew what I'd done, he'd disown me. Sure, I could wait around and see if he brought back dinner, or if he brought back some accomplice, but I'd survived this unbelievably dangerous day, and I wasn't about to risk my neck another minute!

Jamie could have been ordering a pizza. I could be paranoid. But if I was going to live to see tomorrow, I couldn't let down my guard. My rollercoaster hadn't yet come to a complete stop.

“Keep your arms and legs inside at all times...”

GATHERING COMPASSES

I buttoned up my jacket, grabbed my duffle, and left the building. While the smart move might have been to head further up the street, my curiosity got the best of me and I nearly caught up to Jamie before he reached the bottom of Warren Street. From there, he was easy to follow, his tan coat all but glowing in the dark.

He ducked into the American Grill, so I made my way to the side of the building where I could stand in the dark and see the interior through a window. He stood at the counter for a minute, then moved to a bench along the far wall. A few minutes later, another man entered alone, didn't bother ordering, and went directly to the bench to join Jamie.

He *had* called someone.

Heavy disappointment settled in my chest and made it harder to breathe. So much for kind humans.



JAMIE GAVE HIS NAME TO THE NEW TEENAGER AT THE CASH register and found an empty seat along the wall while he waited for his order. Doctor Elis Beddoe pushed through the stubborn glass door, found him, and slid onto the bench as well. "Jamie."

"El."

"I don't suppose ye ordered for me?"

“I reckoned ye’d had supper, this late.”

“I have. But in lieu of a professional fee—”

“I told ye not to come. I only wanted ye to know, in case something happened, aye? I truly dinnae expect any danger.”

“Well, of course ye do. And I couldnae sit blithely by—”

“No.”

“No, what?”

“No, ye’re not comin’ hooome with me.”

“Come now—”

“Lawyer/client privilege is just as sacrosanct—”

“Ye’re not her lawyer.”

“I am.”

“As of when?”

“She gave me a hundred-euro retainer—”

“Ye gave it back!”

“Beside the point. She gave it. I am retained. And it would violate—”

“I’ll violate ye myself if ye think I’ll let ye go back there alone.”

“Give it up, El.”



AFTER A MILDLY ANIMATED ARGUMENT, JAMIE’S ACCOMPLICE left in a huff. I stepped out to the sidewalk and “accidentally” bumped into him as we passed each other. He nodded and mumbled an apology, but barely looked up. Though he stomped away with purpose, he didn’t seem in a great rush to steal some American woman’s money.

A chill breeze blew past and snuck down the back of my collar, and I wished I’d never left the apartment. While I stood there debating where to go next, Jamie came out of the

restaurant with a white sack in his hands. His eyes found me instantly.

“Joey?” He glanced up and down the sidewalk, then came close before he spoke again. “Did they find ye?”

I shook my head. “Who did you call?”

“Isn’t it dangerous for ye to be oot and about?”

“I had to know. Who did you call?”

“Just my friend. A psychiatrist. Ye just missed him.”

“Why?”

He seemed slightly embarrassed. “If something happened to me, I didnae want him to wonder—”

“And?”

“And nothin’. He didn’t want me goin’ back home alooone. I told him to bugger off.”

“He thinks you let a psycho into your apartment.”

“Naturally. He said if fairies were after ye, that ye were probably dangerous.” He noticed my expression and shook his head. “I’m just jokin’.”

“So, what’s he going to do?”

“Probably call me every hour until ye’re gone.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

“Okay.”

“Okay? What does that mean? Ye’re goin’ to run off, or ye’re coming back with me?”

I was cold, hungry, and worn out from running on the adrenaline rush that came with driving off a cliff in the dark. I didn’t want to curl up on a church pew for the night, or wait at the ferry dock Orion might be watching. And I sure as hell wouldn’t try to call Wickham.

This guy couldn’t hurt me. If he really wanted the money, he could have it—minus a few bills for my ferry ride and a

meal or two.

“I’m coming back with you.”

He grinned. “That’s a pity.”

“Why?”

“Obviously, I was gearin’ up to eat two hamburgers.”



WE HEADED BACK UP THE STREET. TWO COUPLES SLOWED TO greet the lawyer, and though he greeted them in return, we kept a steady pace and he didn’t bother introducing me. I was beginning to believe Jamie Godstone was an honest to goodness Samaritan at heart. He was funny and used his wit to keep me from worrying about his possible ulterior motives.

As we neared the church, I looked for the dark form of Archer’s car. It was still there, but two human shadows separated from it, moving around, checking the doors, looking for a way in.

Jamie followed my gaze and moved closer. He shifted the food sack to his left hand and wrapped his right arm around my shoulders. “Eyes on the ground,” he said quietly. “I’ll watch ‘em.”

I dropped my chin and whispered to Hank, begging him not to hiss, telling him we were safe but only if he stayed calm. If one of those shadows belonged to Orion, a little hiss and I’d be dead. Or worse. Being locked in a dungeon by a man who loved me was bad enough. I knew I wouldn’t last long at someone else’s mercy. If Orion found out I was DeNoy, however, there was no telling what he would do to me, or with me.

Would he use me against my friends?

I should have insisted that Griffon take me somewhere other than his mother’s. Maybe by now we would have figured out what being a DeNoy meant.

Jamie kept us moving, and once we'd passed the church, each step was torture, waiting to be pounced on from behind. But soon we were standing at the door to his building. I turned only slightly to glance back while he unlocked the door. One of the shadows came out of the church and joined the other at the car. I couldn't see their faces, their hair, but neither of them had a big head of blond curls.

At least, I didn't think so.

It was a pity I'd lost that little pin feather when Griffon swept me off my feet outside Hope House. If I ever got him back, I'd insist he give me another one. Maybe a dozen, for emergencies like this.

We made it to Jamie's flat without incident. While he located plates for our dinner, I moved to the window and peeked around the end of the curtains. From my angle, I could almost see where the car was parked, and I jumped when both the dark figures came into view, headed up the street, scanning.

"Just how good can fairies smell," I wondered aloud.

One of the figures stopped and raised his head, as if he were looking right at me, and I froze, careful not to move the curtain.

"Hell if I know." Jamie brought the food to the coffee table. "But then again, those two seemed human enough to me."

Both figures beelined it across the street, headed straight for me. I swore and headed for the door. "Listen, Jamie. I don't want you hurt. Just stay inside, okay?"

"What are ye on about?" He rushed to the door and put his hand on it. "Just lie low."

I shook my head. "One of them saw me at the window. They're here. They're coming."

"Then ye won't face them alone." He reached onto the top of the shelf at his back and pulled down a pistol.

"I thought Brits didn't carry guns."

“I deal with a tough sort now and then.”

“I don’t even know if bullets can take out a Fae.”

“Fae? I thought ye said little fairies were after ye.” He sighed and shook his head. “No matter what, let me do the negotiatin’.”

“I mean it. I don’t want you involved. I’ll just step out and you forget you ever—”

“Bollocks to that.”

The floor creaked on the other side of the door, followed by a polite knock. With his gun pointed at the ceiling, Jamie opened it only as far as the chain would allow, but said nothing.

“Good evening, sir.” The words were clipped, intense. “I believe you have something that belongs to me.”



“OPEN IT! OPEN IT!” I DANCED IMPATIENTLY WHILE JAMIE closed the door to release the chain. “Griffon!” I forced myself to calm down and waited for a clear shot before jumping into his arms.

Archer was there too, grinning and rolling his eyes. “Ye’d think ye haven’t seen each other for minutes on end.”

I showed Griffon just how happy I was to see him, then he showed me. Eventually, Jamie invited Archer inside and they left the two of us in the hallway.

“Let’s not do that again,” Griffon growled. “We go together or not at all.”

“Deal. What did Orion do when I was gone?”

“No idea. We never saw him come back downstairs. He frightened *The Queevna* enough they never showed their faces again.”

“Then maybe he hasn’t caught on.” I prayed it was true. The last thing I needed was for Orion to start hunting me, not

to find Wickham, but because I was DeNoy. “Staying would have been a disaster. I couldn’t get Hank to shut up.”

“Ah, yes. Hank. Don’t you think it’s about time you—”

“Not yet. Not here. Jamie already thinks I’m crazy—”

“Jamie?”

I dragged him through the door, then introduced him to the selfless Welshman who had given me refuge.

Griffon shook Jamie’s hand, and I noticed the intense stare in both their eyes and the jump of their jaws. Jamie was slightly shorter than Griffon but seemed to be stretching a little. I might have teased them both had I not spent the last year of my life witnessing similar pissing contests. I knew to stay out of them.

“Thank you for your trouble,” Griffon said, then urged me toward the door.

I pulled my hand free so I could give Jamie a kiss on the cheek. “Thank you. At least you’ll be able to eat that second hamburger after all.”

Jamie pulled out his wallet, removed a card, and pressed it into my hand. “If ye ever need me, just phone. A trustable friend is like a compass. Ye should always have one in yer pocket.”

WE STEPPED OUT INTO THE COOL DARKNESS OF A STREET THAT no longer felt menacing, and I asked, “Where to now?”

Griffon nodded his chin at Archer. “He’s going back to Bridie’s, to make sure she’s all right and to see if *The Queevna* know more about the DeNoy.”

“Oh! Then he can return the dress and shoes.” I handed Archer the duffle. “Your cash is inside too. Thanks for the loan.” I smiled up at Griffon. “And where are *we* going?”

“How do you feel about Yarmouth?”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

Archer snorted and rolled his eyes. “A reunion of lovers. How...unappetizing. Have ye got my keys?”

“Sorry. I locked them in the car, under the seat.”

“Right, then. Take care.” He winked and headed across the street.

Griffon took off his coat, put it over my jacket, then turned up the collar. “Not a long flight, but a cold one.” Then he removed his fancy shirt and I tucked it inside the coat. He led me over to the streetlight and unfurled his wings, then looked up at the window where Jamie stood watching. He put his fingers to his forehead in a sort of salute, then scooped me into his arms and jumped into the air. I wondered if we rose slowly just to give Jamie a good look.

If he hadn't believed my story about being chased by the Fae, he'd believe it now.

“You're cute when you're jealous,” I shouted.

Our “flight” lasted less than an hour, and I was amazed at how much colder the air became as we descended. I realized my ability to remain conscious was completely within his control because this time, I never passed out. I could tell when the oxygen was too thin and asked him to take us down a little. But otherwise, we were able to talk a little along the way, though it required shouting.

Draped across his arms, I was able to bury my hands in my pockets, and when my face got too cold, I tucked my head beneath his chin and pressed my cheek to his warm skin. He didn't seem to mind my icy touch. And by the time we touched earth again, the coldest parts of me were the tops of my denim covered thighs and my toes. A little rubbing and stomping took care of that, but I was still eager to get inside.

Thorley House was engraved on a plaque by the door of a flat-faced, two story, rock house. In the dark, the dimly lit upper windows looked like two sleepy eyes with the lids half-closed.

Griffon knocked on the door. After a minute, it opened and Annag's familiar face broke into a smile. "As I live and breathe! A visitor!" She grabbed my shoulders and pulled me close to kiss my cheeks and force me inside. She cut Griffon a sharp look. "Ye remember what a visitor is now, do ye?" To me she said, "Now he'll give me a lecture about safety measures. Mark my words."

"A simple thanks will do," he said, then gave the woman a peck on the cheek.

She batted at his shoulder and put her hands on her hips. "Did ye remember yer shirt this time?"

I pulled his shirt out from under the coat and handed it to him, then shrugged out of the hulking thing and hung it on one of the dozen large pegs on the wall. The woman bustled us into the kitchen and asked if we were hungry and was delighted when we both admitted we hadn't eaten. She opened the door to a very full fridge, then laughed when she saw Griffon had buttoned his shirt wrong. Before he could figure it out, she was there, rebuttoning the whole thing.

Over her head, he and I exchanged a look.

I couldn't help myself. "I'm relieved to see he's not keeping you in a dungeon somewhere."

He winced, and I almost felt guilty. But not quite.

"We're here for our own safety," Annag said, "and we know it. Luckily, he comes nearly every day to escort us to the beach. And he sits with her so I can gant about when I need to. Spoils her to the moon and back again, but I beat it out of her when he's not here."

Griffon gasped. "You wouldn't!"

She laughed. "I havenae. Yet."

We ate meat pies and drank apple cider while Annag asked me about my friends. She wondered if they might be coming to visit as well.

Griffon gave his head a little shake to suggest we not bother the woman with the details of my sudden change of

companions.

“Not for a while,” I said, and was caught off guard by a yawn.

“It’s nearly one,” she said quietly. “I’ll slip in with Fallon so Lennon can have my room,” She gave Griffon the same look Bridie had given him when discussing sleeping arrangements.

“That’s kind of you,” I said, “but I’ll be fine on the couch —”

“Nonsense. Fallon has a big bed, and it’s settled. Besides, when she wakes and runs to Griffon’s room, ye’ll be lucky to sleep through the squealin’. I’ll just go gather a few things. He can show ye the way.”

“Squealin’, huh?”

He rolled his eyes. “She only gets excited because it means she’ll get to the beach early. Nothing to do with me.”

“Yeah, sure.”

He slowly led me up the stairs like he was running out of energy, or maybe reluctant to say goodnight, or both. I was in no hurry to let go of him, but at least we’d be under the same roof. He pointed to the door at the end of the hall, then pressed me against the wall and kissed me stupid. If I wasn’t so worn out, we might have stayed there all night, but I finally had to cry uncle.

“See you in the morning,” he said, and kissed me one last time. “I’m in the room downstairs, you know, in case you have nightmares.”

“We’re not *staying* here, right? I mean, we have a lot to talk about and—”

“No. Not staying. I just need to prepare them for the fact that I will be gone for a while, and they’ll be homebound. Archer knows about them now and will come check on them in the meantime. Besides, we needed a place to stay for the night. I just didn’t expect, you know, the mothering.”

“Is that what you call it?”

“What else?”

“Well, I thought your other girlfriend was the five-year-old. Now I’m not so sure.”

“You’re cute when you’re jealous.”



I SLEPT LIKE THE DEAD.

Crisp, cool sheets and the smells of farmland convinced my body it was home, and the past two days of chaos melted away like a marshmallow in piping hot chocolate. I remember half-waking in the dark and remembering that I was safe. With morning a long way off, my heavy bedding pulled me back into harmless dreams.

I woke again with light sneaking around the edge of the curtains. A high-pitched scream got my attention, but the laughter that followed brought me back to the present. Fallon was awake.

Ah, but that didn’t mean I had to be, and I let my bedding have its way again.

I jolted awake once more when the mattress sank beside me. “Sorry to wake you, love,” Griffon said, then kissed my cheek next to my mouth, which was just beyond his reach. “Fallon is eager to go to the beach. We are happy to wait for you, or you can stay and sleep.”

“Go ahead. I’m dying for an unhurried shower.”

“We’ll be back before lunch.” He kissed me again, this time reaching my lips. Then he held up a little bronze pinfeather in pristine condition, a drastic difference between it and the last one that had become tattered and frayed from rolling between my fingers a thousand times. “A fresh one for you,” he said, then pressed it into my hand. His gaze raked over the length of me, as if he were tempted to stay, but he shook his head and left.

When I finally dragged myself out of bed, I found a clock that read 7:15. I'd only had six hours of sleep, but it was enough that I could function again. Looking back at the past forty-eight hours, I wondered if I would have followed Jamie Godstone to his flat if my brain had been firing on all cylinders.

I wandered down to the kitchen and ate some things to stop my stomach from turning inside out. Berries, a tiny piece of fruitcake, and a drink of milk. I put my clothes in the washing machine—all but my bra and my boots—and climbed into Griffon's shower. I used his fantastic-smelling shampoo to erase any traces of my intricate updo and was honestly happy to see my old self staring back from the mirror.

Since I'd learned I was DeNoy and knew Hank was a part of that identity somehow, I felt I needed him next to me, with only the thin handkerchief between us. Even the pocket of the robe seemed too distant. I tucked Hank under my right boob and the feather under the left, next to my heart. Then I dug in Griffon's drawers, slipped a long gray t-shirt over my head, and wrapped myself in his sizeable blue robe.

About 9:30, I hung my clothes up to dry, found a pillow, and stretched out on the sofa, happy to sleep the rest of the morning away. I was blissfully adrift when someone knocked on the front door. A cheerful, light knock sounded again, and I wondered if Fallon had come to drag me to the beach. The water might be just around the corner for all I knew. So I made sure Griffon's robe overlapped in front of me, pulled the tie tight, and opened the door.

The dark figure of Colm Mulrooney hovered close to the threshold. His horns caught me off guard yet again, but I hid my reaction. "Mr. Carew's not here," I said, and tried to close the door.

"We didn't come for him," he sneered. Then to answer my unasked question, he stepped to the side to show me who he meant by "we."

A mere two porch steps separated me from Orion. Though I was sick with fear, I could have wept with relief that Fallon

wasn't on the premises. I didn't know if Hank was suddenly smarter, if he was somehow asleep, or if it was my constant praying in his general direction that kept him from hissing. But I was grateful. If he were a dog, I would have promised him a juicy steak bone every damned day forever, as long as he kept quiet.

"Miss Todd." Orion inclined his head slightly. His curls never moved, and he was unconcerned with the puddle beside him, threatening the hem of his gold robes.

"Inspector O'Ryan." I said, pretending the last time we'd met was at the police station, and not at the wake. I'd been Lucy Morgan at the wake. "Like I said, my host is gone."

"Then it's a pity he'll miss all the fun."

He didn't bother coming up the steps—he was just there, standing in front of me, holding my wrist. My heart pounded violently...and then stopped.

THE MUD PUDDLE

By ten o'clock, Fallon had worn herself ragged. She alternated between building a castle, running from the waves, and returning to the blanket to ask questions about Lennon. She was keenly disappointed my friend wasn't married, for if she were, she would have children, and could have brought them along to play with her.

She didn't know what she would do if she didn't have a friend of her own soon. "And the sea doesnae count." She sighed and dragged her feet back to her pebble and sand castle to build the corner tower yet again. She could never get it quite tall enough to suit her, but he let her figure that out for herself.

"If she asks me to recite the tale of Cormac and Aslyn one more time, we're going back to the house."

Annag peeked at him from over the top of her sunglasses. "Her tantrums are getting worse. When you tell her ye'll be away for a while and she won't be allowed to come, we must be well away from the water." She gestured to all the people sharing the beach with them that morning. "Not fair to ruin the day for everyone."

"Ruin their day?"

Annag rolled her eyes. "Since her birthday, her powers have grown in earnest. No doubt about it now—what Fallon feels, the sea feels. I cannae imagine how much worse it will be when she's a teen. I only hope I will be agile enough to help her then."

Griffon made no comment. Annag knew the two forces who wanted Fallon's powers, and the fate of that power, and possibly the world, would be decided well before Fallon grew much older. And each time the subject came up, the old woman would find some way to make her wishes clear—she hoped someone would release both of them from the responsibility.

Hope and Despair. Power enough to sway the world one way or the other? That wasn't a blessing, it was a curse.

Griffon pointed out the obvious. "She's bored. Let's go back. Maybe seeing Lennon will make her happy enough to offset my bad news."

Annag gathered their things into her oversized beach bag and waved to Fallon. "We're goin' in, child. Lennon's waitin'."

His heart raced at the idea that he and Lennon would be leaving soon, on their own, finally. He'd chosen a remote location in Finland, away from witnesses, while they discovered just what it meant to be DeNoy. It would be cold, of course, but he could remedy that. All Lennon needed was a good fire, a healthy supply of wood, and a warm-blooded Fae to keep her happy.

While he waited for Fallon to destroy her castle, he mentally reached out to the pinfeather he'd given Lennon hours ago and tried to sense if she were sleeping still. If he had his way, he would cover her with pinfeathers whenever they were apart, but more than one would prove just how obsessed he was with her.

One invisible heartstring to bind them would have to be enough.

He covered his own heart with his hand, felt hers beating alongside his. Then suddenly, he felt her shock, her panic. Something was terribly wrong! Adrenaline rushed through her, sent her heart pounding—and then nothing.

He felt nothing!

Nooo!



“ANNAG, LISTEN TO ME. SOMETHING’S WRONG AT THE HOUSE. You must take Fallon and go...go shopping in town. If I don’t find you in one hour—*one hour*—you call Mr. Brooke’s number on this phone. He’ll get you in touch with Wickham. If you think you’re being followed, don’t wait.” Griffon fumbled to get the battery into the back of the mobile, along with a pinfeather, then pressed it into her hand. “Don’t lose it. Give me one hour.”

Panic muddled his mind. After all, it might be Wickham himself who had found Lennon at the house. The fact that he felt nothing now could mean she’d dropped her feather or had laid it aside, but it was her panic that terrified him.

Though everything in him screamed to fly, he ran to the car, got onto the road, and turned inland. If Orion had spies looking for him, flying would give him away. A cloudy glamour worked well with humans, but not with higher Fae.

The road was endless, and all through the ten-minute journey, he kept reaching out with his senses, waiting for that heartbeat to return. He had no sense of that feather, either. He was blind to it, to her, and in a world he shared with Orion, he couldn’t afford to be blind.

He sifted through his memory for mentions of Yarmouth. That night they’d gone to dinner at The Ivy, he’d mentioned the place. Wickham and Persi had been there. They might have remembered.

If he were Wickham, he would have scoured his memory for any location where Griffon might have taken Lennon. He would have searched them all.

If Wickham had taken her, however, Griffon should still hear her heartbeat.

Unless...

The car swayed wildly on the road as he shook his head in denial. “Wickham wouldn’t kill her! He wouldn’t!”

No matter what the Grandfather and The Covenant had said? After all, Lennon believed he would.

“No,” he said aloud. Wickham wasn’t foolish enough to kill a DeNoy without understanding the consequences first.

To keep from going mad, Griffon forced all such thoughts out of his head. No use torturing himself until he knew what was going on. Finally, the turn came. He veered right, then turned left into the courtyard. Someone was waiting on the front step. Archer?

Not Archer.

He hit the brakes, hurled himself out of the car, and ran at him. “Muddy, you son of a—”

“Easy, now.” Muddy stood, tried to hide his smile. “If ye want her back, ye’d best take care—”

Griffon’s fist connected with the Fae’s jaw, which gave a satisfying crack, and sent him back against the steps, where his shoulders slammed hard against the front edges. Griffon grabbed the bastard’s shirtfront and pulled him up, knocked his head to the left, then to the right, with enough force to behead a mere mortal. Then he delivered painful blows to Muddy’s midsection and was disappointed when he couldn’t get his fists to come out the other side. After another half dozen blows to the Fae’s face, he tossed him into a puddle of standing water where Fallon liked to play with sticks.

Where she would never be playing again.

If Muddy tried to fight back, Griffon hadn’t noticed.

A weak hand raised, silently begging him to stop.

“Where has he taken her?”

“Not...so fast. Ye owe me. I never told the king you and the woman were together. And ye need me.” Muddy chuckled, then winced at the pain it caused.

“For what?”

“Inter...mediary. The King has demands. Wants to ken why ye’ve kept a secret family here.” He gestured to a

forgotten toy next to the house. “If ye’ve a child, a son, he demands ye present him at court. And he wants...wants to know why ye tried to hide the last DeNoy from him. I suggest ye tread lightly, my friend. I cannae imagine how far yer punishment might...extend.”

Griffon hid his relief. Orion was an idiot. He had no idea he’d walked away from Fallon and her power. But Muddy was the bigger fool. His weakness was his desperate need to be acknowledged, to be consulted, to be included. No doubt Orion was aware and had taken advantage. Griffon would do the same.

“Where is my brother?”

The Fae seemed genuinely surprised. “With yer mother, I assume. We left the house before ye did, if ye remember.”

“And you haven’t been back?”

“How could we go back? Even the king himself can’t see past those wards. For all we know, Bridie doesnae even live in Wales—”

“Never speak of my mother again.”

Muddy nodded and twisted his mouth to assess the damage. “I don’t know where yer brother is.”

Griffon started unbuttoning his shirt. “I assume he has either taken her to Fairy, to court...or to the Embrace...”

Muddy flinched at the latter. *Bingo.*

Griffon shrugged the fabric off his shoulders, balled it up, and tossed it onto the steps. He disliked shopping, so he saved the shirts he could.

Oblivious to the danger, Muddy kept talking. “Trust a Carew to find the last DeNoy. Tell me, did Daphne know? It would be a mighty pity if she died not knowing—”

“She knew. Now, tell me exactly how you found us in Yarmouth.” He offered the Fae a hand.

Muddy accepted the help out of the puddle, then he smiled sideways and tested his jaw. “A rune on the back of her arm.

The King's idea. When I told him about the woman staying at yer mother's house, he was very interested when I described her odd haircut. Insisted I take him along to the wake. He chose not to install the rune himself, demanded I do it. Ye remember, when I kissed her hand? I had no choice, obviously. I've never seen him want anything so badly as he wanted her."

Griffon ignored the attempt to rile him. "And when did he know she was DeNoy?"

"Not until he saw Daphne's room. That hissing he claimed to hear. It meant something to him. Got him all excited. Said there's a difference between revenge and justice, but now he can have both. Only...he'll have to win over the DeNoy first, whatever that means." His smirk said he knew exactly what it meant.

Again, Griffon swallowed the goading. "Justice from whom?"

"No idea."

"That makes no sense. If he was held captive within Moire's Embrace for thousands of years, whoever wronged him must be dead and gone."

"Must they?" Muddy shrugged. "When *Bridie* had four ancients under her own roof?" He bit his lip and looked away as if he'd said something he oughtn't, but it was probably intentional. Muddy liked to give the impression he was more interesting than he actually was.

Griffon changed the subject. "You know, I never saw him leave the house..."

"Well, we had our hands full, ye might say."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean The King didn't leave empty handed." When he realized Griffon didn't know what he meant, Muddy laughed. "I'm sure ye'll figure it out soon enough."

"But he definitely took the woman to the Embrace? He told you?"

Muddy started to nod, then realized the trap he'd stepped into and cursed.

“That’s it, then? No other confessions?”

“Confessions?”

If a messenger didn’t want to be killed, he shouldn’t deliver the whole message. In addition, Griffon didn’t appreciate the inferred threat to his family.

“Doesn’t matter,” he told the traitor. “Like you said, I’ll figure it out soon enough.” Griffon noted the distance between them, the height of Muddy’s shoulders, then he scanned the yard for any onlookers. Satisfied they were alone, he unfurled his wings, spun in a circle, and sliced Muddy’s head off with the tips of his lethally sharp pinions. His wings were half-furled again before the first drop of blood fell.

The bastard had the gall to look surprised.



MOIRE’S EMBRACE—IT WAS REASON ENOUGH NOT TO HEAR Lennon’s heartbeat. It didn’t guarantee she wasn’t alive, but how long would that be true? Hopefully, Orion believed he had a use for her. If he were Ambition, he was as old as Gloir and Afi. He would have answers...

Griffon was going to get Lennon back, and he knew just how to do it. He still had a card to play—a small but powerful card—and it was time to lay it on the table.

UNEXPECTED GUESTS

*P*ersi...

It was obvious now. Everly was pregnant.

Persi began to suspect when Urban was rummaging through the kitchen looking for ginger beer and crackers at six o'clock in the morning. But soon, Everly was nauseated later and later in the day. At first, after Lennon ran off, Persi thought it might be an emotional reaction that forced Everly out the doors to puke in the boxwood hedge. But now that they'd all come to terms with the fact that they'd had a DeNoy living among them for a year, Urban's pretty wife still puked throughout the day, and with little more than a strong smell to trigger it.

Persi hadn't been around pregnant women much in her life, but she wasn't blind.

She wandered into the couple's bedroom and made herself comfortable on the bed while she listened to Everly wrench her guts up in the bathroom. "Urban's going to take you out of the game, isn't he?"

Her friend rinsed her mouth, splashed water on her face, and pressed a towel to her face as she came out. "I may take myself out if I can't even leave my bedroom."

"I looked it up. Sometimes it only lasts for a few weeks."

"It's already been a few weeks. I've lost ten pounds."

"But you eat all the time."

Everly shrugged. “Who knows. The only advice the doctor gives me is that each woman is different.”

“You know, I’m almost glad Lennon’s not here. Envy would eat her alive if she knew—”

“She knows. She knew at the ceremony, when she realized I was drinking soda and not champagne.”

“Oh.” Persi sighed. “At least she’s got other things to worry about now.”

“If Griffon harms her, I’m going to pull him apart, one feather at a time.”

“Yeah, well, we’ll all have to take turns. I hope he has a lot of feathers.”

“It’s been two days. Wickham gets worse by the hour.”

Persi agreed. “We’d better find her soon or the next head he rips off will be an actual head.”

“Okay. Come on. Let’s join the others. If I have enough distractions, maybe my stomach will stay down.”

They headed for the study but ran into Brian headed in the opposite direction. “They’re outside.” He smirked. “Urban’s idea. I don’t wonder that no one wants to be stuck in a room with Wickham. Bundle up, now. It’s chilly this mornin’.”

Everly perked up. “Cold fresh air. Just what I need.”

Outside, the team was scattered around the furniture at the bottom of the steps. Persi noticed none of her friends were sitting within reach of Wickham, who paced like a leopard along the far edge of the concrete. She hoped her little suggestion was about to make the man happy—or if not happy, at least bearable again.

“Before we start,” he said, forcing himself to stand still. “I want to apologize if I’ve—”

“Nonsense,” Urban barked. “Get on with it.”

Wickham’s shoulders lowered. He nodded, and even managed a smile. “If Griffon has both Lennon and Fallon, he’s

the number one priority. Our only move now is to find a Fae who can take us to him.”

Kitch scowled. “I thought he was the only Fae we knew.”

Wickham shook his head. “His sister’s replacement, remember? The one at Trinity College. She was with Carew when we ran into him in Dublin. She has to know something.”

Persi waved her fingers to get Wickham’s attention. “I remembered something else. That first night we let Lennon go to dinner with him—with you and me, we told him we’d been at Lymington. He said he’d been at Yarmouth, that Lennon could have gone to the top of the lighthouse and waved at him across the Solent. If he’s Welsh, what was he doing on the Isle of Wight? His family can’t be there, can they?”

“Yarmouth is relatively small,” Kitch said, and gave her a stealthy wink. “We could search it in a day.”

“Excellent.” Wickham looked for Ivy. “Everly’s not well. Maybe ye could stay with her...” He was distracted by his phone and answered it. “What?” Obviously frustrated, he nodded over and over, though the person on the other end couldn’t see him. “Aye, aye. I understand. Tell him I understand.” He stuck the phone in his pocket and started running for the side of the house. “Ye willnae believe this!”

Persi grabbed Kitch’s hand and followed with the rest of the team. They ran between the carriage house and the manor and kept going until they reached the gate at the end of the drive.

Wickham danced impatiently while the front gates ground open. Persi and the crew crowded around him as he stepped off the property, though he waited at the edge of the road. The sound of an approaching car gave her wild hope that Lennon was coming back to them. Maybe she and Griffon had figured out she wasn’t a DeNoy after all, and it was all just a big misunderstanding.

An old black Rolls Royce came steadily up the road with dried leaves twirling in the wind from the wheels. Persi held her breath as it neared and released it when it passed with

nothing more than a curious glance from its only passenger, the driver.

Wickham tilted his head back and searched the sky, telling them all who he was expecting.

Would Griffon bring her back? Or was he coming to give them bad news? The anticipation tightened Persi's chest and threatened to bring up her breakfast. The threat grew worse when she heard Everly retching nearby, but she was determined to face Griffon first. After all, she'd been planning his death for the past two days like everyone else, and if they were going to destroy him, she wasn't going to miss a minute of it.

They heard him before they saw him. The thunder of massive, beating wings came from the south, then the north. The play of the wind made it impossible to predict which direction he would ultimately come from.

Persi's hand flew to the handle of her dagger at the same time she heard Kitch's silver blade clear its sheath. Each member of the team held a blade, including Everly. Wickham's hands, however, were planted firmly on his waist. But Wickham had other weapons...

The flapping ceased and a dark, dragon-like form drifted down out of the clouds above them. There was not one body but two dangling between the wings. Griffon in the center, Annag to one side. Fallon's grandmother!

Griffon landed gently and the great wings folded in upon themselves and disappeared. Once Annag's feet were firmly planted, he released her. In his other arm, a large, rolled up blanket shifted. He bent to touch one end on the ground, then began unwrapping something—something with long blond hair, blue eyes, and a grin far too big for such a little girl.

“Can we do it again?” She put one hand against Griffon's cheek. “I didn't get to see any of it.”

“Another day, love.” Squatting beside her, Griffon wrapped his arms around her and hugged her, then he let her go and stood. “You remember some of these folks,” he said.

“They’ve promised to find you some friends to play with.” He looked at Wickham and raised an eyebrow.

Wickham nodded. “I’ve a pair of laddies in the house who are as eager for a new playmate as ye must be.”

Fallon took a step, but Griffon put a hand on her shoulder to keep her from moving away from him. “Not until our deal is struck.”

Wickham laughed. “When we all ken better than to make deals with a Fae?” Then he shrugged. “But what choice do we have?”

“Fallon for Lennon.”

Wickham lunged forward a step, then stopped himself. “*We* don’t have her! *You* have her!”

“I *had* her. Orion took her hours ago. I’m assuming to Moire’s Embrace. You have to get her back, and you have to give her to me. Alive and well, both of us. Harm not a hair on her head, is that understood? No matter what you believe.”

Persi would have believed the tears in the Fae’s eyes were faked, but he turned to speak to Annag, and when he turned back, they were gone. He didn’t want them to know how desperate he was.

His gaze met hers, briefly, and she knew he wasn’t pretending. He really was willing to give up everything to get Lennon back. Persi hadn’t been able to forgive him for taking her friend the last time, when he’d been more interested in capturing Wickham, to trade him to Orion for his sister. No doubt he could have traded Lennon for her now—since she was DeNoy.

Now, it appeared he wanted nothing but her.

Persi stepped forward. “And just how can we get to Moire’s Embrace?”

“I will escort you.”

“So Wickham can bring her out?”

“Yes.”

“But if she’s DeNoy, I would think she could come and go —”

“I don’t think she is—yet. And she certainly won’t be able to navigate the Embrace.”

“So you need Wickham’s help? This isn’t a trick to trade him for your sister?”

“My sister is gone by her own choice. And yes, I need his help. He must vow to pop us all out. I promised Lennon...” He shook his head, swallowed. “I have promises to keep.”



ALONE.

I was completely, and utterly alone, floating in the universe like I’d accidentally stepped out of my rocket ship without my spacesuit. This wasn’t Daphne’s purple version, and if there was any color to the night sky encircling me, it was a blue so dark it barely registered.

I could breathe. My lungs pulled and exhaled normally—or was I only imagining it? It was impossible to tell.

I couldn’t think normally. Random questions entered my brain and most floated away again before I could examine them. *Did time have meaning? Was this just a dream? Was I cold? Griffon... Persi... Flann...*

Sometimes, I caught myself thinking the same thing over again, like it was the first time I’d thought it. *Why wasn’t I cold?*

Déjà vu after *déjà vu*. So weird.

The whole suspension thing would make me motion-sick, it was only a matter of time. If I puked, would it float back in my face? On long drives, to keep my stomach under control, I had to watch the road. The only option for me now was to keep my attention on the brightest star out there, and it seemed to work. If my body drifted around so I could no longer see it, I wiggled around until it was dead center again.

After a while, I realized I wasn't going to be sick in this strange little universe, so I stopped trying to control my view...

Minutes passed. Possibly hours. Possibly days. When the nuance to the nothingness wore off, I figured, as long as I was powerless, I might as well sleep. Hell, if this was eternity—if I was dead and this was it—there wasn't a lot to stay awake for anyway.

Deep down, I wasn't worried. This couldn't be the end. Orion had been too happy to see me, and I was pretty sure revenge wasn't something he was after. So I relaxed, and I floated, and I zoned out, hoping my t-shirt wouldn't ride up and expose my bare butt.

Hardly caring if it did.

A SKELETON CREW

*K*itch snagged Wickham a secure line so he could make a quick call. Lorraine answered.

“What is it? Everyone all right?” She didn’t sound too worried because if anything had gone wrong, she probably would have sensed it.

“We’ve had a pleasant surprise this morning,” he told her. “And some bad news.”

“Good news first, dear.”

“There’s a wee lassie here who was thrilled to meet my wee laddies this mornin’. And even more pleased to learn of the pond out back.”

“Fallon! You’ve got Fallon!”

“I do indeed. Carew handed her over...almost free and clear.”

“Almost? Then what’s the bad news?”

“Orion has Lennon.”

“I expected as much.”

“Ye did? And ye said nothin’?”

“Well, that warning on the back of the note says it all, doesn’t it, dear? Be sure to ‘lock’ before the Fae find her? Means the Fae are the most dangerous to her—and the most interested.”

“Aye, well, I wish I could go back to the old man and demand to know what the bloody hell is going on, but—”

“Of course! Why not go back?”

“No use. There’s no telling when he changed his mind about killing the DeNoy. And I can’t bloody well spend a year of my life hoping to arrive on the right date, can I, when we need her back immediately?”

“Too bad you can’t open that last box. I bet he left the details in there, for the Fae King to manage.”

“If we’ve learned anything about the boxes it’s that only the one meant to receive the contents can open each box. We searched the second box with a fine-toothed comb. The blade that cut Lennon’s hand is well and truly gone. I have to allow that she hadn’t known the box was for her. And Flann insists her shock was real. She couldnae have known who she was.”

“Of course she didn’t. And you’re right. We have to get her back by hook or by crook. In the meantime, keep a close eye on Fallon until you can drain that pond. Don’t trust her out there alone.”

“Understood. And, uh...” He wanted to ask more, but he was afraid of what he might hear.

“Spit it out, dear.”

“See anything ahead?”

“Why?”

“Because some of us are about to put our lives in the hands of a Fae. Carew has offered to take us to Moire’s Embrace, where he believes Orion is holding Lennon.”

“Some?”

“Everly is down with morning-sickness. I’ve asked Ivy to stay with her.”

“Wise. You shouldn’t both go...”

“Then you do see something?”

The following pause chilled his blood. Finally, his sister spoke again. “Where you go, we cannot see.”

“Then it’s just a wise move, to not put both parents in danger.”

“Exactly right.” Lorraine then made an excuse to end the call.

Wickham assured himself that if his sisters knew he was headed for doom, they would tell him.

Surely.



WICKHAM EXPECTED EVERLY TO BE PEEVED AT BEING LEFT behind. Instead, she was grateful. In the foyer, she kissed Urban goodbye and headed back to her room at a fast clip. From the sound of it, she didn’t make it far before she lost her breakfast.

Urban looked worried, but he didn’t go after her.

Ivy wasn’t happy that he was headed for Moire’s Embrace. “We don’t even know what you’ll be walking into.” She glanced at the open doorway to the parlor, where Griffon waited for them. “Does *he* even know?”

“Honestly? I dinnae believe he does. The old man said it would take a daring Fae to take us there when he may well not be allowed out again.” He nodded toward the parlor. “Obviously, he loves her. The only way I would walk into Hell would be if I needed to save you.”

Ivy flung her arms around his neck and kissed him hard, like she always did when she thought she might never see him again—which, sadly, happened more often than he’d like to admit.

Griffon Carew was a good man—a good Fae—and for now, he could be part of the team. But good will wouldn’t give him a free pass forever. They would trust him today. That was

all Wickham would promise. And hopefully, they'd all be back in the parlor soon, giving Lennon a hard time for fleeing.

Yes, Carew was a good man, an honorable one, even more honorable than he. Because Wickham had no intention of keeping his word. If they were able to save Lennon and bring her back to Hope House, she wouldn't be leaving with the Fae if he could help it.

Although, convincing her to stay might be easier said than done...



WICKHAM HATED TO THINK OF IT AS A HUNTING PARTY, BUT that was precisely what the team was that morning as they began to take their positions in the circle. Persi fetched their Fae escort out of the parlor to join them. Kitch and Alwyn brought lengths of soft black rope and handed them around.

Kitch explained. "Griffon said we shouldn't rely on normal physics, so rope might be the only way to keep us together." He tied the end of one length to Persi's belt, then knotted the other end to his own. "He also said our daggers may not make it through."

Wickham looked to the Fae for verification. Griffon shrugged. "It's not as if the place is vacation ground for the High Fae. For obvious reasons, no one has ever returned from the Embrace to report what they'd seen. So I urge you not to include more of your friends than necessary."

Kitch whistled. "High Fae? Is that what ye are?"

Griffon rolled his eyes and ignored the question. "Anyone who has qualms should stay behind." He looked pointedly at Persi.

"I'll be stayin'," Brian said, as he tied a rope to his brother. "Flann and I decided, if this ends in disaster, one of us will be left to carry on."

Kitch grinned. "Did ye flip fer it?"

Brian shook his head. “Flann insists on goin’. Thinks Lennon will appreciate a friendly face.”

Griffon grumbled. “I don’t think you understand—”

“Aye,” Wickham interrupted. “We do. But he’s right. She and Flann...get on.”

Flann grinned in the face of Griffon’s sudden interest and offered him the other end of his rope, which Griffon took and attached to himself.

Alwyn stepped back. Essential personnel only. And though Wickham would have preferred Persi stay behind, there was no separating her and Kitch. They’d obviously come to a similar agreement to he and Ivy, that they would willingly leave this world together rather than spend the rest of their lives apart. So who was he to argue?

It was a risk to take Persi and her Naming Power where she might come face to face with Orion. But Wickham doubted she’d see reason when her friend needed rescuing.

Wickham tethered himself to Urban, who tied on to Persi, who was already attached to Kitch. Kitch attached his second line to Flann, who was now tied at the hip to Griffon. With their small party of six attached in a line, they gathered close and set hands to shoulders.

Griffon lifted a finger to the air before him. “Ready?”

“Ready,” they said in unison.

“Remember not to panic,” he said. “If, as you say, there are those from Muirsglen there, and they can breathe normally, so can we all.”

“Bloody hell,” Kitch said, “I didnae think about oxygen.”

“Avoid direct eye contact with any Fae. Don’t allow yourselves to become mesmerized by the glamour. Most mortals are shocked when they see the true fairy world.”

“Anything for Lennon,” Flann said aloud, like a toast.

Griffon nodded. “Anything for Lennon.” He reached forward and made an arc in the air with his finger. Along its

path, the world opened up like he'd sliced a hole in the wall of a tent, revealing a brilliantly lit universe on the other side.

"Not like the other I've seen," Urban nearly shouted, as a wind rushed out of the hole, swooped around the foyer like a concentrated flock of birds, and blew them all through the ever-widening rent in the air.

A heartbeat later, Brian, Ivy, and Alwyn stood alone in the empty foyer. The only movement was a Ficus leaf fluttering to the floor.



THE WIND DIED IMMEDIATELY. THE FLOCK OF INVISIBLE BIRDS dispersed.

The gap through which the team had flown was gone again. A universe stretched in all directions, erasing all trace of their passage, eliminating all sense of gravity. The ropes had been inspired. Otherwise, they would be floating off in all directions if they couldn't keep a tight grip on one another.

Wickham opened his mouth to speak but forgot what he meant to say.

Griffon waved his hands to gain everyone's attention, pointed to his eyes, pointed at them, then pointed to himself.

All eyes on me.

He unfurled his wings only slightly and propelled himself forward as if by intention alone, which dragged them all behind. They were at his mercy. If he'd planned something nefarious with Orion—a way to remove the gold one's foes—he was more clever than Wickham had given him credit for.

A bright light appeared ahead of them, closing fast. But as the star-like form grew closer, Wickham realized it was the body of a Fae, floating in sleep, its form radiating a dim light, like a flashlight whose batteries refused to die. Griffon barely gave it any attention as they paraded past.

Wickham looked again at the universe spreading out to either side, above and below, ahead and behind. All those stars looked much like the first, only smaller due to distance. This was no universe.

He marveled at Griffon's sense of focus. Obviously, the Fae saw something Wickham could not. And once again, he gave the professor his full attention. If they had to search through this quasi-universe for Lennon, it might take eternity...

Again, they passed a star. Smaller. A woman this time. Sleeping peacefully, she didn't so much as stir. Her light had a slightly pink tinge to it. Her body was clad in silky material that might have flowed like water if it, too, weren't suspended.

If this was death for the Fae, it was a peaceful end...

Up ahead, a more substantial golden glow awaited them. Dread flooded Wickham's hope. He knew of only one golden Fae, and if that one were dead, floating...

No. That turn of fortune would require much more luck than he possessed.

THE DEBRIS OF THE SOULLESS

O rion...

Orion reposed on his throne, his favorite spot for serious contemplation, and watched *The Queevna* clustered together to his right. Though they seemed only mildly interested in their surroundings, he noticed each time one of them glanced toward the archways.

Finally, he grew weary of their restlessness. “Your king requires your attendance. You cannot defy your king.”

They smiled politely and spoke in unison, which, he was learning, was not uncommon for them. “We will not defy our king.”

Mollified, he allowed them the freedom of the empty throne room. He’d forbidden anyone entrance until he commanded otherwise, which would prevent Archer Carew from discovering he’d stolen the family servants.

Fools. They couldn’t know what they’d had.

He waved the four tiny women to him again. “Tell me about the DeNoy that Griffon Carew tried to keep from me.”

“A DeNoy?” They seemed surprised. “Were they not destroyed long ago?”

“You are Memory. You have known DeNoy before. You recognized Griffon’s woman as such. Confess it.”

“We know that only the true king can hear—”

“Only the true king!”

“Hail, the true King of the Fae!”

He waved off their attempt at distraction. “Enough of that. Tell me how to bind her to me.”

The green one shook her head. “A DeNoy will bind only to itself.”

“That’s not what I mean. How do I enthrall her to me before she is fettered—”

“She has not yet locked?”

He huffed with frustration but had no choice but to play their games if he wanted any answers from them. “Yes. She has not yet locked. Do you think I would leave her in the Embrace otherwise?”

The four exchanged looks of horror.

“What is it?”

“The DeNoy can traverse the Embrace...and beyond. You may never find her again...”

He rose to his feet. “But unlocked?”

“There is no reason she cannot do so while in the Embrace. Others there might help her...”

He thought of the half-dozen ancients who compose the Tribunal and cursed himself for a fool. “If anyone has helped her, Fairy will know peace no more!”

He gathered the four tiny women to him and whisked off to Hell.



LENNON...

I woke up dead again.

Awareness seeped into my brain like a slow-breaking dawn. Imaginary or not, I sucked a breath deep into my lungs and was almost grateful for the nap—if it hadn’t been Orion who’d given me the chance to sleep.

I had no idea what time of day it was. Maybe individual days were a thing of the past. My last memory was of morning, a lazy morning in Yarmouth, that had ended with Orion at the door. I prayed he hadn't found Griffon and Fallon—if he had, would they be here with me now?

Deep down, I didn't believe the afterlife was supposed to be this...solitary.

A persistent light began from somewhere behind me, so I tried a little swimming move to turn myself in the air. It worked, though not gracefully, and I found Orion standing in a golden aura slightly below me. Bridie's four little servants stood beside him, their heads reaching only mid-thigh. The one in green, Cré, blinked rapidly. Either she had something in her eye or she was trying to tell me something. She smirked with only half her mouth, then blinked again, before looking pointedly at my breasts.

Hank? She was trying to tell me something about Hank? Did she want me to keep him quiet?

Cré gave her head a tiny shake.

Don't keep him quiet?

Cré nodded as if she'd read my mind.

Since I couldn't completely trust my own thoughts in this crazy place, I decided to trust her. After all, she'd saved me from Orion once before.

I thought very clearly and hoped Hank could hear me too. *"Hiss, baby. Go ahead. Knock yourself out."*

I could feel it building in my bones—a rumbling, an anger that wasn't mine. I was so relieved to feel anything at all, I laughed. Then Hank lashed out with a vicious, prolonged snarl that scared the shite right out of me! I tried to hide my surprise that this noise had come from my own body.

Orion's jaw dropped. He retreated a step, then two more.

When the snarl finally ended, I improvised and sneered, hoping to keep him off balance. "Why do you disturb me?"

"You see? She has locked!" Farrig patted her cheeks.

Her sisters joined in. “Too late!” “Go!” “Go now!”

Orion’s eyes narrowed and he closed the distance between us in a blink. He wasn’t too frightened to put his arm around my waist and pop me out of my perfectly comfortable bubble. When he lowered my feet to the ground, we were standing in a wide cavern. The floor was polished stone so cold it hurt my feet. Three walls and a high ceiling. The fourth wall was missing—a window that opened onto a familiar purple galaxy. Apparently, Daphne wasn’t the only one obsessed.

Though I couldn’t understand the language, I recognized cursing when I heard it. Orion turned in a circle, spitting mad. “They tricked me,” he said. “Those little...”

The word *little* gave it away.

“How did they trick you?”

“Made me move before I was ready, tricked me into leaving them behind. They’ll be long gone now.”

I tried not to laugh in case it might piss him off even more. “Those little women?”

“The Four Memories. Everything I need to know, they know.”

“Four Memories. That’s kind of...sweet.”

He took a deep breath and brought his attention around to me. I watched his eyes go from black and angry to brown, then green and pleasant. He was far too beautiful to have an ugly smile, damn him. Though I honestly tried, I couldn’t stop my face from smiling back.

“They were hidden from the world, just as I was, since almost the beginning. I was shocked to find them in the household of Carew’s mortal stepmother.” He shook his head. “As soon as I get Rowena’s power from your friends, I’m going to have a nice little chat with that Carew sister.”

“Rowena’s power. You mean Life and Death.”

“Very good.” His green eyes flashed. “What else do you know, DeNoy?” He turned and strolled to a large, elaborate throne I hadn’t noticed. “The first thing you will tell me is how

you hid yourself from me the first time, at the police station. A nifty trick, that.”

“A magician never tells her secrets,” I said, then was relieved when my answer only amused him.

“Fair enough.” He waved his hand and another throne, slightly smaller and padded with royal purple cushions, appeared just a few feet from his, turned slightly. “Come. Sit. I have much to say.”

I laughed, relieved. “That’s good, because I don’t really have a lot to talk about.”

He chuckled. “I haven’t brought you here to entertain me, after all. But I must plead my case.”

“Plead your case.” I nodded, like I knew exactly what he was talking about. “Go ahead. I’m all ears.”

Boy, did he have the wrong DeNoy. If he thought he was King of the Fae, which he obviously did, then what did he need me for? Why suck up to an Uncast who couldn’t even figure out how to work her pet rock?

If he was feeling chatty, however, I certainly wasn’t going to stop him.

DEATH'S DOORWAY

*W*ickham...

The golden starlight ahead wasn't the body or spirit of a Fae. It was square, like a doorway. A massive doorway. And just as Wickham relaxed, the block of gold rushed toward their party of six and swallowed them whole.

His sense of balance came rushing back and with it, gravity. No matter how quickly he reacted, he still ended up on the glowing floor with his friends. Only Griffon adjusted smoothly. His wings disappeared again, leaving him with nothing but pants, boots, and a bare torso.

"Yer lairdship." An ancient man got to his feet and bowed officiously to Griffon. He stood behind a tall counter made of dimmer rays of light that was easy on the eyes. His white robes reflected the golden light of the room itself. The walls behind him were bronze with three darkened doorways along it, spaced evenly.

To Wickham's right, the doorway that had swallowed them. Beyond it, the dark sky of that odd universe lit by the forms of sleeping Fae. To the left, another wide doorway with a different universe beyond. Very few stars. A purple cast to the distant galaxies.

Griffon turned toward it and took a few steps as if compelled to do so.

"Caution, milord," the old man sang out. "Unless ye seek yer own death."

Griffon pointed out the doorway. “Death is here, but not there?” He pointed back the way we’d come.

The old one nodded at the second, purple universe. “Death for the High Fae only. It is where ye shall find yer eternal rest. One day. Or today...should ye stumble...or overstay yer welcome. Visitors are expected to remain permanently, if they linger too long.” The twinkle in his eye did not belie his words. Rather, they reinforced them, as if it might give the old fellow a bit of amusement to see such a misstep.

Griffon retreated, putting a safe distance between himself and his ultimate destiny. Then he moved toward the old one’s high desk and inclined his head. “I am grateful for the warning.”

Wickham, Persi, and Urban followed cautiously with Kitch and Flann watching their backs.

The old eyes twinkled again as he looked over the group. The ropes seemed especially amusing. “What do ye seek?”

Wickham opened his mouth to speak, but Griffon hissed and shook his head. It was a reminder. These were Fae. Words could be deadly.

“I do not seek Moire’s Embrace,” Griffon said. “But I do seek someone who might be caught here *against nature*.”

Other old heads lifted behind the counter made of light. Naps interrupted? Some blinked and frowned. Others took a quick look and disappeared again. One, with long hair, straightened in her seat and came immediately to attention. She whispered something to the first man. He shook his head and turned his shoulder to her.

“This is Moire’s Embrace.” The man lifted his arms, gestured to the walls. “Which of us do you seek?”

There was no one else in the room.

“I seek...enlightenment. Pray, tell me about this place. About the doorways and what lies beyond them.”

After long consideration, the old one nodded. “Eternal rest.” He gestured to where they’d entered. “Unless they are

called up again.” He pointed to the other opening. “Rest for the High Fae.”

Griffon nodded to the other doors. “And what would a Fae like me find through those doors?”

The man gestured to the first one. “*Ifreann*. Purgatory. Punishment.” The second. “*Srianadh*. Containment. Suspension.” And the third. “*Neamhni*. Nothingness, the debris of the soulless...” He eyed the group again, the ropes. “Perhaps ye seek to contain these...” He waved his hand as if at a loss for what to call them.

Wickham held his breath, waiting for Griffon’s response. He honestly didn’t know if he’d be able to pop them out again if their High Fae ally turned on them.

Griffon shook his head. “These are under my protection. Now, I was told there are beasts here...”

The woman bobbed her head. “He means the Fae King’s beasts.”

The old man whipped around to hiss at her, raised a hand as if to strike her, but lowered it again when she simply glared at him. “Not your business,” he spat.

“You know much,” Griffon gushed, drawing the man’s attention again. “I believe you must have known the previous King of the Fae.”

The man just smiled.

“Tell me about this pretender.”

“A mere Fae when he was released from his prison, the power of the king when he returned. All must defer to the power of the Fae King.” He shot a cryptic glance toward Persi, then forgot her again.

Griffon turned to Wickham and lowered his voice. “We are running out of time. Do you notice the wall of light thinning? Tell me why he noticed Persi. *Now!*”

Wickham cursed himself for a fool and surrendered more information to Griffon than he’d intended. “She has the Naming Power of Light and Darkness.”

“And you brought her *here*? You’re mad!” He turned to face the bar again. “If someone with power of the Fae King asked wisdom from you?”

“We would answer.”

Griffon waved Persi to him. “Ask him if the Fae King brought an Uncast here. If she’s still here, and where we find her.”

Persi nodded, then turned and gave the old one her most charming smile.

“My lady,” he said, and offered a surprisingly limber bow. “A Fae King who is neither king nor Fae. What would ye ask?”

“Has the Fae King confined an Uncast here?”

“No Uncast.”

“You’re right, of course. The one we seek is a DeNoy. Did the Fae King leave a DeNoy here?”

“He did.”

“Show us.”

He shook his head. “She is gone again.”

“Did she escape?”

“She did not try.”

“Is she alive?”

“I cannot say.”

Persi smiled harder. “Was she alive when she left?”

“She was.”

“Has the Fae King left anyone else here?”

“His army...and a host of witches...like yerselves.”

“And if I asked you to release that host to me?”

“I must obey anyone with the power of the Fae King.”

Persi nodded and the team huddled together around Wickham. “Orion’s army is here. We can probably destroy it if

they'll let us."

Wickham shook his head. "We may not have time. *Lennon* may not have time."

As if illustrating his words, the golden light dimmed and paled another degree.

Persi turned back to the bench. "May my companions and I have more time?"

To the delight of the old woman, the fellow reached under his desk and produced an hourglass, which he shook once before tipping it on its head and setting it on the counter. The walls, the floor, the desk, grew instantly more opaque, and he preened. "I have given ye more time."

Persi thanked him. "Please release into my care the host of witches like us. Alive."

The man smirked. "It is not for us to decide life and death, only to assign destinations."

Wickham grabbed Griffon's arm. "I can't pop out of here. I can't get any of us out."

Griffon bowed to the old man. "May I open a door, sir, so the host may depart with us?"

"A lord such as yerself need not ask."

Griffon nodded his thanks, then drew a line in the air beside him. An empty road lay beyond it. The familiar incline, the bare limbs, the dried leaves all told Wickham it was near Hope House. As near as Griffon could get on his own.

The middle door behind the counter slid open. They waited a long minute for something to emerge. Finally, a steady line of people poured out of the dark and came around the sides of the high desk. All ages. Adults carrying children, children leading children. They winced at the light but kept coming.

Griffon waved them close and held the conjured door open for them. "Don't go far. We'll join you shortly."

Children and adults alike began to weep with relief. Tears pricked the backs of Wickham's eyes too, knowing how happy

Lennon would be to learn they'd rescued Muirsglen's missing. He just prayed he'd have a chance to tell her.

The parade went on forever, it seemed. Wickham had tried to keep track, but he'd stopped counting after a hundred and fifty, watching instead the sand in the hourglass. Two-thirds had run out. Finally, when no others came out of the dark doorway, Persi asked if there were any left.

The old one shook his head. "No more witches."

"What about...others?"

"Nothing but the army."

"Of beasts?"

He shrugged. "Various creatures."

Wickham hissed. "Persi, the sand!"

She nodded but didn't move. "And the simplest way to end the creatures?"

The old one pointed to the last door. "Nothingness."

"They can't be brought back if the king decides he needs them?"

"Nothing can be recalled from nothing, no matter the power."

Still, she didn't move.

"Persi!"

"How do we move them from one door to the other without a fight?"

"Clever girl," Wickham said under his breath.

The old man smirked. "A Fae King must be obeyed, even if she is not Fae."

"Then do it. Move them."

He waved a hand, ignoring his fellows who tried to get his attention.

Griffon scowled. "Is there a problem?"

The old woman spoke up. “When the other Fae king comes to fetch his beasts, we must tell him what happened here. You will regret this.”

Persi lifted her chin. “Tell him. Tell him a pretty face doesn’t buy what it used to.”

“And when he asks about your door...” The old woman pointed to the rift Griffon still held open. “We must also tell him.”

Wickham sighed. “We already knew it would happen. We just didn’t know we’d be the ones to lead Orion to Hope House.” He nodded to the opening. “Let’s go.”

“Luck go with you, young lord,” the woman sang out as Griffon stepped through the rift. “Remember, Moire has yet to be proven wrong!”

TOO SOON TO FALL ON THE DRAM

*W*ickham...

Hope House was absolute madness. Nearly a hundred pairs of witches had been taken from Muirsglen, and though it was a relief to learn that so many had survived the slaughter, managing the crowd was a daunting task.

In addition, they'd been held in some sort of limbo, with no need for food, water, and the like. But now they were free, they were in shock, and they were starving.

Alwyn got on the phone and made arrangements for a food delivery. The rest of the household pitched in to calm the children and give what few answers they had about the fate of Muirsglen.

“We can feed them today,” Wickham told his valiant chef, “but we cannae keep them here. It doesnae matter if the next place is large enough. It only matters that Orion will soon learn where we are. We have to go, and soon. Even staying the night is a risk.”

Griffon waited for a chance to speak and pulled Wickham aside. “I appreciate all that needs to be done here. But we've got to get Lennon. We can't just leave her in Orion's hands until all these people are sorted. And I still need your help to do it.”

Wickham conceded. “Ye're right. Of course, ye're right. Come.” He led Griffon to the study, where a line of men stood before the bar, waiting for another man to pour them a drink. Wickham told them to take the bottles and find the dining

room. “One drink for the now. If the beasts come through our doors, we must be clear-headed. Ye can fall on the dram when ye’re safe. And ye’re not safe yet.”

The mention of beasts sobered them all instantly, and though they took the bottles with them, Wickham didn’t worry they’d be drunk off their arses anytime soon.

Kitch and Persi and Urban joined them. Brian was tasked with finding more of Moire’s prophecies, though they’d had no such luck in all their searches thus far. Ivy was handling the logistics of getting the house emptied as quickly as possible, with Rinky and Felicity’s help. So their team of six was free to go after Lennon. They only waited for Griffon, who’d sent a text to his brother, and when his phone rang, he took the call in the parlor.

A minute later, he emerged looking none too happy.

Wickham braced himself for bad news. “What is it?”

“That was Archer. He said *The Queevna* haven’t been seen since Orion left the house. I suppose that’s what Muddy meant when he said he and Orion hadn’t left Bridie’s empty-handed. They might be old enough to have personal knowledge of the DeNoy, which would be reason enough for my sister to have dealings with them.”

“Then we will bring them back with us too.” Urban gestured vaguely at the foyer walls. “What’s four more?”

Wickham left it to Griffon. “Do you know where he would have taken Lennon?”

“I have a good idea. Muddy said Orion needed to *win her over*, and if he needs to impress her, he’ll take her to court. He does love to pose on the throne.”

Persi brightened. “And if he needs to win her over, it means she might be in less danger than we thought.”

“Sure,” Wickham said. “Or more...”



GRIFFON...

The benefit of Orion taking Lennon to Fairy was that Griffon could track her with the pin feather—if she still had it with her. He thought taking Persi along was a mistake, and said so, but the woman wouldn't see reason. Obviously, she and Lennon had a deep attachment Griffon hadn't appreciated until now. And surprisingly, even Wickham was willing to defer to her.

Still, he tried one last time to dissuade her. “We lucked out in the Embrace and never faced Orion. We can't expect to be that fortunate again when we're searching specifically for him.”

Persi grinned. “Relax, man. Whatever happens, you won't be held responsible.”

“If anything happens to you? Of course I will.”

“How?”

“Because Lennon will kill me.”

Kitch laughed, then sobered quickly. “He's right. She will.”

The cry of two small children echoed down the hallway, reminding them all of the time crunch. Wickham waved for them to close ranks. “We need to go and get back as quickly as we can. All hell will break loose once we take her back. I just hope this place is empty when we return.”

Griffon was surprised. “Ivy's found somewhere to hide two hundred people?”

“Yes.”

“I hope they have a big house.”

The witch nodded. “A very big house. The Conrad London St. James. She cashed in on a favor. It was either the hotel or Sandringham. A dozen charter busses will arrive shortly.” He chuckled. “I cannae believe I'm sayin' this, but...let's go to Fairy.”



UNLIKE WICKHAM, GRIFFON COULD NOT WILL HIMSELF TO other locations in the mortal realm, but Fairy was another matter. No doors were needed. But taking a handful of mortals along required a firm grip, a necessity with which the team seemed quite familiar. They locked onto each other, and onto him, as if they'd done so a hundred times before.

Privately, he was still shaken by their trip to the Embrace, still surprised he'd been allowed to leave it. Despite his promises to Lennon, to take her away with him, he'd put his chances of returning to the mortal realm at less than ten percent. And though he'd been shocked to come out alive, his beloved had been snatched away from him yet again.

Damn Orion anyway.

He cleared the bastard out of his mind and concentrated, instead, on the pinfeather, sensed it in the throne room, and willed himself there.

Nothing happened.

He apologized to the group.

Wickham asked, "Has this happened before?"

"Never."

"You're sure where she is?"

"In the throne room. I'm sure."

"Can we try nearby?"

Griffon nodded, took a breath, then willed himself to a spot outside the Fae court, which he could visualize clearly. This time, his body shifted, along with his company, and when they settled again, they stood in a landscape of brilliant mossy green.

Fifty yards away lay a familiar slope. Moss-covered tree trunks reached so high over their heads there was no telling how tall they were. Massive branches, heavy with fat leaves,

blocked out any direct view of the sky, and what light filtered through the gaps dangled and flashed like prisms hung on strings.

While Wickham and the others watched, slack jawed, a handful of leaves lifted off the ground, turned a deeper shade of green, and flew like birds in search of a bare branch, where they attached themselves.

Griffon laughed lightly at their reactions. “Time does not flow in a straight line in Fairy.”

Urban scrubbed the shock from his face. “So we’re definitely in Fairy?”

“We are. Just outside the King’s Court. There will be sentries. Do not speak.”

As they approached the slope, the turf peeled itself back, rocks rolled and tumbled out of the way, and rich dark earth flew in different directions to reveal a stone arch in the hillside. Runes were carved deep all along the edges and glowed slightly in the dim light. Just inside the opening, standing to either side, stood two tall warriors. They, too, were carved out of stone, along with their weapons and shields. But a thin sheen of moss gave them a living skin that shifted to show their expressions. Their eyes were very much alive and watchful.

“Griffon Carew to see the King.”

Two dark, shiny leaves parted like thin lips when the bloke on the left spoke. “King’s busy. Come back later.”

“Trust me. He’ll want to see me immediately. I have news.”

“And we have orders.” Thick vines crawled from the ground beneath the arch and wove themselves into a lattice that covered the opening completely. “Come back later.”

Griffon reached out and plucked at one of the strands. It held as firm as an old root, and he cursed. Then he led the rest of them back where they’d started. “I know of no other way to physically enter the King’s Court.”

Wickham wondered aloud how long those vines might stay in place.

“No telling.”

Kitch offered an idea. “If we get the guards to come out, they’ll have to remove them.”

“Yes,” Urban said, “but how do you lure two stone men away from their posts?”

“Not men, fairies.” Griffon considered for a moment and an idea came. “Will o’ the wisps. Fairies can’t resist them. Catching one means making a substantial wish. If there are fairies in those statues, they’ll abandon their posts, I’m sure of it.”

Wickham shook his head. “Anyone have a will o’ the wisp in their pockets?”

Persi poked him. “You do. Didn’t you say your brother had the power of illusion? And wasn’t his power passed to you when he died?”

Wickham looked ill. “I’ve never...never touched Walter’s power. I always considered it...tainted.”

“Come on,” she prodded him again. “Last days and all that. Time to pull out all the stops. Right?”

The witch closed his eyes and didn’t move a muscle for so long, Griffon wondered if he’d become a statue himself. When he did open his eyes, it caused the others to jump.

He sighed heavily, turned toward the still-visible arch, and waved a hand. At the base of the trees across the way, a small flame grew to the size of a fist. It burned steadily with a slightly blue cast. And there it remained, unnoticed by the guards, who would need to look to their right to see it.

Wickham’s hand moved again, and Griffon was startled by the strident call of a large bird, though he saw nothing of the sort.

The guards moved forward, their curiosity engaged. Both reacted physically to the sight of the little flame and the phantom bird was forgotten. Instead of removing the lattice of

vines, however, they moved smoothly through the stone arch and emerged out the front façade. Advancing quickly for such large, heavy figures, they hurried across the clearing toward the illusion, their steps shaking the ground.

As they neared, the little flame disappeared only to reappear in the distance.

“It will stay twenty feet ahead of them,” Wickham said.

They hurried back to the archway. Griffon tugged on the vines. Still solid. And though they waited impatiently for another five minutes, they never weakened.

“Next plan,” Kitch finally said. “Let’s give hacking a go, eh?”

Urban pulled out his longsword and everyone stood back while he raised it and brought it down on the lattice. Only the smallest chip fell to the ground along with a few small leaves. After five more swings, he’d made little progress.

“Sure but it’s sealed against entry,” Flann said. “But is it sealed against exit? If we burrow under the ground and come up the other side...”

“We don’t have that kind of time,” Wickham said. “The guards may return, or someone else may come upon us. But ye have the right idea. If we cannae get in, perhaps Lennon—”

“Can get out!” Flann clapped his hands together. “Of course!”

Griffon was confused and said so.

Wickham grinned. “Flann can reach out to her. Telepathy. He’s done it before. Like I said, they get on. And she might not be constrained to stay, if Orion’s trying to woo her—”

“Don’t use that word!” Griffon grimaced at his lack of control.

The witch laughed. “I dinnae ken why ye’re so tichy about it? Ye cannae think Lennon is attracted to the bastard.”

“He has the power of Beauty. She said it herself. You can’t know how Fairy can augment a power like that.”

“Relax,” Persi said. “We know how she feels about you. Nothing pretty could turn her head now.”

He appreciated her attempt to reassure him and tried to make up for his outburst. “You’re saying I’m not pretty?”

She patted his shoulder. “On our list of worries, Lennon falling in love with Orion is at the bottom of the list.”

“Is it?”

While he didn’t appreciate the idea of another man having access to Lennon’s thoughts, he was grateful for a new idea. Other than shouting at the top of his lungs, he couldn’t imagine how he might get Lennon’s or Orion’s attention. And more likely than not, it would only give the latter the warning he’d need to move Lennon elsewhere.

Because the throne room was mostly stone, Flann needed to stay close to the entrance to try to reach Lennon’s thoughts. The rest of them moved back to their original spot, in case they needed to make a stand. Thankfully, the silver blades had come through from the mortal realm, so at least they’d be able to fight off any lesser fairies if necessary.

A nod from the old gentleman told them he’d made contact. Now all they could do was wait and hope that enchanted lattice would allow Lennon out. If it didn’t, Orion would be warned after all.

But they were out of options.

ANOTHER HAMBURGER

Lennon...

I had to admit that my lesser throne was comfortable. After hanging in the air for who knows how long, it was nice to sit down again, to have the world hold still again. My amusement ride had been a slow leisurely drift through someone else's universe, but a ride all the same, and I was glad to be off it.

Now, all I wanted to do was go home. And Griffon was my home now. At least, I hoped he would be when Orion was done with me.

There was a game going on here and I didn't have a clue how to play. I knew I was DeNoy, what were the pros? One con, obviously, was that my old friends probably wanted me dead. Now, it looked like Big Bad wanted me on his side for some reason. And for the moment, I was going to add that to the pro column.

I was going to play hard to get, though, because it seemed to encourage his respect. Sadly, I couldn't remember playing hard to get at any other point in my life. I was always the one trying to keep a boyfriend's attention—usually by pretending to love what they loved, study what they studied, and never make them work too hard for my affection.

Now, I just had to do the opposite of that, right?

"You will want for nothing," Orion said for the third time, phrasing it bluntly this time.

I knew what he meant. Wickham promised the same thing when he'd plucked me out of Idaho. And he'd delivered on that promise—I'd been given anything my heart could desire, including people I could call family. Then, a few days ago, all I'd wanted was to stay alive. And now? Now, what I wanted was Griffon, and freedom, and Orion couldn't give me either.

"I'm a little cold," I said. I wasn't cold, but he didn't know that. I was a human—until proven otherwise—and he probably didn't have a clue what I might need or want.

He snapped his fingers and a soft white fur was suddenly draped across my bare knees, folded in half. It could have covered a full-sized bed but it felt like rabbit's fur. "Must have been a massive rabbit," I said out loud.

He laughed. "You're in Fairy now." I supposed he thought that was all the explanation I needed. "Would you like a change of clothes?"

I pulled the robe tighter, inhaled Griffon's faint scent, and shook my head. "Not just now."

He nodded, then watched me, like he would be able to tell when I was warm enough. It was unnerving the way his green irises rotated and shifted. So I tried to distract him.

"Tell me about this place." I pointed to the window behind us. "And what's with you guys and your penchant for purple universes?"

He turned in his chair to consider a view he must have studied a hundred times. "Purple has always been designated for royalty. Mortals have their traditions of pearly gates and streets of gold. You and I have this." After insinuating I was more Fae than human, he turned his back to both the view and the discussion and gestured to the ceiling. "Won't you show yourself to me? We have enough room here. And we have privacy. No one will disturb us."

I hedged. "I don't know. Looks a little small."

His eyes widened. Did he expect me to become the Kraken or something? A giant octopus rising from the deep to destroy whatever I could reach?

Holy shit. What am I?

I made a face. “Maybe we should go outside.”

He put his hands on the arms of his glorified chair like he was about to patronize me, but then he settled back again. “I think not. I don’t wish to expose you to others until I know you are on my side, so to speak.”

Since my instinct was to appease him, I tried to do the opposite. “We may be here a long while, then.”

He smiled and shrugged. “Time means nothing here. I am confident you will understand me perfectly before we’re done.”

I nodded vaguely, promising nothing.

His eyes turned hazel, losing all traces of brightness, but his smile was patient enough. “I need your help,” he said, “to redress the greatest wrong ever done on this earth.”

“And what great wrong would that be?”

“You may find this hard to believe...” He aimed his dimples and his most lethal smile at me. “But I was deeply, wholly, and truly in love...once upon a time.” He bit his lips together as if trying to suppress some show of emotion—tender or vicious, I couldn’t tell. “To put it succinctly, she was forcibly taken from me. I will need your help...to get her back.”

He turned his head away...and let out a single sob. Then he shook his head, held up a hand to stop any comment I might have, which I didn’t. He exited dramatically, stage left, leaving me alone.

Orion, in love? Why did I doubt that?

I glanced toward the large, arched doors of polished wood at the right end of the room, but footsteps drew my attention back to the left side, where Orion had disappeared. Two of his dogs, literally dressed like Anubis in only loin cloths and armbands, marched in and stood at attention. The tallest glanced my way only once, then stared straight ahead.

Without thought, my hand went to my belt but found only terrycloth. No weapons. Hell, I didn't even have pants or underwear. Mine were hanging on a drying rack at Thorley House in Yarmouth.

I suddenly realized how much clearer I was able to think without that pretty face in the room. The Naming Power of Beauty must have been affecting me, though Orion's visage did nothing for me personally. When he said I'd be on his side before we left the cavern, he probably expected his powers to wear me down. All that crap about having his true love stolen from him was just to fill the time.

I had to resist. And if I couldn't resist?

Then I had to keep him out of the room as much as possible.

More footsteps. Orion swept back into the chamber with his layers of gold billowing out around him. His eyes were green again, but he blinked a lot, trying to keep up the emotional façade.

"You can drop it," I said, again fighting my instincts to hold my tongue and keep him happy. "I'm not buying it."

He chuckled, studied me, and then laughed genuinely. "You can't blame a king for trying."

I shrugged a shoulder as if to say I barely cared. "It would only be torture for us both. I'd rather we were honest with each other."

"Excellent." He headed for his pretentious seat.

"And if I'm honest, I'm *starved*. I can't remember when I ate last." I had no hint at how long I'd been kept in limbo, and I wasn't about to ask.

He lifted his hand like a click of his fingers could fix it.

"But what I really want...is a hamburger and fries. American food, you know?"

He nodded, frowned, then headed out again.

“And can you take these beasts with you? Lots of history between us, lots of bad blood.” He didn’t seem moved, so I grasped for anything, remembered Hank’s vicious outburst from earlier. “I’m pretty sure this growling is my stomach...”

Just short of the doorway, Orion turned back to look me over once more. I don’t know what he imagined he saw, but he nodded, clicked his fingers, and the monsters hurried out ahead of him. “I shall return shortly with your American hamburger and fries.”

“Medium rare!”

I thought that was a nice touch, myself.

“Lennon!”

It was Flann...in my head!

“Lennon? Lass. Can ye hear me?”

“Flann!”

“Aye. It’s me. I’m outside the chamber with Griffon and Wickham. We’ve come to take ye away, but the place is sealed against us. Ye must find a way to come out. And Wickham will pop us home.”

“Griffon and Wickham?”

“Aye, lass. We were wrong. No one wants ye harmed, no matter what the Seanathair said. I swear it on my life, ye’ll be safe with us. Wickham has promised to let Griffon take ye away as soon as ye’re free.”

“I don’t know. Should I try to get some information from Orion first? He seems to know something about DeNoy—”

“Are the four auld women with ye? The fairies?”

“No. They escaped.”

“We’ll find them. They can help. Between ye and me, I think I know what they are. And I’d bet money they know what lies inside the Fae King’s book.”

“I’m alone at the moment. I’ll try now. If I anger him...”

“We’re here, lass. If ye can just get outside!”

I rose from my chair and strolled toward the wood doors. If Orion caught me, I'd act casual, bored, curious. Or maybe I needed to pee and was looking for a bush to hide behind. Both plausible. Both forgivable. No reason to string me up and slice me open, right? How was I to know who was waiting outside? It wasn't as if I had a cell phone.

I reached the doors and still no Orion. Maybe he was trying to explain to his minions how to make a medium rare hamburger or how to keep from burning my fries. I pulled on the center handles and both sides of the split door opened freely. I smothered the little voice in my head that warned it was too good to be true. But then I saw a woven mesh of vines as thick as my thumb blocking the enclosed space between myself and freedom.

I couldn't let them stop me! I closed the doors behind me and got moving, hoping the vines were old and rotten, wishing they would just go up in flames.

And they did!

In shock, I stumbled forward, turned sideways to sashay out between burning remnants, determined to find Griffon again. Now that I had some fresh air in my brain, I realized how stupid I'd been to consider staying. Orion's power had affected me more than I knew! Facing him again would be a mistake.

"Flann?"

I blinked against the natural light and suddenly, Griffon was there, pulling me into his arms, tears falling from his cheeks. Then Flann reached glommed on. Persi did the same. The big shadow of Urban hugged me from behind, and then Wickham was there, reaching for me. All of us in a ball, I expected to pop away to Engineering. But we just stood there.

Wickham hissed, "I can't step us out of Place!"

Griffon let go of me, retreated a step, and drew a line in the air. A Fae door opened up to show us the Rose Garden at Christchurch Meadows, where once upon a time, I'd run into Griffon's arms. Urban pushed me through the opening. I

stumbled forward and got out of the way so they all could follow.

I could hear shouting. It was Orion. Persi, Flann, Kitch, and then Wickham came through after me. I watched for Griffon. The magical drape dropped back into place and I shouted, “Nooo!”

My old friends clustered around me and blocked my view. I tried to shove them out of the way, so I would know the second Griffon joined us, but instead, we popped out of the garden and into a dark, cramped hallway. Rooms with numbers lined both walls. We were in a hotel.

Wickham ignored my tugging and knocked on a door. Ivy opened it and Everly rushed out, gave me a quick squeeze, then threw herself at her husband. Kitch scanned the hall while the rest of us slipped into the large room, Flann urging me from behind. Once we were all inside with the door closed, Persi grabbed my arms and silently let me know what she thought of me taking off without a word to her, not trusting her with my secret.

But there was only one thing I cared about at the moment, and it wasn't her hurt feelings. I pulled my arms from her grasp, headed for the door, and insisted we go back for Griffon. “Now!”

Prodded by my emotion, I assume, Hank chose that moment to let out another one of his angry shrieks. The room fell silent, and I could sense them all retreating. It broke my heart and hardened it in the same breath.

Suddenly, Wickham stood in front of me, barring my escape. “Griffon is the one who closed the portal, lass. He could have popped us home again, but he must have had a reason not to. And I cannae pop in or out of Fairy without his escort. We'll have to wait for him to come to us.”

I instantly distrusted him. There was something in his eyes that told me he was holding something back. “Does he even know where we are?”

“Aye. The Conrad London St. James. We discussed it just before he popped us out of Hope House. He’ll ken we’re here...along with all the Muirs we removed from Moire’s Embrace.”

My mind stumbled trying to keep up. “You...you allowed him inside Hope House?”

“Aye. He came to us, brought Annag and Fallon to exchange for helping him get ye back. All he had to do was ask, but he gave them over in any case.”

“They’re here too,” Ivy said from behind me.

I couldn’t have heard him right. “And...from Muirsglen? You got some out?”

“Aye. All. Seems Persi holds some sway in the fairy realm. In Moire’s Embrace at least.”

I turned and found her right behind me. Hank hadn’t frightened her after all. Or at least, not completely. “You got them out?”

“Couldn’t have done it without Griffon.”

I took a deep breath and let it out again, grateful to know my ability to do so was no illusion. I took a tentative step toward her and she came the rest of the way and hugged the breath out of me.

“I know why you left,” she said quietly. “We all know, and we understand. But we’re here to protect you, not to destroy you. No matter what.”

“No matter what? You have no idea what you’re getting yourself into.”

“Oh, yeah?”

I opened my mouth to tell her I wasn’t so sure either, but I was interrupted by a firm knock at the door. Everyone drew their weapons. Wickham turned and looked out the peep hole, then pulled the door open and backed against the wall.

Griffon stood in the doorway, his expression tentative until he saw me. In two steps, I was in his arms, right where I was

supposed to be.

THE REPLANTING GAME

I was hurting him, I knew I was, with my arms clamped around his neck so tight he couldn't have peeled me off if he'd wanted to. But Griffon didn't complain and kept his gentle arms locked around me too.

As far as I was concerned, we were alone, together against the world, and everything was going to be okay now.

The passage of time didn't matter, just like it hadn't mattered in that odd universe where Orion had kept me in storage. But eventually, my arms started to complain and, as if he sensed it, Griffon lowered my feet to the ground, loosened his hold, and kissed me soundly but briefly on the lips.

I turned to face my old friends now scattered around the sitting room of a richly appointed hotel suite. Everly and Urban, Kitch and Persi, Ivy and Wickham, and Flann. Alwyn and Brian were the only ones missing from our regular fighting team.

"Thank you for coming for me."

Flann winked and smiled. "My apologies if it's too soon, but we're all in a fit to know...just how ye made that lattice of vines burst into flame."

"I don't know. I just wished it would, and it did."

Wickham's face changed in an instant. "One moment." He left his wife to come stand in front of me. He lifted his hands, paused for permission, and after I nodded, he placed his palms against the sides of my head and searched my eyes. "Not

touchin' yer memories. Just looking' for..." After a long minute, he shook his head. "If ye're Fae, I cannae tell it."

"I'm DeNoy." It felt good to say it out loud and to his face.

He dropped his hands to his side, but in their place, exactly where his hands had been, a white replica still held onto me. I felt a pull, as if these white hands really didn't want to let go of me, but since they were also attached to Wickham, to something inside Wickham, they had to release me when he stepped back.

"It's the power of the *Seanair*," he said, like an apology. "I suppose we ken now why it is drawn to ye. Fancies the DeNoy, I reckon." Then he laughed. They all laughed, nervously, but it served to chase away what tension remained in the room.

"You asked about the fire," I said, bringing them back to the conversation. "I think it happened before, in Muirsglen, in that burning house. When I found that girl in the bathroom, the fire came up behind me, but I wanted it to stay back. And it did. It licked around the doorway, but it left us alone."

"Daughter of a firefighter," Persi said with a smirk. "We should have looked closer when you came out of there unscathed, unsinged."

"We were otherwise occupied." Wickham paced to the patio doors and back again. "We need answers." He looked at Griffon. "Where do we find answers?"

"We need to find *The Queevna*," Flann said.

Everyone looked to Griffon, who shook his head. "They go where they like. Until it pleases them to come to us, they could be anywhere in Fairy. If they are trying to stay beyond Orion's reach, there is no finding them."

Wickham lifted a brow. "Would they go back to yer mother's?"

"They would have to be taken there, by family, or invited there by my mother. But I refuse to look. She and my brother are safe there, for the time being. My father's wards are

unbeatable, but I will not risk being tailed. I sent word for them to stay put and wait out the storm.”

Wickham nodded. “In the meantime, we need to see Fallon safe...”

I gripped Griffon’s hand tight. He did the same in return. “I’m sorry,” he said, “but you’ll have to excuse us. Lennon and I will be going now.” He held up his hand to ward off their alarmed reactions. “We don’t need *The Queevna* to explain the DeNoy to us. Lennon can figure it out. And I’m going to help her. We’re going somewhere safe—”

“How will we contact you?” Wickham wasn’t happy. “We won’t linger here after we find safe havens for the Muirsglen folk—”

“I will call your Mr. Brooks when I need to get in touch, but we will be...off the grid...for some time.”

Inside, I was jumping up and down like a high-on-life cheerleader, waving my pompoms in faces and crowing at the top of my lungs.

Persi was on her feet. I could tell she was grasping for some reason to keep us from going. “What about Fallon?”

“I explained our leaving before I brought her to you,” Griffon said. “Be gentle with her. I believe Annag is convinced the lass will be better off without her power. I’m not sure Fallon even knows she has it. But either way, we can’t stay. You’ll have to manage without us for now.”

I looked around the room and made eye contact with each of them, letting them know that Griffon spoke for us both, that I was leaving them again. Then I smiled. “At least this time, I’m not sneaking out.”

Griffon tugged on my arm, then led me out the door. No one stopped us, despite how we were dressed. I chose to believe my friends stayed quiet because we were right to go, and not because I’d hurt them again.



I DIDN'T CARE WHAT PEOPLE THOUGHT AS WE HURRIED DOWN the London sidewalk. With my robe tied securely, I wrapped one arm around Griffon's and held his hand with the other, sure something would try separate us if I didn't grip him tight enough. He was shirtless and it was maybe forty degrees, so we drew a lot of attention, but I didn't give a rat's arse.

"Where we're headed," he said quietly, "we mustn't fly. Too cold for even me. So I'll take us to Fairy—only for a moment—and when we enter this realm again, we'll be where we need to be."

"But what if Orion catches us in Fairy—"

"He won't. Trust me."

We ducked into a clothing store and spent far too much time outfitting ourselves. Neither of us had extra clothing, and since we were headed "off the grid" for a while, I stocked up on underwear, got a couple pair of jeans, some sweats, and two hoodies. When Griffon insisted we buy parkas and fur hats with ear flaps, I didn't argue.

Nothing fancy. Everything warm, including matching pairs of his and hers slippers. They were soft, striped, and silly, and I blushed when they went into the bag, as if I'd just picked out frilly lingerie.

His and hers.

Two doors down, we bought two soft-side bags to lug it all around in.

Coats on, bags in tow, and holding hands, we turned a corner into a narrow alley. One second, we were dodging puddles and the next, we were strolling through a meadow of wildflowers up to our butts. The wheels of my bag got caught and stopped me. Griffon stopped too, grinned, and gestured to the flowers around us.

"Always sunny in Fairy," he said. "I thought you might like a warm thought to take with you, considering where we're going."

I reached out to toy with the dark pink blossom of columbine that stretched up above its fellows. It turned its face

to me and smiled! I let it slip from my fingers and it went back to dancing in the sunshine. There were intense clusters of pointed blossoms that resembled honeysuckle, but I didn't look for faces, afraid I might find them.

Near my feet, blue flowers with knobby round heads swayed close to the ground. As I watched, some of them picked up their roots, shuffled in different directions as if playing some game, then planted themselves again.

A sparkly version of white cow parsnip hovered over the field like a thin layer of mist that refused to dissipate. I closed my eyes and turned my face up to the sun to let it warm my skin as it warmed the flowers. The smell of summer in the Rockies surrounded me, prodding at recollections from another life.

“Shall we go?”

I breathed the field into my memory and nodded, then was slapped across the cheek by the icy hand of a mean wind.

“Welcome to Finland!” Griffon had to yell to be heard even though he was next to me, still holding my hand. “Time passed in Fairy! It's morning now!”

In near darkness, we stood on a slush-covered path about twenty yards from a well-lit red building. A white cloud poured from the roof into the stormy sky. Visibility was a hundred yards, which included a peek at a frozen lake, covered with snow, with a long narrow dock that hovered, like a giant diving board, just above the surface. The size of the lake and whatever lay beyond it were a mystery.

Griffon grabbed the handles of both bags. “Come on!” He made a run for the building, laughing into the snow slashing diagonally into our faces. And since I was still suffering from separation anxiety, I stayed right on his heels all the way through the door.

Sevetin Baari was a bar, restaurant, and supply store all rolled into one. A wood burning stove in the corner of the dining room created enough heat to make me want to shed my hefty coat immediately. Or maybe that was due to the fact that

I hadn't had much of a chance to get cold. Two minutes ago, I'd been standing in that field of wildflowers with my face to the sun.

The man behind the counter greeted us and started speaking in a language too bizarre to be real, but my mind was completely blown when Griffon answered back. I just smiled and shrugged to let the man know I didn't understand a word. He immediately switched to English.

"Welcome to Seventin," he said. "Sit where you like."

I took a seat at one of the tables while Griffon spoke with the guy and made a phone call. He seemed pretty pleased with himself when he sat down across from me.

"Found a rental," he said. "Someone canceled, so it's already stocked. Our hosts will come in an hour to collect us."

We had an odd breakfast—reindeer steaks and eggs and rye bread with lingonberry jam.

"We're at the northern tip of Finland," Griffon explained. "Not far from the Russian border. Inside the Arctic Circle."

A shiver ran up my spine and shook my shoulders. I glanced at my coat now hanging on a peg and wished I had it on again.

He laughed. "Don't worry. I won't let you freeze."

"In a place where even *you* wear a coat?"

"Yes. In a place where even I wear a coat, and what little daylight there is means we won't have much of an audience."

"Daylight?"

"The sun doesn't rise far above the horizon now, and it will get progressively lower until the winter solstice. Maybe four hours of light for now." He grinned and intentionally made me suspicious. "I think that's all we'll need."

Alone, with Griffon, in the dark for most of the day?

My face flushed hot and my coat was forgotten until a couple's arrival allowed the storm to breathe itself into the building. They glanced our way, nodded, then spoke with the

man at the bar. When they had mugs in their hands, they came over to our table and sat down without bothering to remove their coats.

The woman took off her hat and shook her hair out of her face. “Mr. and Mrs. Brookes?”

Griffon nodded.

“I am Tuuli Ahonen, this is my husband, Timo. When you’re ready, we’ve got the ski dogs outside,” she said with a lilting accent. “I hope you don’t mind, but our PistenBully will not start.”

I tried not to laugh hysterically. “Ski dogs?”

As it turned out, their “ski dogs” were snowmobiles. Massive red ones big enough for Sasquatch to drive, which was appropriate considering Tuuli and Timo were both as tall as Griffon. Viking blood, obviously. Standing in the snow together, the three of them made me feel like a hobbit.

“Mr. Brookes can ride with Timo. You ride with me. Tie down tight,” she said, then handed me a face mask and a pair of goggles. She demonstrated how to put them on and cinch the earflaps down to hold it all in place. “Gloves?”

I held up my hands and she grabbed my mittens for a close look.

“The ends must be outside the coat, yeah?” She showed me hers. Not a chance of the wind seeping up her sleeves.

I copied her, then climbed on behind her. Her husband put my bag across her lap, then held Griffon’s across his knees before we took off into the cold darkness that threatened to swallow us whole.

I wondered if the authorities would find us in the spring when the snow thawed. Or maybe, in the Arctic Circle, nothing ever thawed...

SPINNING PLATES

Faith is a funny thing. You have to trust in order to grow it. And trust again. And again. And if you don't keep that plate spinning, if you don't keep feeding into it, you'll lose it and have to start over.

Since I'd put my trust in a mysterious Scot nearly two years ago, I'd started a lot of plates spinning. I'd trusted him and was rewarded with more friends worthy of my trust. My trust in them earned me their trust, and together, we kept our plates spinning.

Then the other day, I'd stopped trusting them all together and ran from them. That spinning plate crashed and broke. But seeing them again, I learned the pieces were large and could be glued back together. I was willing to start that plate spinning again, though it might take a while for them to trust me.

I'd started to have faith in strangers, thanks to a man named Jamie Godstone, who'd had blind faith in me, a stranger. A man who trusted easily. And though he'd said friends were a compass to keep in your pocket, that compass wasn't friendship, it was faith.

Thanks to Jamie, I was willing to have faith in these strangers and allow them to separate Griffon from me. I trusted them to keep me safe, to keep me alive, and to get us where we needed to go. Thankfully, I didn't have to spin that plate for long.

The cold dragged out every minute the literal arctic air tried to sneak into my clothing, but the trip took less than

twenty minutes. The clock in the restaurant claimed it was quarter to eight when we left, but the sun still wasn't up, and we arrived at our rental with only eerie shadows to show us what we'd gotten ourselves into.

The cabin was called a *mökki*—pronounced *muh kee*, but our landlady held on extra-long to the “k”. It had short walls made of vertical logs. The only window I could see was a large round one in the middle of the door. The roof had a dramatic pitch all around, presumably to keep the snow from accumulating. It draped over the edge of the low walls, and I wondered if these Vikings might only be able to stand straight in the middle of the house.

Griffon came over to collect my bag and take my hand, assuring me we were still together, and we followed our hosts inside.

Timo turned on a battery-powered lantern that hung just inside the door and lit the single room of the cabin. Shadows lurked behind every object and swayed back and forth until the lantern stopped swinging. I felt like I was back at girls' camp.

A fire had been laid in a metal-ringed pit in the center. Five feet above it hung a funnel shaped hood for venting the smoke out the roof. Half of the left wall was occupied by a stack of fat logs. A box the size of a large doghouse contained kindling. A smaller box attached to the side of that held matches. And tucked behind it were the panels of a black screen. Timo showed us how they locked together to surround the firepit.

There was a sharp ax with its dangerous edge embedded in one of the logs, in case we ran out early. “A full cord of wood out back, covered with a blue tarp—and a layer of snow. If you both exit the *mökki* for long, you can leave coals burning, but place the screen all the way around.”

Beyond the wood sat a futon with a coffee table in front of it. Stacks of books and boxes of games filled the open shelf underneath. Along the rear wall were two narrow beds tucked back beneath the sloping ceiling with heaps of blankets, denim and wool, and clean sheets on both.

The kitchen was situated against the wall on the right. The short pantry cabinet was packed with provisions. The fridge was small and supposedly full, set back against the second wall along with a narrow table and two chairs.

I asked if there was an outhouse and prayed there was a bathroom. Considering I'd only seen lanterns and candles, the chances of indoor plumbing seemed slim.

"Just behind there," Tuuli said, pointing to a folding screen to one side of the front door. I hadn't noticed it because the wood slats blended perfectly with the walls. "We'll empty the tank when we come to check on you. Same with the collection tank in the kitchen. As much as you can, keep a bowl in the sink and pitch the water out into the snow. Allow anything that might attract carnivores to drain into the tank."

I prayed she was kidding. I knew she wasn't.

I pasted on a smile and asked about hot water.

Tuuli went to the miniature fridge and tapped on a large cast iron pot sitting on the top, then she pointed to the fire pit. A black iron chain hung down from the middle of the hood and ended with a gnarly hook two feet above the waiting wood. "I'd keep a pot on all the time, so you're not waiting long."

I found Griffon watching me, biting his lips together, his eyes dancing with laughter.

"It's just camping," I said. "I'm from freaking Wyoming. I can *do* camping." I tried to tell him, with my smile, that I could do anything as long as we were together.

Another ski dog was gassed up and available under the porch. They suggested staying to the road at all times, and only if it was visible. For emergencies, there was a handheld, battery-powered ham radio on top of the pantry shelves, extra batteries in the box along with batteries for the lantern, which could also be recharged with a little crank. Griffon promised he was familiar with using one and that he'd show me how to use it in case something happened to him.

Every topic came down to survival. And by the time the Ahonens were finished with their instructions, I had the impression they would have put our chances of surviving the first week at less than fifty percent, especially after Timo bent down to start the fire and Griffon told him not to bother, that he would do it.

“I just want to be sure you’ll survive the first night, sir.”

Griffon laughed and claimed he’d spent dozens of winters in Lapland and most of them alone.

Timo looked doubtful, but he brushed off his hands and headed for the door. “See you in a week. Call on the radio. Late is all right, if it’s an emergency.” They left us with the goggles and face masks in case we’d brought neither with us.

The storm blew past them through the door as they left, and I shivered from a lot of cold and a little bit of fear. I rubbed my mittens against the arms of my coat and snuggled into Griffon. “Why didn’t you want him starting the fire?”

He pushed me away from him and grinned. “Because you’re going to. Just like you wished those vines would burn up, you’re going to wish our fire to start.”

“That was different. I was fleeing for my life.”

“And now you’re going to freeze to death if you don’t get that fire started. I might freeze to death,” he lied. “Is that motivation enough?”

The lights from the departing snowmobiles flashed through the circular window and left us in the weak light of the lantern once more. I looked at the pile of logs and kindling, and paper and willed them to catch on fire.

“I don’t think it’s listening.”

“Come now, Lennon. Don’t make me toss out the matches.”

I gasped. “You wouldn’t!”

“I would. And if that didn’t work, I guess I’d have to try to fly us home...in minus forty degrees Fahrenheit.”

“That’s not funny.”

“Light it, Lennon. You know you can. You’re dying to play with fire again, aren’t you? With no one watching?”

“You’re watching,” I said, like a petulant child.

“Fine.” He turned his back. “Don’t make me wait outside, love. And the sooner you light it, the sooner we can remove our coats and I can kiss you again without our lips freezing together—”

Yellow light lit the walls and drenched the room, all from the fire that engulfed the carefully laid wood and filled the confines of the firepit.

I laughed, then turned to laugh at the expression on Griffon’s face—impressed, but not amused. I tried to fix that.

“You did promise to kiss me...”

He nodded and shuffled forward, never taking his eyes off the fire. “From now on, we experiment outside.”

TESTING 1, 2, 3

It took an hour and two fat logs to chase the cold out of the cabin so I could stand to take off my coat. The first big flare ate up the small stuff quickly, while I was collecting my well-deserved kiss, but Griffon added more wood before the coals had a chance to cool.

“Survival first,” he’d said, when I tried to collect a second kiss. But the tortured look on his face satisfied me nearly as much as that kiss would have. All I wanted to do was crawl under those heavy blankets together, but he was already talking about going back outside.

He finished with, “We won’t have to be so careful surrounded by snow.”

“Haven’t I played with fire enough for one day?”

He sat on the futon and patted the space beside him. “We can just talk for a bit. It’s time you told me about Hank.”

I sat beside him and reached into my bra. There really was no sense explaining when I could simply show him. I was careful to keep the handkerchief around him, no longer trusting the plastic coating to stay in place.

“I should have dipped it again before we left civilization,” I said, and opened my hand. Hank looked pretty bad, like a round snake trying to slough off its skin. “My grandma tried to pass it down to my mother, but she wouldn’t take it. She wouldn’t even talk about it. Thought her mother was...insane. So Grandma gave it to me. She warned me never to touch it

with my bare hands, so I haven't—except for once, and I won't do that again.”

I couldn't tell if he was listening, his attention was so fixed on Hank. I lifted the edges of the handkerchief and lifted it off my hand to offer it to him.

Hank lost his mind. His painful screeching nearly made me drop him, and I pulled the bundle back.

Still wincing, Griffon shook his head. “All right. We know not to try that again.”

I held it in my palm again and moved it close so Griffon could get a good look, prepared for another screech. But Hank didn't seem to mind.

Griffon blinked, surprised. “It's the Pleiades.”

“I guess so. One of the Culloden Highlanders is married to a gemologist. She was the first one to point it out. She thought Hank must be tens of thousands of years old to have formed around the stones.”

“And the gold? Did she have anything to say about that?”

I shook my head. “There were a few times, when I was freezing and hungry in my apartment in Idaho, that I considered taking it to a pawn shop. I thought the gold was at least worth me not starving to death. But Hank hates being left behind. When...I was abducted, I had hidden him, buried him in the ground. Boy, was he pissed. Hissed and hissed in my mind until I finally went back to get him.”

“This is the hissing Orion heard.”

“Yes, but he'd never hissed at anyone before. Ever. My grandmother gave him to me when I was fifteen, just before she died. In twenty years, he's never made a peep except when he thought I was trying to get rid of him. Now, he's hissed at Orion, growled in Moire's Embrace, and screeched at you. I wouldn't be surprised if he started talking next.”

“A talking pet rock. Wouldn't that be a neat trick?”

“Coming from a guy who can sprout wings, that's saying something.”

Griffon leaned closer to Hank. “Hello, Hank.”

We both waited, but nothing happened.

Griffon leaned back. “Can you tell me what happened when you did touch it?”

I drew in a deep breath and forced myself to revisit the memory. I’d tried so very hard and for so very long to never look at it head on. Just touching on it gave me the shivers and I shook it out of my head again. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

I wrapped my fist around Hank and the cotton and leaned back. Griffon’s arm snaked around my shoulders, and he pulled me closer. We sat like that while we watched the very late dawn breaking on the other side of the door. It was an odd glow that started, then stopped and held instead of growing brighter.

“Maybe I’m not DeNoy,” I said, putting words to thoughts I’d been toying with since I’d opened that note from the Grandfather. “Maybe it’s just Hank. And if I never touch him, if no one ever touches him, then there’s no danger.”

“Maybe,” he said, only patronizing me.

“But that wouldn’t explain why Orion is so interested in me. He never asked if I had a star stone.”

“And if it were only stones that interested him, he would have taken the ones in Daphne’s room.”

“They hissed at me, you know, the first time I went in the room.”

“Then they, too, recognized you as DeNoy.”

“Yeah. And I knew, somehow, they wanted me to touch them. They stopped hissing when I said, aloud, that it wasn’t going to happen.”

“And the difference between them and Hank is—”

“The gems have been removed, and they had no gold.”

“Daphne mentioned gold a few times but never elaborated. Maybe it drove her mad that she never found a stone with it.”

He faced the window again. “I do believe we’re burning daylight.”

“That’s it? That’s all we get?”

“This is why everyone in Finland needs mega doses of Vitamin D. It’s December. We’ll have about four hours of decent visibility a day. We don’t want to waste it.”

“I really don’t want to freeze to death.”

“All right. Let’s establish a safe word. You use it at any time and we’ll come back inside.”

“If I’m freezing, chances are I won’t shout anything nice.”

“Come on.” He went to the corner to the right of the door where our coats hung on pegs. He pulled on the goggles first, then stood there looking like some giant grinning bug. “Ten minutes. We’ll do one experiment, then we’ll come back and warm up.”

“Fine,” I said, then began pulling out the sections of screen to go around the fire pit. “I definitely don’t want to burn the house down or I won’t have a warm place to grumble for the rest of the day.”

“So? What is your safe word?”

I laughed. “Fudge. My safe word is fudge. But don’t worry, you’ll hear me.”

“Because I have excellent hearing?”

“Because I can curse like a very loud sailor.”



TO BE SAFE, WE BUNDLED UP AS IF WE WERE GETTING BACK ON the snowmobiles, but when we stepped out of our mökki, the wind had died. It was still snowing, but the fat flakes fluttered to the ground on their own instead of being launched at our faces.

We were surrounded by pine trees so dark they still looked black in the meager orange light. A frozen lake lay directly to

the south, and the promise of sunrise teased us through a break in the forest on the far side. The road we'd come in on stretched alongside the lake, but the tracks of our hosts were nearly erased by an hour's worth of Finnish weather.

As far as I was concerned, the first snow of the season was Christmas snow. We were still more than a week away from the actual holiday, but I was tempted, despite the subzero temperature, to make a snowman.

Through my foggy goggles, I grinned up at my fellow bug and pulled down my mask so he could see my teeth. "Christmas snow," I said.

His face contorted under his mask enough to assume he was smiling back. "In Finland, it's Christmas most of the year. Santa lives up here, you know."

I nuzzled against him to reward him for reinforcing my holiday delusions. Alwyn had cooked a turkey on Thanksgiving, and because there were a handful of Americans on the team, we'd all pitched in to make traditional dishes that reminded us of home. I'd never enjoyed a Thanksgiving more, nor had such a big family with whom to celebrate. So I'd really been looking forward to Christmas...

I lifted the mask back over my nose so Griffon wouldn't notice my smile was gone.

"Let's move away from the cabin," he said, and held my arm while we picked our way down the snow-covered steps and headed toward the open space between us and the water.

"Wanna go skating?"

"Maybe tomorrow. We'll have to clear the snow off the ice first. There were blades hanging on the wall, the type you attach to your boots."

"I thought those were just for decoration."

"I think we can assume nothing here is for decoration. But for today, you must work before you can play."

I glanced around. "You want me to shovel snow or chop wood?"

“You know what I mean. We’re here for a reason. We’re here to discover your talents. Or would you rather let Orion reveal them to you?”

“No, thank you.”

We stopped in the middle of the road with thirty feet between us and the nearest trees.

“First of all,” he said, “I want to assure you that you cannot hurt me. I will not freeze. I will not burn. Unless you chop off my head, I’m not going anywhere. Do you understand?”

“You’re a vampire. Got it.”

He rolled his eyes. “Unless you had something else in mind, I thought you might want to try warming yourself.”

“Warming myself. I don’t know. You’d think if I had that kind of capability, I would have figured it out on my own. Winters in Wyoming and Idaho are pretty gnarly.”

He shook his head. “It’s just a hunch, but I think your recent exposure to the Naming Powers have awakened your own.”

“Spending time with Persi, you mean?”

“And with Wickham. You never mentioned that white mist that tried to hold onto you hours ago, in the hotel. He brushed it off as inconsequential, but I admit I was shaken by it.”

I nodded vaguely, committing to nothing. The last thing I wanted to talk about was the way Wickham sometimes gravitated to me. “All right,” I said. “I’ll try warming myself. But if I burst into flames, don’t just stand there and watch me burn, okay?”

“I promise. And don’t think of fire, just warmth. Remember how toasty it got in the cabin and see what happens.”

I backed up a few steps, tried to ignore the cold jeans against my thighs, and thought about the cabin, about the heat that came off that firepit that finally reached me after I removed my coat. I imagined it filling the room, all the way to

the rafters, and leaching into my body. I closed my eyes and remembered the warmth of the sun on my face while we'd stood briefly in that patch of wildflowers.

It's always sunny in Fairy...

I imagined that same sun shining on the rest of my body, warming layer after layer of skin until it finally warmed my bones...

“Shite!” I ripped off my gloves, my hat, goggles, mask, so I could get to the buttons and zippers that held my coat closed tight. “I’m on fire!” My entire body was going up in flames, just as I’d imagined.

Griffon ripped off his gloves, his goggles, and his mask and started tearing at my coat, peeling it off as I danced out of it. But I couldn’t stop there! I ripped off my sweatshirt and my t-shirt all at once. I reached for my bra but stopped myself. I couldn’t take that off. Hank was in there.

I begged the snow to cover me, begged the wind to start blowing again, but they didn’t answer to me. I reached for the top button on my jeans just as the fire began to ebb.

Griffon frantically searched my skin, maybe looking for flames to seep out of my pores. He grabbed handfuls of snow and waited for my nod before rubbing it on me. Back, shoulders, arms, stomach.

“Perfect,” I whispered. “Perfect.” Five long minutes into my snow-bath, I held up my hands. “It’s over. I think it’s over.”

“If you’re getting cold—”

“No. Not cold. Just...just right.” He collected the shirts I’d discarded, turned them right side out, and held them out to me. I put them on, both of them, and still didn’t burn up.

“And your coat?”

I shook my head. I was in control now. Like a thermometer, I set my body’s temperature and it held. The environment had little to do with it. “I don’t think I’m old enough for hot flashes.”

“I think it’s safe to say that was not a hot flash. By the way, your safe word was supposed to be *fudge*, not *shite*. I think you’ve spent too much time with those Highlanders. You’re starting to sound like Archer.”

I laughed. I’d forgotten all about fudge. “Is this what it’s like, when you’re flying? You just decide not to be cold?”

He grinned. “Very much the same.”

“I wonder if my mother was capable of that. Would have made for one helluva fire fighter.” I shrugged. “Plenty of her friends said she was one, but that was at her funeral. Everyone lies at funerals.”

“Maybe they weren’t lying.”

“Yeah. Maybe.”



GRIFFON HELPED ME BACK INTO MY COAT SO WE COULD BOTH pretend to be human for a while. But there was nothing human about walking around the outside of the cabin and melting the snow from the walkways with just a thought.

“If there was a Naming Power for Fire and Ice,” I said, “it would probably feel like this.”

I melted the snow off the big pile of wood without damaging the blue tarp that lay over it. But melted snow quickly turned to ice and I decided I’d better stop messing around before the cabin turned into a fat, dome-shaped icicle.

Our hearty breakfast finally wore off and we went back inside to find something for lunch. We put a big log in the firepit for light as much as anything, and Griffon hung the iron pot on the hook. I filled it with snow, and we had hot water for washing by the time we’d eaten our canned peaches, cheese and crackers, and made some hot chocolate.

When we went back outside again, I didn’t grumble, but I was suspicious when Griffon suggested I wear only my t-shirt.

“I would rather not have another hot flash today. I’ll practice tomorrow.”

He chuckled. “I don’t think you will need to practice that.”

“Oh? Are you saying I need to practice something else?” I was willing to pretend our kissing needed a little perfecting, but that could wait until later.

“Not exactly. You’re not going to like it, but I think we should get the unpleasant things over with early on.”

I stomped down the snowless steps. “I noticed you got me out the door before saying the word *unpleasant*.”

“I’m clever that way.”

Again, we headed back out to the “safe zone.”

“You want me to melt the snow on the road?”

“No more fire today. Just relax.” He chewed his lip a minute. “I want you to give Hank to me—”

“He’ll throw a fit.”

“I’ll give him right back.”

My head was already shaking. “You can’t touch him. I mean it. You don’t want to.”

“I will only touch the cotton.”

“Okay,” I said, *you asked for it*. I made a mental apology to Hank as I pulled him out of my bra, then braced myself for another screech and set him in Griffon’s cupped hands.

At least my hands were free to cover my ears, though Hank’s outrage rang in my brain too. But poor Griffon could only grimace.

He looked at me and shouted, “Forgive me!” Then he grabbed the cracked plastic and pulled it off, leaving Hank lying naked on his tiny white blanket.

The screech was replaced by a low growl, like someone had turned the knob on a gas stove, going from full flame to a shallow blue ring.

“What have you done?”

YOU CANNOT BRACE FOR THIS

*M*y heart pounded, outraged at Griffon's betrayal. But as the volume of the noise in my head lowered, I was able to think clearly, to see clearly why he'd done it. He'd brought me to Finland to experiment, and we couldn't figure out Hank's purpose if I kept him sealed away, wrapped in a handkerchief, and tucked in my bra.

I just hoped my pet rock could do something more helpful than make noise.

Trying to chase the taste of resentment out of my mouth, I joked, "I think he prefers being naked."

Griffon's worried forehead smoothed, and the corner of his mouth lifted. "You forgive me, then, for ripping off the plaster?" He meant band-aid.

"I do. You'll owe me some lip service, obviously."

"Obviously." He braced his feet apart and ignored the growling. "You don't have to tell me what happened when you touched the star stone the first time. But we—you—have to trust that there is a purpose here. Whether you admit it or not, Hank is the key to unlocking—"

"Wait." I briefly told him about the times we'd found mentions of DeNoy being locked or unlocked. "Flann found The Noy listed in a book. The Noy, not DeNoy. They have to mean the same thing. But I'd almost forgotten—the book was about the *different breeds of the Fae!* So, that means I am Fae.

Whether Wickham could see it or not.” I swallowed a lump in my throat. “I’m Fae.”

To suspect was one thing. To know was a whole other ballgame. I was...I was part of a magical race. And silly as it might be, I looked down at my body and honestly expected to sprout wings or something.

“Easy, love. You’re not breathing.”

I nodded, then shook my head to get back to my original line of thought. “In the book, it talked about the Noy being so ancient their true names were lost...and that they—we—are the only ones who can unlock the stars and the heavens.” I looked at my little star stone. “I think this tells me which stars I can unlock. The stones in your sister’s room had no jewels in them, but there were holes. Most of them had different patterns.”

“Sounds like myth, but we are creatures of myth. However, that doesn’t address your own locking or unlocking.”

I laughed. “Sounds painful, doesn’t it? When Orion came to get me out of limbo, he brought your mother’s maids with him. When they heard me growl, they said it was too late, that I had *locked*. But I think they were lying, trying to freak him out. They yelled at him to get me out of there, and he did, forgetting to take them with him. I assume they got out...”

“So Orion knows what it means to lock. If he finds you again, unlocked, he might know how to take advantage. So...”

We both looked at Hank again.

“So I need to let Hank do his thing.”

“That sums it up nicely.” He winked at me. “Ready?”

Hell no, I wasn’t ready! I knew of a dozen horror movies I could use to explain what would happen, but since he was a Brit, I doubted he’d seen any of them. So I would just have to let him see for himself. And deep down, if he was horrified, it would serve him right for making me do this.

He said I had to trust that there was a purpose to it all. He was asking me to spin another plate.

“Just breathe,” I told myself out loud. “How long can it last, anyway? A few minutes and it will be all over.” Ignoring the wild protests of my terrified heart, I slowly reached toward Hank. Griffon took a big step back. He was ready to light the fireworks and run.

Smart man.

The growling stopped before I even touched the stone. I wrapped my fingers around it and held tight, pinning the gold strands down so they couldn't move. There was a shushing in my head and a dozen voices began to whisper. I understood none of it, but I knew in my bones what I needed to do.

I put my *cloch realta* face down in my right hand, pushing away the excited tendrils of hot gold that would invade my skin if I let them. Then I pressed the underside of the rock against the outside of my left arm, just above my elbow. And I held it there.

The first time I'd brushed my fingers over the stone, those tendrils had come to life immediately and tried to bury themselves in the back of my hand. I could still remember the pain, the terror that it wanted to take over my body. I'd flung it away, ripping out the gold tendrils that had already burrowed their way down to my young, delicate bones, leaving my punctured hand bleeding profusely from five different holes.

They hadn't healed until I went back for the hissing rock—the holes were gone by the time I got home. My favorite shirt, covered with blood, I buried in the garbage can. My mother never knew.

This time, when the molten gold pushed its way under my skin, there was little pain. I was vaguely aware of Griffon standing nearby, his breathing ragged. But I had no attention to spare for him. I concentrated on standing my ground and not puking while this...this living thing slithered inside me and felt for my bones. And I wondered, when it was finished, if there would be anything left of Lennon Todd...

Now it moved over my skin, spreading, twisting, expanding. One thin finger of gold slithered like a snake toward my shoulder but stopped midway, turned toward my

heart, and wound itself into a spiral. When it stopped in the center, the tip shaped itself into a tiny wing.

Another piece, as thick as my finger, branched out vertically and wrapped itself around my arm. When it reconnected with itself, it flattened into an armband. Locked into my bones as it was, I was betting money it would never come off.

While some strands twisted and twirled into decorative details, others pressed on Hank, gripping him tighter and tighter until something broke! Black sand sprayed everywhere, and I turned my face away, to spare my eyes. I looked back just in time to see one of those polished jewels slip beneath my skin.

Hank was gone. The only thing left of him was the gold and The Pleaides stones, and the stones were inside me.

It was too much. I bent and puked into the snow at my feet. In my mind, if I kept at it, puked hard enough and long enough, maybe I could get the invaders out. After the third round, Griffon was beside me, supporting my shoulder with one hand, patting my back with the other.

“Do not touch her!”

The growling voice hadn't come from me. It wasn't inside my head. And though the fresh snow absorbed any echo, it was very real. We were not alone.

I cleared my throat and spit so I could look up without puke on my chin. My eyes were watering, so I couldn't see clearly. Or was it something else that wasn't clear? No gold robes. So Orion hadn't found us.

Blinking rapidly, I tried to focus on a blur of blue and green on the road ahead. I thought it was close—it wasn't. It was huge! And the problem wasn't with my eyes, it was with...the dragon. It wasn't...solid.

Griffon had removed his hands but stood close beside me. The snarl on the ghost-beast's face was for him. “We have no need of you, Son of Fae.”

Thankfully, he didn't move.

Bile gathered in my mouth and I turned to spit again. A ridge above one of the dragon's eyes lifted as if it were asking if I was finished.

“Sorry,” I said. I was apologizing to a ghost.

It lowered its head toward me, but I didn't panic. What could a ghost do? What could anyone do to me that was worse than what Hank had done?

Táimid aontaithe. Táimid ag eitilt. Táimid táimid.

The words rang in my head, and though I didn't speak the language, I *felt* what they meant. *We are united. We are flight. We are we.*

I wondered... “Hank?”

It snorted. “Do I look like a *cloch realta*?”

Griffon choked and coughed beside me. The beast swung its head to him. “*Why do you not flee, Son of Fae?*”

He stuck his chin out. “I am her mate. I am her protector —”

“We need no protector!”

Griffon inclined his head. “Forgive me. I have yet to understand what is happening here—”

It swung its massive head to me again, then spoke in my brain. “*Shall I dispose of him? You need no other—*”

“No! Please don't. Seriously. I never want him harmed, ever.” Then I wondered if I was losing my mind, pleading with a smear of colored air with a face. “This can't be real. I have to be dreaming. There are no such thing as dragons. Maybe...” I turned to Griffon. “Maybe I'm hallucinating because I'm freezing to death in my sleep. I mean, look at me. I'm not even wearing a coat!”

With that little bit of doubt in my ability to keep myself warm, the cold started biting at my skin. I closed my eyes and willed it away again. An easy trick for someone who's dreaming. When I opened my eyes, Griffon and the dragon were both shaking their heads.

“So afraid of touching. So afraid.” It emitted a long, drawn-out snort that might have been a dragon’s version of a sigh. “I will not harm you. We are we. Touch me and see.”

Griffon nodded. “I suggest you do it, love. It’s a leap of faith sort of day.”

This from the guy who could sprout his own wings. I wasn’t losing my mind. It was already lost. “Nothing to lose,” I said quietly. Griffon was by my side. At the first sign of danger, he’d whisk me away.

“That’s right,” he said. “Nothing to lose.”

I moved forward and noticed that my self-proclaimed protector held back. The dragon smirked, as if it read my thoughts, then it preened and half closed its eyes when I reached toward the side of its face, though there was nothing solid to touch. If it were real, I doubted I’d have the guts to get close, let alone reach for it.

This was not some sweet fairytale version of a dragon on the side of a lunchbox. The blue and green seemed whimsical enough, but there was a severity around the eyes, a terrible sharpness to its claws that hovered on top of the snow. And the veins in its wings were more bat than butterfly.

I’d never noticed if dragons had ears, but this one did. They were shallow divots in the side of its skull with a rounded shell that came to an elven-like point at the top. And there were more pointed claws on its half-furled wings with tips that gleamed like golden razor blades.

Winged death. You can’t be real, I whispered in my mind.

Only if you touch me, it answered back. *We were meant for this moment, Marka.*

“Marka?”

“Marka. It’s Irish,” Griffon said, from yards away. “It means rider.”

I started backing away immediately. “No, no. You’ve got the wrong guy. I’m not riding anything.”

“And yet, you have tasted of clouds.” It glanced at Griffon to make its point.

“Yeah, but I was usually unconscious, and when I wasn’t, he was holding me tight.”

“You must trust us.”

“I’m right here.” Griffon tried to sooth me with his voice. “Last experiment of the day, Lennon. You can do this. Trust it.”

“Her,” I said. I’d always known. I thought Hank was female when it wasn’t Hank at all. It was *her*, communicating through the star stone.

Clever girl. Now touch us, so that we may be.

I didn’t hesitate this time. She’d always been with me, after all. And she’d been with my grandmother before me. She was one of the family.

She lowered her head to make it easy. I reached out and laid my hand on her cheek, or at least where her cheek would be, had she been tangible. But my little act of faith must have been enough—my hand no longer hung in mid-air.

Nothing spectacularly dramatic. She was spirit one second and physical the next. The blue and green of her skin was darker than expected. Her claws were gold like the armband that was now part of me. The blue of the nine sapphires, which I’d somehow absorbed, matched the iridescent shine of her neck and underbelly.

Her feet sank instantly in the snow, and when she turned to face me, I noticed one off-white fang curled outside her closed mouth, on the left side.

A snaggletooth dragon. How perfect.

We are born...

As further proof, I could hear her heart beating, and I felt it in my own chest, its rhythm lagging just behind the beat of my own. It was like sitting up late at night and hearing a clock ticking in the stillness—whether it was still or not. Despite the

slight breeze skimming off the frozen water, I could still hear it. Maybe it was coming from my bones...

I hunger. She turned toward the mökki and hopped once, which made the ground shake. Heavy clumps of snow fell from the trees, creating mini blizzards all around us. Her second hop lifted her massive feet off the ground completely. Her wings stretched to twice as long as I expected, and after two downbeats, she was fifty feet above our heads. In the strange orange light of the half-day, she flew over the cabin and disappeared beyond the black wall of pine forest.

Griffon ran to me and wrapped an arm around my waist, gasping like he'd been holding his breath. "Where is she going?"

"She's hungry."

"But she'll be back?"

"I would think so."

"How does she know I've flown with you?"

I'd wondered the same thing. "She's been communicating through Hank. It wasn't the stone that was aware of what was happening, it was her. She was the one hissing when I tried to leave Hank behind."

Hank had been no more than a fancy pet rock after all, and understanding that fact removed the sting of him being gone for good. And that led me to another thought.

"I don't suppose you'd be willing to run a little errand back to Bridie's house, would you?"

"And leave you now? Not a chance." He dragged his gaze from the treeline. "Why?"

"Those other star stones. I can't leave them there, knowing..."

"Knowing what?"

"That those voices belong to dragons."

He laughed, dismayed. "Don't tell me you like this one so much you want more of them?"

“I can only say for sure that they can’t stay locked in that box. If Daphne were here, she’d feel the same.” I remembered the little frame near the box on her shelf that depicted a dragon with a rider on its back. “Maybe your sister was hunting DeNoy and star stones. Maybe she just wanted a dragon of her own.”

We stood there for ten minutes, clinging to each other and waiting for the next surprise. The chills I felt were internal only.

“Speak of the devil.” Griffon pointed up. I blinked up into the downdrafts created by my new friend’s wings. It was like standing below a helicopter.

Something large and dark fell from her claws and landed with a heavy thud twenty feet away. A large reindeer, no blood, no immediately visible wounds. The sound of the dragon landing beside it was slightly more gentle, but it shook off what little snow remained in the surrounding trees.

Griffon leaned down to whisper in my ear. “Is that supposed to be our dinner or hers?”

A BLANKET SANDWICH

“*F*or Marka,” the dragon answered, “to celebrate the start of our union...and the end of others.” It cocked its ears and dared Griffon to argue. “She will share with you, Son of Fae.”

Griffon went to the back of the cabin, produced a shovel, and started digging in the snow fifty yards away, in the trees. The dragon and I watched him, amused.

I shouted, “What are you doing?”

“It’s not legal to hunt reindeer without a license. I’ll have to bury the hide and the entrails.”

The dragon huffed. “Entrails? What do you suppose fills my belly? You think I would offer my Marka an undressed meal?”

I moved around to the far side of the carcass and realized it had been slit from stem to stern. “It’s wet, too,” I shouted.

Griffon stopped digging and came to look. He was obviously impressed. “I wonder how far she had to go to find water—”

“She can hear you,” she said. “Are you unfamiliar with lakes?”

He pointed. “A lake of ice—”

“With water beneath.”

Griffon and I looked at each other, both realizing a dragon the size of a massive bulldozer could easily break thick ice. He

looked up, then inclined his head. “Is the Son of Fae at liberty to ask questions?”

“Only because my marka prefers you to live.”

“For which I am grateful.” He wrapped his arm around my head and planted a kiss on my brow, which drew a Hank-like hiss from the dragon. He was shaking, which proved he wasn’t nearly as calm as he pretended. “We must have a conversation about boundaries, but now is not the time.” He let his arm fall away. “What are you called, fearsome one?”

The dragon’s eyes narrowed and she blinked. And just that fast, her dark blue eyes turned green and I knew she was pleased he considered her fearsome. “My marka has yet to name me.”

“Me?”

“We are we. We must name ourselves.”

“But don’t you want to—”

“It is your place.”

I couldn’t believe that something so...substantial...had no name to begin with, but then again, she did say she’d just been born. I thought about the names some of my Highland friends had for their swords. It was more of a Viking tradition, I had assumed. But calling my big pretty friend something like Skyeater or Snowshaker would make her sound like a character for Dungeons and Dragons, which was, I don’t know, unworthy.

This was a living, breathing animal with a heartbeat. Yes, she could talk, and yes, she could hunt down a reindeer, kill it and clean it in a matter of minutes, but she was also a female and terrifying, and beautiful. Like the nine sapphires.

I asked Griffon, “How do you say sapphire in Irish?”

“Sapphire.”

That wouldn’t do. “How do you say it in Finnish?”

“Safiiri.” *Sa-fee-ir-ee.*

Four syllables. Too long. And I didn't like Safi, so I shook my head.

“Gemstone is jalokivi.” *Yah-lo-kee-vee.*

“Jalokivi. Kivi.” I looked up at her and tried it out. “Kivi. What do you think?”

She bowed her big head. “I am Kivi.” And suddenly, she began to fade.

“What's happening?”

Though her expression turned hopeful, she continued reverting back to her spirit self. “Unless you would like to fly...”

I shook my head. “Not ready for that. Sorry.”

“Then I will take my leave.”

“Where will you go?”

She pointed straight up.

“And when will you come back?”

“When you summon us.” She pointed a deadly claw at my arm. “Only you can summon us. And only your touch can turn me corporeal. Without it, I last only minutes. And without you, no other can force their transport. The heavens are closed to all but the DeNoy...and her Kivi.”

There was barely anything left of her by the time she leapt silently into the air. I watched, scanning the dark sky above us for a wisp of colored mist, but she was gone.

But she'd been real.

“Holy shit.”

Griffon collapsed to his butt in the snow, stunned.

I laughed and prodded his back with my knee. “Come on, fearsome one. We need to skin our dinner while there's still a little light.”



THE AIR INSIDE THE MÖKKI SMELLED LIKE COLD WOOD, COLDER ashes, and snow. No faint traces of our meager lunch. Any scent we'd left hanging in the air had frozen and fallen to the floor. I put my gloves on to take the screens from around the fire and store them back behind the kindling box, then wrestled the fattest logs into the firepit, thinking Griffon might be impressed.

He'd insisted on doing the skinning and butchering and sent me inside to get the fire going. I found an apron and dropped it over my head out of habit and was immediately overwhelmed by domestic urges. I ran around like a chicken with its head cut off, setting and decorating the table, creating a side dish, and mixing up a boxed cake, which I covered with canned cherries and cooked in a cast iron skillet.

The chances weren't good that the cake would turn out, but I couldn't help trying. Like Kivi, I felt like the day's revelations were worthy of a little celebration.

Griffon blew in at one point, shirtless, when I was up to my arse in dirty dishes. He delivered two raggedy steaks that looked like he'd cut them with a dull hatchet and marched back out again without a word. I assumed, from his lack of eye contact, that the butchering wasn't going as smoothly as he'd expected. After all, it might have been a hundred years since he'd had to butcher his own kill.

I considered going outside to offer help, but he'd all but had his hat handed to him an hour before by a girl dragon, and I didn't think his male ego would welcome a witness to his struggles.

Another forty minutes passed before he came through the door again with his shirt on and not a speck of blood in sight. This time, he looked me in the eye and smiled. "Smells heavenly."

I was suddenly a contestant on a cooking show, facing my only judge with a table covered with questionable dishes. "Try to remember that I poured coffee for a living. I was never allowed in the kitchen."

He stepped close, lifted my hands to his neck, and wrapped his arms around my waist. “I have never had anything so delicious.” He stared at my lips when he said it, followed by a kiss that curled my toes and my apron strings.

“I’m serious,” I said, pushing him away so I could take off the apron. He moved over to the table, and I took the mystery out of what he saw. “Broccoli and cheese. No idea what kind of cheese it was. And the broccoli was canned, so it’s a little mushy. The bread was kinda stale, so I made garlic toast.”

“Looks perfect.”

“And I didn’t burn the steaks, so that’s something.”

He lifted the tin plate off the top of the big surprise. “You made cake!”

“Yes, well, you have two choices for dessert—slightly burned chocolate cake from the bottom, or undercooked cake on the top covered with cherries.”

“Both, please.” He waved his hand over the candles. “And candlelight.” He tilted his head to the side and looked back at me, past his shoulder, with his lip caught between his teeth. As he looked away, his gaze stuttered on the beds at the back of the room, but he didn’t say anything.

I’d had a hard time keeping my eyes off them myself.

“I’m famished,” he said, his voice so quiet I wondered if he’d intended for me to hear. A shiver ran up my spine and shook me. Again, I suspected he wasn’t talking about food.

We ate in silence for the most part. He’d wink and smile each time he noticed something I’d added to the table—cloth napkins with a sprig of dried lavender tucked in the improvised napkin ring, the plaid ribbon from the artisan bread tied around the candleholder, and the short stems of fresh pine I’d stuck in a ceramic stein for a centerpiece.

Every now and then, one of us would mutter the word dragon and we’d laugh.

“You brought us here,” I said, picking out the edible bits of my slice of cake. “So you must have expected it.”

He shook his head. “If I’m honest, I suspected *you* might transform into something...formidable. We came to find out what being a DeNoy meant—these creatures that must be eliminated to protect entities we know nothing about. A pity Gloir and Afi didn’t put more detail into The Covenant.”

“There *is* more, though. Afi, the Grandfather, hid three books for Wickham to find.” I told Griffon about the first one, which included the last known whereabouts of those possessing the Naming Powers. “The second and third were supposedly for the Fae King, but that was a lie.” I told him about cutting my hand on the second box and finding nothing besides an old Bible and the note addressed to me, revealing what I was. “The third wouldn’t open, no matter what we tried. If the Fae King is really dead, I assume it can’t be opened ever.”

“Where is this box now?”

“I don’t know. Wickham intended to bury all three of them the morning I left, to be sure Orion couldn’t get his hands on them.” I also told him about the vision Loretta and Lorraine had about their own deaths, that they knew they would die at the Bridge of Sighs in Oxford, and how there is now a second one, erected in the backyard at Hope House. “So naturally, we are expecting that Orion will find the place.”

I got lost in memories while Griffon finished his cake. Then his brows pinched together and he asked, “What is it?”

I shook my head and laughed. “I was just thinking. It all seems...meant to be. Foreordained, you know?”

He nodded. “Prophecy.”

I made air quotes with my fingers. “*Despite what Moire saw*. Why couldn’t they just tell us what she saw?”

“Maybe, when we find *The Queevna*, we can ask them.”

“Will Wickham be able to find them?”

“Doubtful.” He grinned. “I suppose we’ll just have to find them first. Or perhaps they’ll find us.”

I was missing something. “Why would they want to?”

“Four ancient fairies who agreed to shelter at the home of a DeNoy huntress? You think they won’t be drawn out by the last DeNoy now that she’s locked with her dragon?” He nodded toward my new armband half-hidden by my sleeve. “Believe me. They’ll find us. As soon as they hear, they’ll find us. Unless, of course, diminutive fae are on the list of a dragon’s most desired snacks.”

I started stacking the dishes. “The more time passes, the more unreal it seems. By morning, I’ll be convinced today never happened.”

Griffon stood and held out his hand to pull me out of my chair and wrap his arms around me once more. “By morning, I’ll have you convinced you’ve had the most wonderful day of your life, and it will have nothing to do with dragons.”

“No. You watch. Something will happen to keep us apart. It always does.”

“Then we don’t have a moment to lose. The dishes must wait.”

STEALING FROM A CHILD

The wind knocked on the door and rattled the round window, insisting we let it in. We didn't answer. There was no need to maintain my body temperature on my own—adding a log to the fire sent sparks into the air and promised I would be warm enough. The look in Griffon's eyes promised the same.

Since the beds were narrow as camping cots, we spread all the heavy blankets on the floor, on top of each other, a safe distance from the fire. Sandwiched in the middle of the stack, we finally finished what we'd started in the Fae King's mountain hideaway.

With as many times as we woke, made love, and slept again, there was no telling what time of night or day it was when we lay near the newly fed flames and watched shadows dancing on the ceiling. We clung to each other as if, any minute, Orion or Wickham might break through the door to separate us.

My new favorite pastime was going to be making the usually composed Griffon Carew lose control. But it went both ways. One look at that mussed hair that might never cooperate with a brush again, and my own control flew out the door like a hungry dragon.

I reveled in the warmth pouring off him and wished I'd been able to keep him with me in that cell, those days he'd held me captive.

“Griffon?”

“Mmm?”

“You never told me...how you knew I was DeNoy. How long have you known? And why didn't you say anything?”

“You're asking if I knew when I put you in the dungeon at Tantallon.”

“Did you?”

“No. After Wickham came to get you, I had a long talk with Archer. I wanted to know exactly what Daphne and her moronic men had done to you, and why.”

“And?”

“He said she'd caught you and Wickham snooping around the Fae books at Trinity, and that she'd realized The Covenant had been broken, which to us, signaled the end of the world would not be far behind. In shock, she'd fled home to Bridie's. And when she'd calmed, she went back to the library to save...four little pages...”

“The bookmarks!” I told him how these four enchanted pages had led Wickham and me to some of the answers we'd sought. “When I asked about the DeNoy, one of them just stared at me. I guess she was answering my question after all.”

“*The Queevna*. The keepers of memory. The protectors of memory. They agreed to the enchantment so they could watch over our history. I'd never heard of them until Archer told me. It is amazing how much Daphne uncovered. If she'd have stuck around, she could have been a great help...” His voice weakened at the last.

“So,” I said, trying to keep a pall from settling over our perfect night, “she took them back to Bridie's, where they could hide.”

“And just in time. Orion stole all the books, the relics, The Covenant itself. But he didn't get *The Queevna*. And with nothing left to protect, the enchantment was no longer necessary.”

“So they're the ones who outed me?”

His fingers drew circles on my bare shoulder, possibly the only energy he had left. “They recognized you as DeNoy, when you and Wickham went back to the archives the second time, when you met them as bookmarks, as you say. And when Daphne asked them about the DeNoy, they told her about you.

“Archer said all the while he and my sister were searching for you, she was obsessed, mindlessly so. All she had to do, to prove what you were, was to find your *cloch realta*. In all her years hunting for DeNoy, I don’t know that she ever found one living. Generations of those who came before her never found one. They’d been hunted relentlessly millennia ago. Archer said all she had were relics she’d taken from museums that proved they had once been.

“She never once mentioned dragons. At least, Archer never mentioned them to me, and I assure you, he would have had he known.” He rubbed his hand over the spot where he’d drawn the circles as if he could erase the conversation. “So I didn’t know, when I decided to take you as ransom for Wickham.”

I poked him in the ribs. “When you found out, you didn’t think to drop me a note?”

“I considered it. But I believed your ignorance kept you safe. And I wondered if maybe you’d lost your stone and might never know what you were. So I waited, ready to come to the rescue if circumstances changed.”

For a while, I drew those same circles on his chest while we listened to the crackling of the fire. “Seems like months ago, not days.”

Griffon turned his head and strained to see something across the room. “Just about morning. Nearly five o’clock.”

I looked at the perfectly black window and felt no guilt about snuggling deeper into our thick bed of blankets. The fire crackled and whispered, luring me back to sleep.

“So?”

I forced my eyes open again. “What?”

“Was it the most wonderful day of your life?”

I was glad he couldn't see my blush. "Easily. But..."

"But what?"

"Tomorrow doesn't have to start if we don't get out of bed."



PERSI...

Except for Lennon, everyone who had witnessed Rinky and Felicity's ceremonies now gathered in a solitary cove of blue water and white sand that was already toasting in the morning sun. Not a chance they were in England.

There were gifts and pastries and treats and a new little mermaid gown hanging on one of the poles holding up the small white tent protecting the food from the sun. But, unlike the last party thrown for Fallon, she was the only child allowed to attend.

Everything was in place by the time Wickham, Annag, and the guest of honor arrived in a blink. Fallon's face lit up immediately at the sight of the pretty little cove. She kicked off her shoes and stockings, hiked up her dress, and rushed into the water until the timid waves reached her knees. She closed her eyes and smiled up at the sun for a moment before turning to face everyone.

"Good morning, Mistress Mermaid," Persi called.

"Good morning, Queen of Light," the girl called back, causing everyone to gasp. No one had ever mentioned Persi's power to the child. And it was an odd title to just pull out of the blue.

Annag waved for her granddaughter to come to her, then she knelt and took her hands but kept her voice light. "Why the Queen of Light?"

Fallon refused to answer, but Persi assumed the child had overheard some conversations. The girl's attention caught on the dress, and for a moment, her face lit again. But just as

quickly, that light was gone and she turned to look into Annag's eyes. "I don't want it."

"You don't want the dress?"

Fallon nodded.

"Are you so sure it's for you?"

She nodded again, and the water in the cove began to churn. She found Wickham and gave him a dirty look. "He wants to take the ocean from me."

Wickham didn't bother trying to charm her. Obviously, she understood more than they'd expected. "It's not the ocean I wish to take, lassie. It's the sadness. The ocean is goin' nowhere."

She shook her head, and the wispy ends of her long blond hair caught the breeze and danced around her shoulders. "I still don't want it." She looked around. "Where's Griffon?"

"He had to go away for a while. He explained it to you."

"I want Griffon."

Annag rolled her eyes. "You know he can't come. He'll be back, but we don't know when."

"Yes you do. Tell him to come now." She folded her little arms and turned so she couldn't see the swaying gown.

She knew how much power she held over them. She'd been brought to her favorite place, the beach. All these adults were willing to throw a party for her, offer her things she loved, and all because they wanted something from her. She had them eating out of the palm of her hand, and she knew it. She was the boss.

Persi dusted her hands together. "Well, it was worth a shot. Might as well pack everything back to the hotel. Maybe we can find another little girl who likes mermaids." She said the last quietly, to Wickham, as if she hadn't intended Fallon to hear.

Wickham, Kitch and Alwyn followed her lead and moved to the corners of the tent to start lowering it. Persi snatched the

little hanger and pulled the sparkly dress out of the way. Everly, Soni, Loretta and Lorraine began packing up the food. Felicity and Rinky looked for something to do while Brian, Flann, and Simon started folding up the chairs.

Urban knelt beside a neatly stacked fire but held off lighting it.

Annag walked away, hiding her expression from the little girl who was watching them all closely, waiting for someone to break. But no one did. They'd have it all packed up in a matter of minutes.

Fallon's stubborn pout melted into real tears that poured over her round pink cheeks. But it was Rinky who reached her first and wrapped her arms around the child, her pity sincere. "What's wrong, sweetheart?"

"I dinnae want him to take it. It's mine."

"Aw, honey. Do you know what? I had a big power too, just like yours. You can make the water dance. You can do all kinds of things, just like I could. I could make the flowers grow."

The girl blinked. Rinky had her attention now.

"But you know what? I can still do that sort of thing. I'm still a witch," she whispered. "I just do it one flower at a time." She shrugged her shoulders and held Fallon back a little further, so she could see her face clearly. "But I could also do terrible things. If I was unhappy, I could make the flowers die. I could make the grass dry up and blow away, just because I was sad. What happens when you get really sad?"

Persi thought Fallon wouldn't answer, but after a long pause she said, "Storms come. It's scary. Everyone gets sad."

Rinky nodded. "Yep. That's the power." She waved for Felicity to come closer. "Felicity here had the power to make anything she wanted. Anything at all. Did you ever see that bridge in the back yard at the big house?"

The girl nodded.

"Felicity made that in less than an hour."

Fallon's eyes widened. "And the pond?"

"And the pond. But the bad side of her power, the unhappy side, made her want to tear it all down again. Can you believe that?"

The child looked up at Felicity in wonder, then her bottom lip came out. "Did it make ye sae verra sad?"

"It did. So sad I wished I hadn't made it at all. But then," Felicity smiled, "I let Wickham take the power away and I don't feel like destroying anything anymore."

"But ye can't make things now?"

"Not giant things, no. But I can still make what I want to make, and I have to ask for help sometimes. But there's nothing wrong with friends helping, is there?"

Fallon shook her head, then she ran to Annag and wrapped her arms around her legs and squeezed her tight for a long time. When she let go and looked up, her cheeks were wet with fresh tears. "If I give Wickham the storms, can I have the dress?"

TEMPTTEST IN A PINK TEAPOT

*W*ickham...

There were five women in Wickham's life who helped him feel...grounded. Ivy grounded his soul. His sisters grounded him to his past and tried to ground him to his duty. And Soni grounded him to his children, since she was, in many ways, one of them. And the last was Lennon.

Since the moment he'd laid eyes on her in that miserable café in Idaho, she'd proven to have a calming effect on him he couldn't describe. She inspired...hope...in a man from whom hope had been stripped time after time after time.

That was it. She supplied a hope he couldn't define, and he had to own that only part of it had to do with the power of the *Seanair* that dwelt inside him.

Standing there on the beach that morning, planning to relieve an innocent child of a monstrous power, he wished he could have had Lennon and his wife with him. For without them, he felt more vulnerable, less confident than he had in the previous ceremony, where he'd taken the powers of Art and Fertility from Felicity and Rinky.

If Lennon were there, he wouldn't be wasting so much of his mental power worrying about her. Just where had that Fae taken her? And if and when Griffon Carew brought her back, would she resemble the lass he'd plucked from Idaho?

That was yet to be seen. At the moment, he had to move fast before Fallon changed her mind.

Wickham stepped out of *Place*, returned to the hotel room, and collected a special gift that Ivy had wrapped for the child. He also grabbed the second to the last of the jars. The one with the pink cast seemed appropriate. The final jar, of course, was ready in case Persi decided to surrender her power of Light, which may or may not happen. If he were able to get the rest of the Naming Powers away from Orion, he'd need three more containers in a hurry.

He wondered if Persi knew what she was inviting by resisting. Orion would obviously come for her if she insisted on keeping her power, but Wickham wasn't foolish enough to point it out. She'd have to learn the hard way. He just prayed she'd come around before the inevitable...

Back in the cove, he placed the jar on a table and faced a nervous little girl. She stood in the center of a pack of women who all seemed determined to take her side if she changed her mind again.

Rinky spoke for them. "You can let her play first, can't you?" *One last time*, was implied.

"Certainly," he said. "There's nae rush, lass. Go and play with the sea for a bit."

And so they watched, the entire team, while a five-year-old child pushed and pulled the ocean water with little more than a wave of her hand and a giggle. And while she played, they all came to understand just how much power was involved, and how powerless they were in the face of it.

When the waves swelled and hovered at thirty feet, some nameless grief ripped Wickham's heart out of his chest! He held his breath and waited for something, anything, to break Fallon's grasp on him. Then finally, when the waves were released to the influence of gravity and crashed onto the beach, spilling and splashing its salty mist over them, he felt such relief, such hope, he wept.

This power in one so young? She could destroy the world!

After three more cycles of manipulation, he looked around the cove to find each of his friends wet-faced and weeping,

with joy or otherwise, looking to him to bring a stop to it.

“Fallon,” he shouted, over the crash of water. “Fallon, time for presents!”

Her head whipped around, and she glared at him, her bright blue eyes overshadowed from within. But if he’d learned nothing else from being a father, he’d learned no child of any age could resist the temptation of an unexpected gift.

By degrees, the water behind Fallon settled, as did the emotions washing through his own body. Her chest rose and fell with deep breaths, and finally, she smiled. The blue of her eyes lightened, and she headed away from the edge of the water, though it tried to follow her and lure her back again, like a lovesick dog begging her not to go.

Wickham held out the brightly colored gift with the sparkling ribbon on top. The lass ran the rest of the way. “Ye may hold it a moment, but ye cannae open it until we’ve finished the ceremony, ye ken?”

“Aye, aye,” she said, pulling the large box from his hand. “Auch! So heavy!”

“This is no mere gown, though that will be yers as well. We just have to see to this first.”

She nodded and when Wickham held out his hands, she reluctantly surrendered the box.

“I’m going to ask ye some questions, Fallon, so listen well.”

She nodded again.

The team assembled in a semi-circle in front of the chairs. No one bothered to sit. Before joining his wife, Urban handed the Grandfather’s staff to Wickham.

Wickham pointed it at the pile of wood. which erupted into white flame. He stood to the right of the fire as Annag took Fallon by the hand and led her to the opposite side. Loretta and Lorraine moved behind their brother, supportive as ever, ready for anything. He thumped the staff once and summoned the protection of the Muir ancestors.

He was always surprised when they came to him, no matter how worthy he might consider himself. And they rose again, their presence swirling around him, encompassing the fire, Fallon, and her escort. *We are here. We are willing. We are ready*, they whispered.

He pounded the ground again, three times. “Fallon Mackay, do ye surrender yer Naming Powers of Hope and Despair...for the greater good, with all the contracts and conditions with which ye might have multiplied those powers?”

Fallon tilted her head to see the gift sitting on the edge of the table next to the open jar, then she nodded. “Yes.”

“Do ye give it freely and without compulsion?”

She shrugged.

Wickham looked to Annag, who then bent and whispered in Fallon’s ear. The child nodded again and said, “Yes.”

“Then let it be surrendered.”

The ancestors abandoned him to swirl around the child, speeding up as it did so. It rose to the height of Fallon’s head and held there for a few seconds before falling, slowly, to her feet. A blue smoke that matched the water of the cove leaked out to join with the green. The color was rich, the mist so thick it was nearly opaque. In no time at all, it had overcome the green, which receded for the most part, with just a strand appearing randomly inside the blue as it continued to churn.

Slower now, and slower still.

Fallon watched the mist as it rose the second time, amused by it as she’d been amused by the water. She lifted a hand as if she’d like to push it into a wave, but Wickham shook his head, ever so slightly, and her little hand dropped back to her side. Her bottom lip pushed out as she watched the mist rise over her head.

With the guiding gestures of Loretta and Lorraine, Wickham compelled it into the jar. But like Fallon herself, it resisted until the end. A tendril tried to slide down the back of the container unnoticed, but it was sucked into the opening

with the rest. Persi took a step forward as if she might rush over and shut the lid, but Wickham raised his hand and waved her back. There was no telling what might happen if she came too close to the jar—or too close to the raw, blue power.

He closed the lid himself, sealed the container, then left Annag to praise Fallon while he took the lot away, beyond her reach. Beyond anyone's reach.



WHEN WICKHAM RETURNED TO THE COVE, FALLON HAD opened her gift. The doll lay forgotten on the ground, its mermaid costume, which matched the dress Fallon now wore, was sprinkled with white sand. The tail of the half-buried, glittery ribbon fluttered in the weak breeze.

Fallon squatted at the edge of the water with her back to him, concentrating on something at her feet. Annag came to stand beside him. “Playing with tiny waves now. Happy as a clam. Normal as can be.”

Water splashed up and over the child's head to land behind her and she laughed.

“Right, then. As normal as a young witch at least.”

Wickham would have preferred to take all the girl's talents, just so he could sleep easier, but if he began wielding his power in that way, he worried it might corrupt him irreparably.

He eyed his friends, noted their happy faces. “Any more tugs on yer emotions?”

“None.”

Fallon turned to survey the beach, caught sight of him, and came running, her awkward fins flapping around her ankles. “Grandfather! Did ye bring any string?” When he shook his head, she took her smile and wandered away.

He studied Annag's face, noted the usual furrow missing from her brow. “Ye seem pleased.”

“Auch, I am. And if she regrets what we’ve done here, when she’s older, we shall deal with it then. If I’m still about, I’ll explain it as best I can. But ye never ken.”

“If that day comes, maybe she’ll find Soni. As one Third to another, my niece can help the lassie see reason.” He spied the opportunity to offer more. “But Annag, I can wash away her memories of what’s transpired since the night Griffon took her. The pair of ye can go home again, safely now, and all this nonsense can be a dream.”

Annag’s gray curls slapped back and forth against her head as she shook it. “Certainly not. Griffon was one of the bright spots in her life. Let her remember him. Let her remember it all.”

Wickham nodded. “As ye wish, then.” They watched Fallon wander back to the doll, flick the sand away, and attempt to tie the ribbon around the little head. “Maybe her fondness for the ocean will wane.”

Annag laughed. “I think not. Look at Soni. Does she still care for the Highlanders she brought back to life?”

At that moment, Soni was seated on one of the chairs with her toes in the sand, blethering on about some such. Urban and Simon stood before her, hanging on every word. When the two of them broke out laughing, her eyes sparkled and she grinned like the dickens, as if she’d won a great prize.

“Aye. Aye, she does.”

“Any word from Griffon and Lennon?”

“Nay. Not a peep.”

“Dinnae worry,” Annag said with a smile. “She couldnae be in better hands.”

A wee coil of jealousy sneaked its way around his heart and gave it a squeeze, but he shrugged it off, and he reminded himself that, as much as any of them, Lennon Todd deserved to be happy. He only hoped it wouldn’t mean the doom of all those on the beach that morning...and the rest of the world besides.

A WAR OF WINGS

December days in Finland were two hours of sunrise and two hours of sunset with nothing in between. So, when we noticed light finally coming through the round window, we weren't surprised it had an orange cast to it. We were amused, though, to find ourselves socked in. We'd been ready for some fresh air, sunshine, and the next adventure. Instead, we were greeted by an opaque wall of fog.

I felt sheepish and was grateful for the cover. Maybe I was just shy because I was fully dressed again. But whatever it was, Griffon seemed to be suffering from the same self-awareness.

I was well covered with my parka, hat, and gloves. The goggles were in my pocket. Though we could keep ourselves warm, the idea of riding a dragon over the Arctic Circle demanded I wear an extra layer, just in case. Poor Griffon couldn't if he planned to follow.

"This is eerie," I said, to test my voice. The fog swallowed my words, and with the white stuff swirling around my feet as I walked down the steps, our little mökki could have been relocated to the top of a cloud and I would have believed it.

Griffon grabbed my mittened hand and we struck out toward the currently hidden lake. Our boots sank into fresh snow that showed no signs we'd been there before. We had to guess where to stop.

I closed my eyes, reached into my left coat sleeve, and thought clearly to my dragon while I rubbed my fingers across

my armband. *Kivi, can you hear me?* Then I opened my eyes and waited. “Maybe she won’t be able to—”

The snort of a giant horse, near my ear, made me jump. Looking over my shoulder, I expected Kivi in her colorful glory, but she was still in her spirit form, barely visible, and had no effect on the thick mist. The pale green and blue of her only showed where the fog allowed.

You must touch me.

Happily, I reached out and felt her jawbone turn solid beneath my hand. “Good morning, Jalokivi.”

She closed her eyes and the corner of her mouth curled slightly. She either enjoyed my touch, approved of her name, or she appreciated being real again.

All of it.

Aware of our telepathic link, Griffon cleared his throat as if worried he was interrupting a conversation. “Good morning, Kivi.”

Her massive head, like a scoop on a front loader, swung in his direction. The ridges of her forehead pushed together, though her slight smile remained. “Son of Fae, why do you linger?” Her eyes widened slightly, then she sniffed him—inhaling so forcefully, it nearly sucked him off his feet. When she was finished, she blinked at him a few times before inclining her head.

Griffon grinned and winked at me. “I think she understands that I’ve finally claimed you.”

My face heated again. “*You claimed me?* I thought it was the other way around.”

Though her smile was gone, I heard Kivi chuckling in my head. She inhaled deeply again, then blew away the fog hanging between us. “No need for hiding today,” she said. “Perfect weather for learning to fly.”

“Fine,” I said. “But I’m terrified.”

“I know this.”

“Don’t worry,” Griffon said, stripping off his coat. “If she drops you, I’ll be there to catch you.”

Kivi laughed outright and the ground vibrated in unison with the kettle drum in her throat. “You presume to keep up?”

My arms shot out. “Whoa! Wait a minute. Let’s get one thing straight. I need to go slow here. The two of you can race each other another time, without me. It’s been years since I’ve ridden a horse—”

“Horse?” Kivi rolled her eyes. “This is no ride. I am no horse.” She flicked a claw at Griffon. “I am no little bird. *We* shall become the sky.” She stomped her hand on the snow in front of me. “Come.”

“Wait a minute. I have to know how this is going to work.”

“No,” she said. “Doing is learning. Doing is trusting. Time to spin a plate, Marka.” She looked pointedly at her foot that was anything but flat. “Step here.”

Spin a plate? Could she read *all* my thoughts? She couldn’t have overheard my private debate about trust. I’d never said anything to Griffon about spinning plates, had I?

Our thoughts, Marka. Step now.

Griffon offered his arm to steady me. I climbed onto the flat back of Kivi’s hand and worried the heels of my boots might hurt her.

We cannot hurt us.

She lifted me into the air. Griffon had to let go. Kivi turned her head away to expose her lower neck to me. I put my hands on her smooth skin and leaned while I threw my right leg over and balanced myself. The span of her neck was similar to the girth of a horse, but there was no mane, no saddle horn to hang onto. Riding bareback had never been fun for me, and I knew if she started walking, I would fall off. Flying was out of the question!

Easy, she said in my mind. Show him how brave we are. He will admire us all the more.

This wasn't a matter of courage—this was logistics. This was freaking physics! She would move and I would slip off, and Griffon would definitely not be impressed!

“I need a saddle,” I said, looking for a way to get down gracefully.

Heat began building in my sleeve, along with tugging and pressure that threatened to rip the cloth apart. I unzipped my coat like it was on fire and peeled my sleeve away from the armband where the gold was expanding once more.

Finally free from confinement, long tendrils stretched out and flexed. This time, instead of weaving themselves into an intricate, decorative pattern, they turned into thin slats that wrapped around Kivi's neck, then detached from my arm. Beneath my butt, warm gold puddled and became a seat, then quickly cooled. Gold straps spread up over my thighs and locked me down like safety restraints on an amusement park ride. Into my hands rose two ridges that mimicked Kivi's knotted brows.

I searched for Griffon's face, to see if he was witnessing anything from the ground or if I was having some fantastical dream.

Kivi was right. He was impressed and we hadn't even left the ground. His bare stomach jumped when he laughed. “Still worried about falling?”

The snow sank away and rolled past me. Kivi was running!

I gripped the handholds and hung on for dear life. She leapt into the air and brought her wings down. Seated between them, a violent whoosh deafened me. *Boom! Boom! Boom!* The beating stopped and Kivi's wing fluttered, allowing the air to rush under them, to lift us higher. I could hear her heart striking in my chest. Between my knees, I felt the pounding of the real thing.

I should have been puking at that point. I felt fine.

I eventually got up the courage to look to the side, to scan the fog flowing beneath us. Something dark darted through the

white stuff, keeping pace with us. Just a shadow—a fast shadow that was completely aware of our movements.

Son of Fae. Kivi turned her head and smiled back at me.
He loves the race.



WHEN I WAS LITTLE, WE USED TO GO TO THE WYOMING STATE Fair in Douglas every year. The one ride that never made me sick, oddly enough, was the Tilt o' Whirl. It might have had something to do with centrifugal force keeping my stomach where it was supposed to be, or maybe in the chaos, I was too distracted to worry about motion sickness. Or maybe, just maybe, the ride was similar to riding a dragon—something which I was apparently born to do.

My life, in the week that followed my first dragon flight, was also carnival-esque. Loud laughter, flashing lights, joyous music. And nothing held still for more than a minute.

All three of us laughed, though my laughter might have been the loudest and probably due to an edge of hysteria. The memories of blue shadows in the forests were punctuated with flashing yellow and orange—some from the fire inside the mökki or from the sun lurking near the horizon, visible between beats of Kivi's wings.

During our short days, Kivi and I slowly became synchronized in our movements and our thoughts. After a lot of frustrating attempts, I learned how to see her intentions forming in her mind so I could be ready for the turns and dips she made in midair. And after a lot of time in the saddle, I eventually sensed her intentions in the movement of her body. A muscle movement here or there, the tilt of her head, and sometimes a scent in the air—a scent I knew she would want to follow. And by the end of the week, I didn't need to listen to her thoughts at all.

We became one.

I was shocked by some of her revelations. For instance, she knew my thoughts because she'd been there, all along, in

the back of my mind, biding her time. She'd done the same with my grandmother, though their time never came. And sometimes, when I struggled, she'd console me like my grandmother would have, had she been standing on the shores of a frozen lake in Finland, watching me learn patience the hard way. It was like having family with me again.

And every afternoon, when the sun took its blue and orange blanket and disappeared into the night, Kivi would fly off to sate her hunger. And though she never brought back another reindeer, she always presented us with a small offering before fading back to spirit form. A rabbit, a fox, a fat goose.

And every evening, Griffon and I grew just as close. We were able to anticipate each other's reactions, sense a change in mood, and give each other space. I could have gone on like that forever.

At the end of the week, the Ahonens came to check on us and make sure we hadn't burned down their mökki. Since we hadn't tried to get through on the radio, they'd reached out to us every other day. I think they worried we didn't take seriously enough the risk of freezing to death. When they found both of us outside with our coats hanging open, they gave us a mild lecture...and started talking about emergency contacts.

Tuuli gave me a stern look. "You left no telephone numbers on your application."

Griffon laughed. "If something happens to us, there is no one to call. If there is anything left of us, just push us out onto the ice."

They didn't appreciate our attitudes, and when they wished us luck before they left, I was certain they expected to find us frozen to death when they came to collect us the next week.

"You'd better radio them every night," I said, as we started stripping off our coats again. "Or they won't sleep a wink."

After the buzz of the snowmobiles faded, I called Kivi to me. There was no need to touch my armband anymore, but I was surprised to find her already standing behind me.

Kivi ducked her head guiltily. I looked into her thoughts and learned she'd come before I'd called.

I don't understand.

I shouldn't have come, but...I was curious.

Doesn't matter. They obviously didn't see you.

She shook her head. *A dragon should never come unbidden unless her marka is in danger.*

That day, instead of heading deeper into the Arctic Circle, we stayed close to the lake and toyed with altitude. Apparently, my fear of heights disappeared while strapped firmly against the body of a capable dragon. I couldn't understand it. Looking out the window on an airplane freaked me out—I could easily imagine the aircraft falling like a rock, in a never-ending wind shear. But now...I guess I had wings to catch myself.

Had I never seen Superman movies that showed a glimpse of the edge of space, I might have panicked for an entirely new reason. But Superman was with me, complete with a set of wings of his own. Just as backup, of course.

I was a little surprised when a furious Griffon caught up with us. “Kivi! You will go no farther! Not an inch, do you hear me?”

She stopped, hovered, and turned to face him. “You fear.”

“I do! She cannot survive beyond the atmosphere!”

“You are mistaken.”

He was even more horrified. “You would risk her life to prove it?”

For a long time, they glowered at each other. Two sets of wings. Flapping. Hovering. Daring.

I felt the moment Kivi relaxed her muscles, conceding his point as she ducked her head and began our descent. Griffon dropped much faster, probably too angry for a leisurely spiral between the stars and the lake. He disappeared into the clouds, wordlessly trusting us to follow.

He understands nothing.

I asked carefully. *What is it he should understand?*

We are meant to soar through stars.

I bit back a laugh. I was out of my mind, and I assumed my snaggletoothed dragon was a little crazy herself to think we could fly out there, in the darkness. Maybe she was able to do it in spirit form, but Griffon was right. Simple physics would mean the death of me.

I stared at the gold contraption of my saddle/cage attached to the neck of my old-souled, talking dragon. A dragon that just had a face off at the edge of Earth's atmosphere with my be-winged, four-hundred-year-old soulmate, and wondered how physics might begin to explain any of it.



“LENNON?”

It was barely a whisper that woke me from a dreamless sleep. The physical effort to stay seated on a dragon all week had taken its toll, and my body was far too weary for dreaming. But I mustered the strength to face Griffon. He was turned away from me, his chronically mussed hair smashed against his pillow. A low rumble told me he was deep asleep, probably as worn out as I was, despite his indestructibility.

Maybe I'd imagined it.

Lennon?

This time, when the voice whispered in my mind, I knew it was intentional. Not Kivi. I could think of only one possibility.
Flann?

Lennon!

The voice was so faint I could barely hear it, even in the pure silence of a winter's night, with only an occasional hiss from dying coals.

Safe? Then another word came through. *Worried.*

Happy, I sent back, guessing he couldn't hear me any better. *Safe*.

Tell me!

I hoped he could hear laughter in my voice. *You wouldn't believe me...*

VITAMIN D OR BUST

The next day, I cried uncle. My body needed to recover, and the last thing I wanted was to go outside and watch the sun fail to pull itself up into the sky one more time. So I stayed in the cabin, pretended the darkness was due entirely to a lack of windows, and lit every little light I could find, battery rations be damned.

Unable to explain my raw mood, I found a fat novel written in English and immersed myself. I thought Griffon might run away and find something to do outside, but he puttered around in the kitchen, making a surprise, he said. Two hours later, I began to smell something delicious.

I set the book aside. “What did you make?”

“Sit at the table.”

My stomach growled as I did as I was told.

“Close your eyes.”

I heard him moving heavy pans around. “The suspense is killing me.”

He set a single plate on the surface. “All right. Open them.”

Filling my enamel plate was a giant, roughly-shaped candy cane sugar cookie, complete with white frosting and red-hot candies creating the stripes.

“Merry Christmas,” he whispered. “I would have found you a better gift, but what do you buy a lass who already has a dragon?”

“Christmas? Is it Christmas?” I hadn’t been paying attention!

“No. Today is the twenty-fourth. If I gave it to you tomorrow, it might not taste as good. Not that I’m promising anything—”

I interrupted by throwing my arms around his neck and giving him a kiss worthy of a giant homemade cookie. Then I kissed him a second time. “And that’s for the frosting.”

He smiled into my eyes. “Anything for the red candies?”

“I’ll kiss you for each one if you like.”

“Yes, please. But you might want to eat them first. You know, to get an accurate count.”

I resumed my seat. “I wasn’t keeping track of the date. I hadn’t thought of a present—”

“I know this will sound cliché, but truly, honestly, all I want for Christmas...is you.” He shrugged and nodded toward the back of the cabin. “And I got my gift early.”

“Same, same,” I said. “So you didn’t need to bake after all.”

He moved his chair next to mine and we sat, hip to hip, and shared the cookie.

“I never want to leave,” I said.

“Who says I’ll let you?”



I MADE HIM SIT WHILE I CLEANED UP THE SUPPER DISHES THAT night. I had just placed the Dutch oven on top of the coals, to re-season it, when I heard Kivi in my head.

Summon me, Marka.

Not tonight. I’m too tired. I need a day off.

No training. Summon me. You need light.

I told Griffon what she'd said, then added, "Light sounds...lovely."

He jumped up and stripped off his shirt. Together, we banked the fire, set up the fire screen, and walked out into the night.

I tilted my head back. "Jalokivi."

In the time it took for me to take a breath and let it out, she was there, within reach. I stroked her cheek and she preened. She noticed Griffon's lack of shirt. "Not this time, Son of Fae."

He lowered his head like a bull ready to charge. "You may not take her without me."

She chuckled deep in her chest. "Easy, little bird. Tonight, you are also marka."

He and I stared at each other. I'd never imagined he might be able to ride with me.

"Get your coat," I said. "I'll be warmer if I don't think you're freezing to death."

He glanced back before ducking inside. I didn't blame him for being suspicious when the last time I'd ridden, Kivi nearly took me out of bounds.

He trusts, but not far.

He'll come around.

He must, or one day I shall toast him like a marshmallow.

I gasped, but before I could protest, Kivi chuckled again.

Griffon hurried out the door wearing a shirt and carrying one of the large denim blankets.

"A coat wouldn't be easier?"

He grinned and hopped down the steps. "Trust me."

I mounted first, and once I was settled with my golden safety harness in place, Kivi lifted Griffon and he climbed on behind me. The saddle came to life again, spreading out and

wrapping itself around Griffon's legs. He couldn't jump off even if he wanted to.

I laughed at the unhappy look on his face. "Keep your arms and legs inside the ride at all times. Apparently, it's not an option."

When the living gold settled, Griffon wrapped the blanket around us both, pulled me against him, and locked the overlapped fabric in his fists.

I sighed. "Oooh, I like this."

"Pay attention, little bird," Kivi said. "Tonight, you learn what it means to eat the sky."

Griffon nearly squeezed the life out of me when my dragon moved beneath us, ran into the dark, and jumped with all her might. I thought he might rip us both out of the restraints until he finally found one of the grips. I felt his leg muscles shaking with effort, pressed against the backs of mine as we ascended. Only when she leveled out did he relax.

"No wonder you needed a day off," he said. "I'm sorry you didn't get it."

"We should take tomorrow off instead, since it's Christmas."

I was surprised when Kivi turned north. When she said I needed light, I thought she might take us south for a nice dose of sunshine.

Behold. My gift to you, Marka. We shall eat the light.

Above us, shifting curtains of green light moved across the horizon, folded back on themselves, and spread again.

"The aurora borealis?" Griffon shouted. "This is the light?"

"It's beautiful," I shouted back. "I've never seen it before!"

We know.

For an hour, we flew through the sky, trying to catch the green as it contorted. Eventually, I realized that it was an optical illusion. We were already *in* the light, eating the sky,

breathing it in and out again. But we could only see it from a distant perspective—the exact opposite of Kivi.

Real when I touched her, an illusion when far away.

My most memorable Christmas ever. Thank you.

I felt a vibration and placed my hand on her neck. She was purring.

Dragons purr?

Do not tell your little bird. Then she showed me her thoughts—an image of a marshmallow skewered on a stick, on fire.

I laughed, and when Griffon nudged me, wanting to know why, I only laughed harder.

At long last, when we landed back at the mökki, I thanked Kivi again and followed Griffon toward the steps.

“Tell him,” Kivi said. “It is time for the Son of Fae to go.”

Griffon turned and marched back to her. His shoulder bumped into mine as he passed and knocked me into the snow. It was comical, how he was torn between fighting with my dragon and making sure I wasn't hurt. I sat arse-deep in the snow and laughed so hard I snorted.

“Lennon,” he scolded, as he pulled me back to my feet. “I am sick of her trying to get rid of me.”

“She's not trying to get rid of you.” I gave Kivi a pointed look. “She just didn't bother asking nicely. And she does need to ask nicely.”

“Ask nicely?” He turned to face her. “You want something *besides* my absence?”

“We do,” she said. “We require...we request...that you bring us the violated *cloch realtas*.”



WHEN I WAS YOUNG, CHRISTMAS EVE WAS A NIGHT OF HYPER vigilance. Any little thump meant Santa was in the house, so I had to hold completely still so he would believe I was asleep. That was also the night my parents left the Christmas lights on outside, and the blue and green glowed through the curtains. The color combination always meant Christmas to me. I had no idea that they were chosen because blue was the least popular color, and that's all that was left by the time my flaky father got to the store for replacement bulbs.

My dragon was the colors of my childhood Christmas.

I was awakened by the loud pop of our fire finding a pocket of sap, and I was instantly alert. No, it wasn't Santa, but I couldn't go back to sleep with Christmas just hours away.

I eased out of our cocoon and got a drink, then sat on the futon to watch Griffon sleep. He looked so young when his guard was down. It was easy to imagine what his children would look like...if he had "claimed" someone else.

I sucked in a loud breath without meaning to. He stirred but went right back to sleep. So trusting. Boy, had he changed since we first met. I guess I had too.

We weren't the same pair who bumped into each other on the second floor of the library—a Fae pretending to be mortal and a mortal not knowing she was...a mythical creature from a nearly extinct race of Fae.

I'd spent my life wanting to be something to somebody. But I'd been something special all along.

I'd loved my mother. I guess I'd assumed that becoming a mother would ensure I'd be loved too. And when I was told I couldn't have children, I worried I wouldn't be loved at all.

And yet, there I was, staring down at an impossibly irresistible man whom I adored, and who adored me. *He* loved *me*, unconditionally, before he'd even known what I was. And now, even a dragon, who was more than willing to toast his marshmallow arse, couldn't scare him away.

What more could I ask for?

Yeah, I'd come a long way from Hazelton, Idaho, where I'd lacked safety, security—everything but a job, and even that was under daily threat.

Now, gazing down at Griffon, I wanted to wrap my arms around him and hold on tight until morning, but he needed his sleep. In a few hours, he'd be leaving to run an errand he didn't want to run, to make my dragon happy—a dragon that called him *little bird*.

He might have resisted harder, but he liked the idea of surprising his stepmother on Christmas. The risks of putting any distance between us made me nervous, and the possibility of losing each other again had me crawling back into bed and quietly draping myself over his chest.

“Mine,” I whispered. “You’re mine. And you *will* come back to me.”

FAIRY CHESS

*A*rcher...

Archer glanced at the candy dish on the end table that held a dozen yellow chunks of old -fashioned sea foam, Bridie's latest confection. If he hadn't the metabolism of a Fae, he'd gain two stone before the Days of Christmas had a chance to start.

He glanced across the chessboard at the half dozen pixies who, together, made up his opponent that afternoon. They provided a modicum of challenge for him, but damn it took them a long time to agree on the next move.

He blinked slowly, a dozen times, to keep his eyes from becoming as dry as the candy.

Bridie wandered through with a damp cloth in her hand, waiting for a speck of dust to fall. She stopped and glanced at the board, then scowled at Archer's shoulder. "I'd be all too happy to launder somethin' for ye, love."

There was nothing wrong with his shoulder but a slight wrinkle in his shirt. But knowing how desperate the woman was to keep herself busy, he stripped off the offending garment and handed it over.

She rewarded him with a bright smile, so he volunteered to run upstairs and get more.

"Aye, son! Bring it all!"

He was about to step away, but his opponents failed to hide their glee at being left alone with the board. So he waved

Bridie closer. “Sit here, mother. Watch the board. No matter what, don’t look away. Don’t let anything distract you. Pretend it’s a cake that will fall if you turn your head or blink too long. If they so much as wiggle a piece, they forfeit the win.”

Six small faces fell as if he’d stolen their supper. Satisfied, he made his way up the stairs and made a mental note to don another shirt. Someone might mistake him for his brother, running about half naked—

“Professor!”

Archer whipped around, looking for Griffon but instead, he found four small faces emerging from the trees beside Daphne’s door. *The Queevna* were hiding in his mother’s house after all.

He inclined his head.

“Ye’re not Griffon Carew.”

“I am not. But I would help if I can.”

“He must be warned. Ye all must be warned.”

“What is it?”

The one in white stepped forward. “Ye promise to warn yer brother? Ye vow it?”

He inclined his head again. “I vow it.”

The four began talking over themselves, trying to decide how to word the warning. It was very much like playing chess with the pixies, and now, reminded of Bridie guarding the board, he suggested the four follow him and explain while he gathered his laundry.

They were too busy debating to listen, so he continued to his room. After pulling a shirt over his head, he removed half the clothes from his closet and drawers, wadded them into wrinkled lumps, and carried a full hamper into the hallway. The four fairies were waiting, but when he invited them to follow him to the parlor, they were aghast.

“We’ll not expose ourselves to those pixie pests!”

“There’s no end to the mischief they’ll cause us.”

“Just need to entrust our warning to the right High Fae and go.”

“Yes, we must go!”

He couldn't torture his mother any longer and called down the stairs to her. “Mother?”

“*Aye?*”

“This will take longer than I expected! Go ahead and finish the game for me! It's their move! And if they win...give 'em the sea foam!”

Four small heads nodded in approval, then they led Archer back toward the trees, but he wasn't fool enough to step into them. He set his burden down and stood his ground.

“I need to warn Griffon of what?”

“Of what Moire saw...”

“Ye want me to tell him what Moire saw?” He nearly laughed. It was a phrase used a dozen ways by Fae parents trying to get their children to behave. She was like a gentle boogie man who didn't take kindly to bad behavior, though no one knew what she might do to a guilty child, just like no one knew what this prophetess of myths, the stuff of legends, actually saw.

Although...Daphne claimed *The Queevna* were as old as Time itself. He'd taken it as a euphemism. Perhaps she'd meant it literally.

“All right. What did Moire see?”

The one in white turned up the corner of her nose at him in a silent growl.

He inclined his head by way of an apology. “I see ye're serious. Forgive me. Ye're sayin' Moire was more than fairytale?”

The one in green lifted her chin. “We are *The Queevna*. We are memory. And we remember Moire.”

“Ye knew her?” He tried, and failed, to hide his disbelief.

“Moire knew the DeNoy would come. She knew The Covenant would be broken, that the king would fall—”

“Wait a minute.” He didn’t want to hear that the king was well and truly gone. There was still a chance. “We’re nae sure ___”

“She knew Ambition would usurp the throne, that he would capture the heart of the DeNoy, that he would destroy our realm with the Naming Powers—”

“And with the DeNoy, destroy the realm before.”

“Where the Royal Family fled—”

“Where the seven daughters—”

“And the mother—”

“Moire—”

“Fled.”

Archer stood still as the trees for a long time, sewing together their snippets, trying not to believe them. But deep down, he already did.

“Ambition cannae capture Lennon’s heart,” he said, just to hear it in his own ears. “Griffon already has.”

“Gloir and Afi were deluding themselves,” said the green fairy. “Wishful thinking does not make it so.”

Archer sighed. “Then, if it is written in stone, if Moire cannae be wrong, then what good is warnin’ Griffon?”

“Because Moire was a woman—”

“An oracle, yes—”

“A woman with but two eyes to see—”

“How much can one see—”

“With only two eyes?”

They bobbed their eyebrows, glanced meaningfully at each other, then waited for him to understand.

Something warm and bright swelled up inside his chest and made him grin. “Ye’re sayin’ there are four of ye. Eight

eyes.” His smile widened. “Ye’re saying ye saw more than Moire?”

“Not saw—”

“We *see*—”

“So what do ye suggest Griffon do?”

They sobered instantly. “He must secure the DeNoy’s loyalty—”

“By any means necessary—”

“He must keep the rest of the Naming Powers away from Ambition—”

“Keep *her* away—”

“Or Moire’s prophecy will come to pass.” The four said the last in unison and a chill ran up his spine.

The one in white moved closer and lowered her voice. “One last thing.”

“Aye?”

“Kill the pixies—”

“You cannot trust the Minor Fae—”

“From the throne, Ambition can direct them—”

“He mustn’t kill them.” The one in blue nudged her sisters out of the way and commanded his attention. “Lock them up... inside the house...until the war is over.”

THE MICE WILL PLAY

Back when Griffon had turned to Wickham to free Lennon from Orion, he'd done so for two reasons. Obviously, he'd been frantic to get back the woman he loved. Secondly, he'd been desperate to get Fallon and Annag to safety. And though the witch leader and his crew might not be much help with the first, they were capable and motivated to keep the child safe.

Whether or not they relieved Fallon of her powers was not his choice to make, but he knew Annag would be relieved. So for her sake, he hoped that was already underway.

In the end, it was lucky they'd had Persi on hand in Moire's Embrace, to sway the ancients into releasing Orion's captives. Lennon had been overjoyed, and her joy was worth enlisting a recent enemy. Also, Flann's ability to speak with her telepathically had instigated her quick escape from the throne room.

In those fraught moments, after sending her with Wickham through the rift, he'd realized it might be best if Orion saw that they didn't leave together. Griffon had aided the escape of Orion's enemy and his prey, and no doubt the Pretender had literally placed a price on his head. But at least he wouldn't automatically expect Griffon to lead him to Lennon.

Thanks to Muddy, Orion wasn't aware of their relationship—if Muddy had been telling the truth.

If Griffon was lucky, Orion considered the Carew brothers to be nuisances, not his primary enemies. Griffon was happy

to leave that moniker to Wickham Muir. Even so, he moved in and out of Fairy a dozen times before heading to Bridie's house, intent on hiding any trail back to Finland. His last move was to Calais, France, before catching a tail wind and flying to Wales.

The place was quiet when he entered the yard. The same three cars sat at the side of the house. No Christmas guests, then. No birds. No breeze. The stillness unnerved him. Though he didn't want to, he inhaled deeply, tasting the air for hints of...blood.

None. Thankfully. At least, none outside.

He was torn. Did he announce himself and surprise his family? Or did he tread quietly and surprise the enemy?

He made no noise on the steps. Instead of opening the front door, he moved around to the left side of the house to look in the windows. A decorated Douglas Fir twinkled in the corner. Small and forgotten, a fire sputtered in the hearth, all coals and half-burned wood. But no one sat by, enjoying the warmth.

Bridie always hung three stockings. Always. No stockings over the fire this year. Maybe hanging two would have been painful.

Griffon strode stealthily across the front porch again, around to the dining room window. A tiered platter sat in the center of the table still full of tea cakes. Not a dirty plate in sight. It was Christmas morning. Where was breakfast?

He moved to the kitchen door, almost hoping to find Orion so he could slice and dice him. If anything had happened to Bridie and Archer, the slicing would be slow...

He peeked around the corner, pulled back, looked again. Then he pulled the door open and stepped inside a delicious cloud. "Now, this is quite the Christmas gift."

Bridie backed away from the open oven door and straightened. "All ye wanted for Christmas was to see me bum in the air?" She closed the oven, launched herself at him, and wrapped her arms around his middle.

“Aye. Just what I wanted.” He sniffed the air. “Goose?”

“It’s Christmas. What else? Though it’s hardly warm yet.” She leaned to the side to look at the door. “Where’s Lennon?”

“Lennon?”

“Aye. Yer brother’s tongue slips more often than a numpty on ice. He had to confess it all. Though I must say she never struck me as a Lucy. Now. Where is she?”

“She’s not with me today.”

“But she’s *with* ye?”

“Yes. Lennon is *with* me.”

Archer slipped in from the hallway with a short sword at the ready. His face was puffy, his eyes drooped. At the sight of Griffon, his shoulders slumped. “Brother.” He lowered the weapon and closed his eyes. “I heard a man’s voice. Had to be certain. Thought it might be Muddy. I worry he might have an invitation tucked away for a rainy day.”

“Muddy is dead.”

Bridie’s face crumpled. “That’s a pity.”

“Yes.” Griffon ducked to catch her full attention. “It was a pity he deserved killing.”

She blinked. “Did he?”

“He brought Orion to my doorstep. He took Lennon from me.”

Her hand flew to her mouth and he instantly regretted worrying her.

“I got her back, love. She’s safe now.” He imagined Orion coming near her with Kivi on hand. “In fact, she may never be in danger again.”

“She’s got her dragon, then?”

Griffon and his brother stared, open-mouthed, at the mortal woman who’d never taken much of an interest in Fae matters. A woman for whom they avoided unpleasant subjects, who

apparently held the answers to questions they never would have thought to ask.

Griffon eventually found his tongue. “Just what do you know of dragons, Mother?”

She rolled her eyes and went back to the oven to set the timer. “M’ daughter was a DeNoy hunter. Ye don’t imagine she discussed her business with meee? Who better to entrust with her seeecrets?”

“That’s it.” Griffon pointed to the door. “Both of you. In the car. Now.”

Bridie was affronted. “I have a goose in the oven. Why must we go to the car?”

“Because your walls have a hundred ears...at least.”



I DIDN’T GET UP WHEN GRIFFON DID. I PRETENDED TO STILL BE half asleep when he leaned over to kiss my lips and wish me Happy Christmas. If I’d made a big deal out of his leaving, with breakfast and an emotional goodbye, he would know I was worried.

If I didn’t make a big fuss, he’d be back in a few hours—like he’d just gone to the store...for a handful of rocks to keep my dragon happy.

I promised myself I wouldn’t fret unless he wasn’t back by six that evening. After all, he was going to visit his mother for Christmas, and if past was prologue, it meant Bridie had been baking for a day or two and would expect him to stick around long enough to make a dent in her buffet.

“She’ll keep him as long as she can,” I told the eggs frying in the pan.

When I was dressed and ready to face the day—with its tease of sunshine—I called Kivi to me. I hardly gave our routine much thought until I was seated above her shoulders and waiting to see which direction we would turn.

“Son of Fae is gone,” she said. “We are free.”

“Son of Fae will be back soon, with the cloch reatas, so don’t go nuts.” When she didn’t respond, I pushed harder. “Understood?”

She shook her heavy head. “If not now, when?”

I laughed. “You mean, when can you go nuts?”

When can I show you...home?

Home?

The word tumbled into my heart like a jagged rock coming loose from a quarry wall. Usually, that kind of pain was caused by someone throwing around the word motherhood. I’d used *home* often enough—referring to Hope House, Wyoming, or even Idaho. But home wasn’t the US, or Oxford, or even my friends anymore. I wasn’t attached to anyone but Griffon now.

And Kivi wasn’t my home. Like Flann and Brian, Loretta and Lorraine, Kivi was the twin at the other end of my thoughts. And I was at the other end of hers.

What possible home was she talking about?

She was dying to show me, to impress me with whatever awaited us out there, among the literal stars. And she wanted to do so without Griffon on our tail.

“You’re sure I will survive it?” I couldn’t believe I was saying it. “If we’re not here when Griffon comes back, it won’t be pretty. If we die—”

“We cannot die. We are DeNoy.”

“Everyone and everything can die, Kivi. Some things are just harder to kill, that’s all. If DeNoy can’t be killed, then where are the others? How could they be eliminated if they are invincible?”

“Then we are exceptionally difficult to kill.” She launched into the sky and speaking aloud had to stop.

Our ascent to the edge of the atmosphere took forever, with my anxiety and her excitement building with each downstroke. Of course, I didn’t want to do anything that

would separate me from Griffon, but I wanted to see, to learn. I wanted to uncover the secrets that somehow waited inside of me, known only to my dragon.

Do you remember the lights, Marka?

The Northern Lights?

Like the lights, we cannot see when we are surrounded by them. But we are.

Kivi's muscles bunched and together we took a deep breath just before she plunged us across some barrier between atmosphere and space. But we weren't naked and vulnerable. There was a sort of bubble surrounding us, moving with us, trailing us.

You see? We are safe. The Son of Fae knows nothing.

He's going to kill me.

She answered with her favorite image of a flaming marshmallow.

I laughed and my voice was eaten by nothingness.

Kivi nodded. *Show me the way.*

She had to be joking. *I don't understand. You said you could show me home.*

I can. I can take you. But you must guide me to the bridges. DeNoy are born with the knowledge of these bridges. None else can see them.

Bridges?

Find them, she said. Guide us.

She made no sense. The entire visible universe was splayed out in front of us, above us, below us. If there were bridges out there, even with my good eyesight, I would never be able to—

Something shifted when I turned my head to the right. From the corner of my eye, I saw a wobble in the solid blanket of stars to the left. After I turned my head a few more times, I finally narrowed it down and tried to focus.

Eleven o'clock. Straight out. Go slow.

As Kivi moved, the wobble became more obvious. It was like a large bead of water on a windshield. Everything on the other side of it was distorted. And it was closer than I thought. Half a mile? I could only guess how far we moved before we hovered in front of it. Kivi's bridge was a waterdrop without the water.

Straight in front of us. Be careful.

She laughed and plunged ahead, ignoring my apprehension. It was becoming a habit.

A tunnel of silvery light surrounded us, made from the streaks of a hundred million stars blurring past. Time blurred in my head too. And then we were out.

Kivi laughed. *Again! Find the next!*

Don't we need to leave a trail of breadcrumbs or something, so we can find the way back?

Do not fear, Marka. The path back will be just as clear.

Without the streaking silver light, my eyes had to adjust to the darkness again. I blinked and scanned the sky. Now that I knew what to look for, I found it quickly.

Down. Two o'clock. But down. There had to be a better way to describe—

I see it, in your mind.

Our bubble filled with her laughter yet again as she pounced through space like a puppy and plunged through the second waterdrop. When it was time to find the third, I concentrated on it and she saw it immediately. We shared a mind, a body. There was a strange exhilaration that came from the ability to move through space—a feat that should have required tons of rocket fuel.

It was all us. The power was ours. Ours alone.

I was a sixteen-year-old with a freshly minted drivers license, turned loose with a sports car in a parking lot the size of the universe. In my giddy state, I'd nearly forgotten about

our destination, along with my fear of leaving Earth and my known world behind. I could see the bridges behind us as well as the bridges ahead. Kivi was right. No need for breadcrumbs.

At the end of yet another bridge, we emerged frighteningly close to a massive white moon and my heart jumped. Kivi sobered immediately.

Almost home.

She veered left and flew forward with much more care than before, heading for a blue and green planet directly ahead of us. For all I knew, we'd traveled in a circle and came out at the start. But then I noticed the handful of bright stars in the distance, and the sun at our backs that burned white.

The Pleiades. I knew it before Kivi spoke it, and my chest burned white-hot too, as if those nine sapphires had migrated from my arm to my soul.

We broke through the atmosphere of this new world with our bubble intact. The edges warmed a bit as we descended, but what was a little warmth to us?

Someone will notice this. We mustn't stay long.

Soon, our bubble dissolved, and we were flying like we always did. Wings extended. A slight dip here and there to speed our descent. My ears gave a sharp pop, but the adjustment grew less painful each time. I saw Kivi's intention and braced myself for a hurried landing on a stone pinnacle at the top of a mountain. The pinnacle had been carved into the shape of a dragon, itself the size of a small mountain. Kivi perched on its shoulder.

Tell me their dragons aren't this big.

I cannot say. I have never been here.

But you knew this was home?

This is home. For all of us. A pity we cannot stay.

We can't? Not that I wanted to. Nothing would be home for me without Griffon.

Perhaps one day. Take it in quickly. We must go. Beneath me, I felt her heart jump. We have been seen!

SMILE, DAMN YE

*A*lwyn rang his little dinner bell and Persi dragged herself down the stairs. The rest of the team emerged from different corners of their small Georgian rental house and funneled into the dining room.

The Welshman and Rinky had outdone themselves. The green and red tartan tablecloth was covered with traditional Christmas dishes she would expect to see on either an American or Scottish table. Potatoes, stuffing, Brussel sprouts...

Christmas. She couldn't get it through her head. It couldn't be Christmas without Lennon, could it?

She and Everly, Urban, Brian and Flann settled into chairs. Kitch came in from the cold to join them. Just the sight of him made her smile and nearly banished the sullen mood that had her by the throat. Nearly.

He gave her a peck on the head and squeezed her shoulder before sitting beside her. Then he looked around the table and nodded to all the extra place settings. "Ivy and the laddies?"

"Wickham took them away last night," she said, "so they could have a family Christmas somewhere. J.W. wanted a Christmas tree so Santa would come."

"Still believes, does he?"

"Why not? After all he's seen, the idea of Santa Claus isn't a stretch at all."

"I see what ye mean."

Rinky started gathering up the extra plates, and Persi snapped, "Leave them!" She apologized quickly, then explained, "You never know who might show up, right?"

Kitch, bless him, turned to Flann and asked what Persi wanted to know. "Have ye tried to contact Lennon this mornin'?"

"Aye. I tried. Nothin' on the other end."

Silence settled around the table again while they waited for Alwyn to join them. Kitch gave conversation another try. "It's quite nice to have just the small house and the original crew. I was a mite surprised when so many Muirs chose to return to Muirsglen to help rebuild, what with Orion still undefeated."

Urban stole a pinch of stuffing and nodded. "We may never ken how many were lost. Or how many Orion took for questionin' and never returned. But that witch, Jezebel, is determined to make a list so they're remembered. She's gone back as well."

A roasted turkey on a platter came flying from behind Urban, carried by Alwyn, and was slammed on the table. The chef glared at the Highlander and spoke through clenched teeth. "Smile, damn ye! Tadee, we're countin' our blessin's. Tomorrow, we can count our dead."

Enforced cheer brought a welcome improvement to everyone's mood, and soon the room filled with chatter and even some laughter. Wickham appeared in the doorway and grinned. "Happy Christmas!"

Persi gestured to the empty chairs. "We may not have waited grace on you, but we've saved you seats."

Wickham sighed. "I was sent to retrieve one of Alexander's games, and alas, I will be dining on pigs in blankets and cloutie dumplin'. Remind me, next year, not to allow the lads to choose the menu."

The idea of being together in another year, still fighting Orion, made Persi feel slightly ill. She was only too glad to get up from the table and follow Wickham to the doorway.

“I thought of something,” she said, stopping him in his tracks. “I know how to call Orion when you’re ready for a showdown.”

“Aye?”

“Even though Soni no longer had her power, a drop of her blood on the ground brought him and his monsters to her wedding. Fairies are tied to the earth, right? So, you know, if he’s so in tune—”

Wickham’s eyes widened in horror. “Nooo!” He disappeared.

Urban jumped up from the table. “Arm yerselves! We dinnae ken what he’ll be bringin’ back with him!”



WICKHAM POPPED INSIDE THE TUNNEL AND WISHED HE’D brought a torch so his eyes wouldn’t need adjusting. He laid his hand against the wall and became one with the tunnel once more, trying to sense who had last trod that path. He sensed no one but himself.

With little need to feel his way, his feet took him where he wanted to go. He might have popped directly to that spot, but he was leery of leading others to it. If someone followed him to the tunnel itself, they would have no way of knowing what lay in the ground beneath, and any digging would be random. One could dig for weeks and miss the jars.

Once again, he examined the footsteps in the dirt—his own footsteps where he’d tamped the soil back into place. If Orion had sensed the powers buried there, he couldn’t have dug them up without a trace. He couldn’t.

Unless.

Wickham fell to his knees and clawed up the packed earth. He found the top of the first jar he’d buried, the one containing Rowena’s power of Life and Death. As he exposed the lid, he thought of the lives that had been restored. Seventy-nine by

Soni. Some by himself. All good people. But if Orion wielded that power, it wasn't the souls of the good he would raise.

All Wickham had to do was open the lid to know if the green mist still lay within. But fear made him hesitate. Fear convinced him he should free the shoulders, pull out the jar... buy himself another minute's peace.

He removed enough dirt to expose half the container. The time was at hand. He closed his eyes and bolstered his courage with one last breath, then pulled. The jar came easily.

The same jar, the same, undisturbed dirt. The power should still lie within. But his gut told him it was gone. There was no need to open the lid. Mindless now, he ran his hands over the ceramic surface, noted the gaps in the sealant. His fingers found the hole in the bottom.

Fairies, earth. What need had they of tunnels?

With his chest heaving, his stomach churning, he dug out the other jars, knowing what he would find. Holes in the bottom of each. He flung the useless things against the wall, shattering them.

Porous. If nothing else, the *bottoms* were porous.

Orion had questioned and tortured Muir witches. How many of them could have recounted Wickham's own story in which the tunnel had played such a pivotal part?

All.

Even if Orion hadn't sensed the powers through the earth, he would have suspected Wickham's hiding place and looked there. Who knew how long Orion had been laughing, allowing the team to collect the powers for him?

There was only one vessel left untouched—a metal whisky flask containing the powers of Wish and Unwish that he'd taken from a tortured witch so long ago. He tucked the flask into his coat pocket to take with him. He had one more place to check, though he held out little hope.

Before Fallon's ceremony, Persi had pulled him aside. And though she didn't know where Wickham was storing the jars,

she'd pressed upon him that he shouldn't keep all their eggs in one basket. When he'd taken the pink jar to the tunnel, that warning had nagged at him until he'd ultimately chosen another hiding place. Something nearby but secure.

He popped out of the tunnel, leaving the large shards behind. If Orion came looking, he'd know Wickham had learned his devious secret. But it was too late to consider that.

When he stepped back into Place, his eyes needed more adjusting. Isobelle Ross Dragotti's empty tomb had no light at all. But his hands found the spot. The last time he'd been there, he'd removed one of the larger stones, wrapped the jar in oiled skin from another century, and pressed it into the hole. In the dim light, it had blended nicely with the surrounding stones. But stone was as good as earth to a fairy.

Wickham's fingers found the edges and he pried out the package. He located the lid, then ran his hands over the rest of the jar like a blind man.

No holes.

He sucked in a breath and let it leak out of him again.

No holes.

He considered opening the lid and taking the power into himself, but then he remembered watching Fallon toying with the sea and unknowingly toying with her audience's emotions. He didn't trust himself. There was no telling how the white power of the Grandfather might react if combined with a Naming Power. So he rewrapped the skin around the jar and pushed it back into place. He'd find a better container later. There was no reason to believe Orion would search Castle Ross. Hopefully, he already had.

Two powers on their side. Hope and Light.

“Please, God, let them be enough.”

BRIDGES AND SIGHS

I braced myself for the violent rending of air. Kivi jumped and strained to build speed. I had no idea what we were fleeing, and I didn't dare look. My concentration, like hers, was on reaching the limits of the wide blue sky.

You must look. I cannot!

She was right. Turning her head would slow us.

I released the grip with my left hand and twisted around, fighting gravity while I searched the sky below us, trusting my golden saddle to keep me secure.

A small, black, riderless dragon was chasing us, struggling like Kivi to pick up speed. When Kivi's green tail swung again, I could see a second dragon in pursuit. And while I watched...

I felt Kivi's terror as she watched them through my eyes, growing larger as they closed the distance. These were no small dragons.

Kivi, you've got this. We're small. We can maneuver so much faster. We'll smoke their doors!

Her panic ebbed a bit. Her muscles bunched, and we broke right.

The dark dragons changed course, making large, vague movements to do so, slow to pivot, just as I'd hoped. But they were closing faster, growing larger. We could probably perch on one of their shoulders!

Kivi broke left, and just as the others finished their turns, she broke right again. And this time, I saw something small attached to the back of a big neck. I thought it might be a saddle, it wasn't. It was a rider—a man—made tiny by the size of the narrow-snouted monster he was attached to.

They invite us to stay.

You can hear them?

Kivi didn't slow. Neither did they.

They insist we land. Kivi continued to fight for altitude.

Can we lose them?

She laughed. *We can tie them in knots. Will that do?*

The dragon closest to us paused a beat. Maybe it was giving up the chase! But then it exhaled a steady stream of white fire that nearly reached us. I felt the heat of it on my face. Kivi tucked her tail.

Marka, must we land?

A possibility popped into my head that made the answer easy—what if these people also had a standing policy to kill DeNoy first, ask questions later?

I stretched myself out against Kivi's neck. *Run, baby! Run!*



KIVI DUCKED AND DOVE AND SPUN JUST BEYOND THE REACH OF the dragons' flames, and all the while, I moved like a passenger on a motorcycle, leaning with her, trying not to be a distraction, letting her forget I was there. Our day-long practices were paying off.

At one point, when a white flame nipped at her heel, I realized the dark dragons weren't trying to kill us—they might have done so a few times by then, if their aim had been better. But no, they were holding back. They wanted us alive.

As if trying to prove me wrong, flames shot at us from the side, but it bounced away, stopped by the return of our bubble!

Though the sky was still blue overhead, our little force field meant we had to be close to the edge!

We've played long enough, Kivi. Time to go home.

Our edges sizzled again as we fought our way out into the darkness of space. When I looked back, my heart sank. Our pursuers had no trouble following. Either they, too, were DeNoy, or flying in space was a dragon thing.

Let them come, Kivi said, shooting through the darkness with little help from her wings. Let them follow. A pity we won't be able to see their faces when we find our bridge...

The big pair slowly lost ground as we beelined it for the moon. Apparently, our will to escape was stronger than their will to catch us. The longer we flew, the greater our lead. We headed for the back of the giant white globe, but when the sun hit us in the face, I had to shield my eyes. How could I find the bridge if I was blind?

Guide me!

I can't find it!

They are coming, Marka.

I closed my eyes, begged the bridge to show itself, begged the sapphires, inside me, to show us the way.

Two black shadows closed in, flew alongside us, blocking out the light of the stars on one side, the moon on the other. One moved in front of us, faced us. Its massive wings blotted out the white sun....



ORION WAS WEARY OF HIS COURTIER. NOW THAT HE'D gathered most of the Naming Powers, they were happy to pay him the respect he was due. But that only enraged him. They should have worshipped him from the moment he'd taken the throne!

"Where is Archer Carew?" he demanded for the second time that morning. Only this time, he spoke quietly, and the

ragtag mix of lowborn and High Fae fell silent.

One of the latter was fool enough to step forward. “He cannot be found, sire. His mother’s home is well-hidden—”

“I know it is well-hidden. Find someone with an invitation. And find me *The Queevna*, or heads will roll.” He looked pointedly at the fool’s companion. “You will remain here.”

He’d allowed the ancient sisters to slip away in the Embrace. There was no use looking for them there. But there were plenty of Muir witches awaiting interrogation, and he was in the mood for some torture. It might as well be productive.

No doubt his court was relieved when he shifted *Place* to stand before the judgment bar in Moire’s Embrace. The tribunal stood immediately upon his arrival. They showed him deference, as usual, but not nearly enough. He had to allow, however, that it would be difficult for them to bow and scrape when they’d known him as a prisoner for over fourteen millennia.

They were lucky he didn’t pitch them through the archway, and they knew it.

Of course, he could have shifted directly into the prison where he kept the Muirs, but he was wary of being caught in a trap, and he’d rather step into Nothingness than be forced back into that cell with the window eternally displaying the constellation of Taurus, with his namesake always hunting the seven sisters of the Pleiades and never catching them.

No. He would never shift directly into the prison. Besides, he liked to watch the ancient judges sweat.

“I am here to see my prisoners.”

The judge in the center stepped forward. “Your creations, sire?”

“My prisoners. The witches.”

Suddenly none of them wanted eye contact.

“Explain yourselves.”

The same man inclined his head. “The prisoners were taken, sire. Your creations destroyed.”

A fresh wave of rage began to build. The powers of War, Destruction, and Death fought their way to his fingertips, but he held them in check. They would have to wait.

“By whom?”

“One with a Naming Power.”

“Show me.”

With a wave of his hand, the ancient summoned an image in the air. A woman. Orion recognized the mass of red curls on her head. She’d been at the Wedding, in Inverness, when Wickham Muir and his barbarian friends had destroyed most of Orion’s army.

Of course! Her power had to be that of Light and Darkness. She’d been able to veil herself from everyone but him, and then, only because he’d already taken the power of Beauty from the king’s lifeless body. If the young bride hadn’t distracted him, he might have sensed this woman’s Naming Power that day. It could have been his from the start!

He added the bride and the redhead to the list of witches and Fae who would suffer at his hands. He’d have no need of an army now, considering what waited in his own fingertips.

“Show me the door.”

The ancient waved his hand again, and behind Orion, the air rent itself apart, showing a dark road in the country. Along the sides, piles of leaves lay half-buried by snow.

Orion gathered his robes and stepped through.



HE REMEMBERED THE TASTE OF OXFORD.

This was the stomping grounds of Griffon Carew, the protector of The Covenant, brother of the DeNoy hunter, and brother of Archer Carew. But the biting tang of magic in the

air had nothing to do with Fae. Was it a coincidence that the red-headed witch and Carew moved in such close proximity?

No doubt Wickham Muir and the DeNoy were the link between them.

Carew was such a fool to have so much happening right beneath his nose. Or was it Orion who had been deceived? If the Fae wished to prevent what Moire saw, he should have killed Lennon Todd long ago. Was the Oxford Professor protecting her only to thwart him? Or did he truly care for her?

Orion hoped the latter was true. The slow slaughter of the Carew family would be sweeter if the Winged One were so foolishly sentimental. But it couldn't begin until the DeNoy woman was brought to heel.

Orion walked up and down the road for a long while before he stopped searching. Powerful wards had been erected here. He tasted the magic of many, which was encouraging. A single witch with that much power would be a great threat.

He reminded himself that it was he who had the upper hand. Only two Naming Powers eluded him. Two more and the world was his to do with as he pleased. But even with six...

No! He wanted them all. And he would take Light and Darkness next. He had a sudden "hankering" for some red curls...

He lifted his hands, summoned Destruction, and directed it toward the wards he sensed before him. The illusion of a wooded countryside peeled back to reveal a high wall. The earth shook and the wall crumbled. Beyond, the rear of an impressive but silent estate sat exposed. And between himself and the estate stood an enclosed Bridge of Sighs that spanned across a manmade pond.

Incongruous with the elaborately designed grounds, a small wooden structure caught his attention. Crudely made, a painted sign hung on the door. "No girls allowed."

Children. These witches had children. The weak, romantic fools had fled to protect the children! They'd stole into

Moire's Embrace to rescue the Muir children. So what more would they be willing to do for them?

Such a large number of refugee witches couldn't be hidden easily, especially with a contingent of noisy bairns who could be ransomed for what he wanted most.

Orion chuckled as he wandered through the abandoned mansion. His enemies were on the run. The war was nearing its inevitable, prophesied conclusion. He upended the corner of a chess board whose game had been interrupted. "The winner need capture three more pieces."

Light, Hope, and The DeNoy.

SOFT, BUT NOT TOO SOFT

It was eight at night when Griffon arrived back at the cabin. There was two hours difference between Finland and Wales, so when he'd left his mother's house, it was just getting dark. The moon was nearly full, as it had been when they'd soared through the Northern Lights the night before. He glanced up before heading into the mökki, looking for a silhouette of a dragon against the backdrop of the small white disk in the sky.

But Lennon wouldn't be out riding at that hour. She usually didn't last much later than five, sometimes six. And after his taste of dragon riding, he understood why. His powerful abs and obliques still burned from trying to stay upright on an animal flying vertically.

His heart sped up when he reached for the door, knowing she'd be inside. It was like opening a gift. "I'm back—"

The interior was dark as pitch. Not an ember left in the fire. He switched on the small light and refused to feel slighted. He'd left her alone on Christmas Day, after all. If she was having fun with Kivi, who was he to wish her home again.

But he did. He wanted to pull her into his arms and keep her there. Forever.

He'd brought back a heavy basket of food from Bridie and the pencil box from Daphne's room containing the six stones. He'd only peeked at them long enough to ensure they were inside. He just prayed Lennon wouldn't end up with seven

dragons begging her to ride, reading her thoughts, and edging him out. It was hard enough having one.

He placed the basket on the counter and set about building a fire. When she walked through the door, he wanted her to feel like she was coming home—home to him, home to his heart.

Good hell, how she'd softened him.

Over the course of an hour, the mökki warmed enough that he moved some of the food stuffs into the refrigerator. She'd be famished, and he'd brought more than enough to make it feel like Christmas in earnest. Along with the crackle of the fire, the smell of cardamom and cinnamon relaxed him and tempted him to sleep. But one glance at the clock and he knew it was time to worry.

Unlike Flann and Kivi, the only link Griffon had to her was that pinfeather. She'd allowed him to weave it into her hair at the base of her skull, so it should still be there.

He closed his eyes to concentrate and reached out—

Voices outside had him on his feet, rushing to greet her. The door opened before he reached it, but it wasn't Lennon. Or was it?

“My love, you're drenched!” He stood back to take in the sight of her. Clothes sagging and dark with wet. Her dark hair dripping. Her skin was blue.

“R...r...rain.”

He pulled the door shut and whisked her off her feet to get her to the fire. Murmuring softly, he stripped the wet clothes off her. “You're here now. Just concentrate. Take the warmth of the fire inside you. Will it into your limbs. You can do this.”

“C...c...can't c...c...concentrate. N...need to p...p...pee.”

“First things first, then.” He wrapped a shawl over her bare shoulders and took her to the toilet. He turned his back when she insisted, then returned her to the fire with her wet pants around her ankles. She wouldn't forgive him for this, but he could live with her ire...she had to be alive to be angry.

“B...blanket.”

“No, love. It will keep the heat from reaching you. If you show me you can warm yourself, I’ll give you a blanket.”

He removed the rest of her clothing and brought her a chair, then he stood at her back and made a wall with his wings to keep the heat around her. Her arms were blue from the elbows down, so he took one arm at a time, rubbed them, and massaged her fingers to lure the blood back.

It wasn’t working. Shivers wracked her body. She wouldn’t look at him. Her mind...it was like her mind was still out there, in the rain.

He pulled her to her feet and turned her to face him, so the heat could reach her back. “No excuses, now. Concentrate.” He put his hands to the sides of her face and massaged her cheeks a bit roughly. “Remember how you lit the fire when I promised to kiss you?” He forced a laugh and pulled her hands into his again. “I’ll kiss you as soon as you can make your fingers pink again.”

After a few seconds of painful silence, her digits warmed in a rush, like someone had poured warm water into a latex glove. Her hands, forearms, her whole body was transformed by a rosy glow. And finally, blessedly, her eyes met his.

She opened her mouth to speak, then shook her head and began to collapse. He caught her before she could fall into the fire.

All through the night, he lay close to her, keeping her warm. Her sleep was fitful, and she cried out half a dozen times but never fully woke. And some of those times, she muttered about dragons and fire and ice. He considered taking her to a hospital when she started burning up. But while he walked the floor, deliberating, she broke into a sweat and the fever vanished. After that, she slept peacefully until morning.



A LOUD POP FROM THE FIRE WOKE ME. I WAS BACK IN THE cabin, tangled and naked in a wad of blankets on the floor. Memories flooded back into my brain, fighting for my attention. I worked backward. I couldn't remember coming to bed. But I quickly recalled how I got my clothes off.

I rolled my face into a pillow and groaned.

“Here, now. None of that.”

Following Griffon's voice, I found him sitting on the futon, fully dressed and watching me, with a large basket in his hands. Though he smiled, he looked nervous, and I wondered if our trip to the bathroom together might have embarrassed him too.

“Good morning,” he said. “I'm sitting over here to keep from ravaging you. So please don't read anything else into the situation.”

I knew for a fact there was nothing at all appealing about me at the moment. I probably looked like death warmed over, I hadn't brushed my teeth, and the distinct smell of my own sweat made me want to leave the room. But I bit my lips and held my tongue. Obviously, he wasn't interested in my opinion.

“Most important news first. Bridie sent along an array of Christmas food.” He patted the basket. “After what you went through last night, it was a mistake not to have taken you with me. She wanted you to know she was disappointed, but she wishes you a Happy Christmas.”

“You didn't take me with you because we might have run into Orion. What happened to me was no one's fault. We came here to learn things. And we just learned that I can't keep up my body temperature when I have a full bladder. That's all.” I had to change the subject. “How is Archer?”

He lifted a brow.

“Don't be silly. I'm just making conversation.”

He nodded. “Then Archer is fine. He's bored, but he's safe.”

“And Bridie?”

“Pleased as punch that one of her sons is compelled to stay home and eat her food.”

“Did you bring the *cloch realtas*?”

“I did. But must you call Kivi back today? I thought you might like time to recover. By the way, you had a fever in the night. Came and went so quickly...”

“It’s Kivi. She heals me. I thought it was Hank that did the trick, but it was Kivi. She came to me, in my mind, and healed me.” I shook my head. “She thinks we’re invincible. I think maybe last night she began to believe we are not.”

“We’re all learning that.” He looked nervous again. “If you’ll get dressed, I’d like to show you something else I retrieved from Bridie’s house.”

“What?”

“It’s a surprise.”

“Well, it can’t be better than rocks and food.”

“We’ll know soon enough.”

“All right. Close your eyes.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m naked.”

He sighed but did what I asked. I was halfway to the kitchen when he added, “I peeked, just so you know.”

“That’s okay. To me, honesty is more important than chivalry. Especially now.”

BETTER THAN MEAT PIES

By the time I'd bathed and dressed, Griffon had folded up the bedding and warmed the meat pies by the fire. He insisted we finish eating before I could have my surprise, so I took only a couple of goodies from Bridie's basket and didn't take time to savor them. I was working with a caloric deficit from my Christmas Day adventures, and it looked like I would make it up by suppertime, thanks to Bridie's baking.

While I cleaned the crumbs from the table, Griffon started fidgeting again, and I got nervous. What if the surprise was bad news?

I hung the washcloth on the side of the sink and brushed my hands together. "Okay. I'm ready."

Griffon glanced around. "Maybe we should go outside."

"I'd rather not. That is, unless you brought me another dragon. Please tell me you didn't bring me another dragon."

He shook his head and paced to the futon and back, searching the floor like he'd lost something. "All right. This is fine. I mean..."

"If something's wrong, just tell me."

He stopped, forced a smile. "Nothing's wrong. Just... pending."

I closed the distance and reached for his hands, but he pulled back. "Griffon?"

He pointed to a spot on the floor near the fire. “Stand here. Please.”

I did as he asked. He got down on his knees—no, just one knee—and I finally caught on. “Griffon?” All I could manage was a whisper.

“Lennon. When we first met—the *moment* we met—I thought I was just like my father, that I had fallen for a woman. That I was meant to love a human, not a Fae. So I’ve been thinking how appropriate it would be to give you this.” He held out a silver ring with an oval emerald embedded in the top. “It’s old, of course. Late 16th century. And even though you’re not human—I mean, it doesn’t matter to me that you’re Fae—I still want to offer you the ring my father gave my human mother.”

He exhaled in a huff, like he’d just gotten something heavy off his chest. Then he looked up at me, expectant. Suddenly his eyes widened.

“And ask you to marry me! Oh, Lordie. I forgot the important bit!” Whether he realized it or not, he slipped the ring onto his own pinkie and started massaging my fingers as he had the night before, like he was worried about my circulation.

His nerves gave me the time I needed to compose myself. I barely remembered the faces of the three men from college I’d hoped to see on their knees, offering me a ring. They were part of a different life, a different world—a purely human world. At the moment, I was overjoyed that each and every one of them had disappointed me.

Finally, I pulled out of Griffon’s grasp and laid my hand on his cheek. “Griffon?”

He blinked.

“You really want to marry me?”

“I do. I want to know that, wherever I am, wherever you are, you’re mine. I want you bound to me, obligated to me, legally required to call me yours. In Fairy, in the human realm,

in Moire's Embrace. I'd marry you in all three if you'd allow it."

"Oh, yes, please."



WHEN THE SKY BEGAN TO LIGHTEN, GRIFFON LEFT ON A snowmobile, to make arrangements, he said. He wanted a ceremony before we left Finland so we could think of the whole experience as our honeymoon.

Technically, he hadn't asked what Kivi and I had done or why we were out so late the night before, so I hadn't lied to him. I just kept the details to myself. And I felt horrible about it. All that talk about honesty vs. chivalry was bull. I was a hypocrite. I just didn't know how long it would take to summon the courage to come clean.

I did keep my promise to take it easy while he was gone. Though I felt perfectly fine, I promised not to go riding that day. I cuddled up in a corner with that novel I'd started, snacked from the basket, and let the noise from the fire drown out the occasional hiss from the box of stones that was now wrapped in towels and tucked into a kitchen cabinet.

I'd told them they'd have to wait one more day, which shut them up for a while. But they couldn't resist an occasional protest.

The sound of a snowmobile engine was music to my ears, and I hurried out to wait for Griffon on the porch. I hadn't expected him back so soon, but I wasn't complaining. I was disappointed, though, when the snowmobile was red and the tall man driving it was all in black.

Timo turned off his engine, lifted his visor, and waved.

I pretended to be cold by folding my arms and shivering. "Griffon's not here," I shouted, and hoped he'd go away.

"That's all right. I brought more batteries." He patted a bag hanging across his chest and dismounted.

Since I couldn't very well bar him from his own cabin, I invited him in, playing along. But I wasn't happy to have someone inside what was technically our honeymoon house. And I didn't want another lecture, with that lilting accent, on how deadly the weather was.

"Sorry," I said. "I haven't made any coffee today."

"No worries. Will you check the toilet to see if it is full?"

"Sure." I slipped behind the screen before I rolled my eyes. It took a minute to find the gauge and figure out, in the shadows, that it was only half full. But already, by the time I stepped back into the room, Timo had removed his coat, boots, and ski pants. "Still half-empty. What are you doing?"

"You have to let the warmth reach the body," he said, as if that was explanation enough. He carried his bag into the kitchen, then set it down to check the coffee pot. "Your husband must have made some. Still hot." He pulled two mugs off the shelf and started pouring.

"None for me, thanks. I was just going to take a nap."

"Don't let me interrupt. I will restock, and as soon as I am warm, I will be on my way. Pretend I am not here." He sucked down some coffee, glanced at my crotch and turned his back to me.

Ignore that? Not bloody likely. And I wasn't going to pretend otherwise. "Just leave the batteries and go."

He glanced back at me and nodded, vaguely, as if he hadn't been listening. While he pulled our rationed batteries out of the cabinet, I concentrated on the firepit and encouraged the flames to raise the temperature.

He was cold? Not for long.

"Good fire," he finally said, after putting the stash of batteries back.

I'd been watching. He hadn't touched anything from the bag he brought with him. He sent me a smile when he went to the main hanging light and pulled it down. With his height, he

reached it just as easily as Griffon had. Then he took it back to the kitchen.

“You get used to dim lighting because it dies so slowly. When the sun is gone, you will find it brighter than before. Of course, it will be dark for a moment, while I change it out.”

He switched off the lantern, but the firelight still reached far enough to tell me where he stood. I gravitated to the back of the room where the lamp still burned next to the book. The threatening, Andy-Weaver-vibe I was getting now was no joking matter, no matter how capable I was of defending myself.

But more than that, I wasn't about to let him taint my memories of the place. So I would stay on my feet until he was on the other side of a locked door.

I grabbed my dagger from the drawer under the lamp. When I straightened, Timo was coming around the fire straight for me.

“I never showed you how the beds connect,” he said, cheerfully. “I don't know how the two of you have managed to warm each other all this time. Here. Let me show you.” In the shadows, he never noticed the dagger. He turned his back to me and started dragging the bed away from the wall. He pointed at something along the lower rail. “You see this?”

I glanced where I was expected to but didn't move any closer. It didn't matter. He grabbed me anyway, used his hip to throw me off balance, and pushed me onto the mattress, knocking the lamp onto the floor in the process. My heart raced, but from anger, not fear. I was sickened by his willingness to hurt me, to risk everything in his life to do this.

While we struggled, I kept waiting for him to change his mind, to come to his senses. But he didn't. Then it struck me—this couldn't be the first time he'd attacked a woman!

That was all I needed. It wasn't in me to punish an innocent man.

My dragon freaked out. *Mark-a!*

Kivi! Don't come! This was between me and him.

Timo was a giant, a heavy skeleton made of thick bones, covered in flannel. Without his winter gear, he was surprisingly quick. He pinned my shoulders to the bed with one forearm while he fumbled for my clothes. To give him fair warning, I held my blade out where he could see it, but he never looked.

Then I tried talking, to distract him, to give him one last chance. “You do this to all your tenants?” My voice shook from adrenaline. He mistook it for fear.

He smirked, grunted, but said nothing. He found the zipper on my jeans, but I twisted my hips and he lost it again. With the muscles born from riding a dragon, I could probably buck him off. And if I concentrated, I could maybe roast him from the inside...

He and his wife had spent a lot of breath warning us about the laws of survival. The line between life and death, in Lapland, was delicate, they’d said. And now Timo had crossed to the wrong side. He threatened my survival, so he would forfeit his.

Before I could decide how I would end him, his fingernail gouged my chest. Instantly, heat shot up my arm, flooded my torso, and poured down my body. I no longer felt his groping hands, no longer felt his crushing weight. A golden, fluid armor now covered me, protected me, and made me untouchable.

He clamped his hand around my wrist and pushed off me, not yet willing to give up. In the light of the fire, he looked me up and down. That Andy Weaver smirk faded fast. I wiggled the dagger to get his attention. His eyes bulged and he flung my wrist away like it was a hot coal. I rolled to my feet and faced him across the bed.

He was pissed. “Who are you?”

I shifted the dagger to my left hand, then back to my right. “Your judge, jury, and executioner.”

I could tell by his expression, he didn’t believe me. The smirk was back, and he glanced around, trying to figure out

how to regain the upper hand. He grabbed a pillow by the corner and eyed my blade.

I clicked my tongue on the back of my teeth. “Griffon’s going to be disappointed he missed the chance to kill you himself. But maybe, if he hurries back, he can help me get rid of your body. Are there bears in Lapland?”

Timo sneered. “Reverend has got him cornered. He will not escape for an hour.”

“So, you knew he was gone.”

He snorted. “Guilty.”

“And just to be clear, you have done this before?”

“But you are the best fighter.”

“I’m surprised an oaf like you would know the difference.”

He shrugged off the insult. “You will love it in the end.”

“I see. You’re stupider than I thought.” I shook my head slowly. “But I’m afraid that won’t save you.”

I glanced at the bed and the number of Timo’s possible victims made me watch to retch.

He took advantage of my seconds-long distraction and swung the pillow at me, made me jump back. “So brave, are you? Take off your armor and we will fight fair. Winner takes you.”

“Not going to happen. I’ve killed monsters before.” I imagined his future victims—I knew what their terror would taste like, I had felt their shame. But I could prevent all that.

The door burst open. I only spared a glance to make sure it was Griffon and not some accomplice. His shirt was gone. He flung his coat aside, but he wouldn’t need more than a few seconds to realize what was going on.

My empty hand shot up to warn him off. “I need to do this!”

After a few seconds, he spoke, his voice even, barely controlled. “Don’t let me interrupt.”

He couldn't have said anything more perfect. He hadn't said, "All right. But I'm here if you can't handle it." He hadn't, for a second, doubted me, though he'd never seen me fight. He'd given me blind faith. And I loved him even more than I thought was possible.

Timo misunderstood and grinned again. "He's a watcher, is he?"

"I'm just trying to decide how to kill him," I said. "It would be a pity to burn the place down, but I do hate to mop up blood. And if I try to roast him, I don't think I can bear the smell."

"Maybe Kivi would like to stomp a hole in the ice—"

"No. No. He doesn't get to see her."

"Who is Kivi?" Timo kept glancing at the door. "I never heard your snow dog."

Griffon closed the door. "I ran into your wife. She seemed nervous to find me in town, alone, when her husband had come out to check on us. So I *flew* straight here." In my periphery, I saw him flap his arms to demonstrate, but his wings stayed out of sight.

Timo sneered. "You are both insane. Get out! Take your things and leave my house!" He backed toward the side wall so he could watch us both, holding the pillow out in front of him like a shield. He wanted us to think he was standing down, but the way his eyes shifted, I knew he wasn't finished.

"He's right," I said. "We should gather our things, say goodbye to the place." But none of us moved.

I thought I would be able to forget about predatory men like Andy, but I was wrong. I'd been helpless in that Idaho parking lot. I'd been helpless in that taxi. But this time, I was perfectly capable of saving myself. And Griffon understood my need to do it.

The big man moved faster than I expected. He planted a foot on the mattress, and launched the pillow at me as he came. He reached for my dagger, and I sliced out and down, caught his left hand with the tip of the blade, and opened the

flesh. He yowled and lifted his right arm, to backhand me, but before he could connect, my warm armor stretched up to absorb the impact. I took a quick step to save my balance, but I was unharmed.

If he was willing to attack me, covered in unearthly liquid armor, with Griffon in the room, then he was more dangerous, more stupid, and more crazy than I thought.

Again, Timo glanced at Griffon, then came at me, to shove me toward the rear wall. My armor clanged when it hit the wood. He pressed the right side of his body against me, to hold me in place while he groped for my blade. I sliced up, missed him, then tossed the knife over his head to catch it in my left hand. I bit into his shoulder to get him off me so I could bend. I then put the blade between his legs and dragged it up, severing his right femoral artery, among other things.

His caterwauling filled the room and the rafters as he stumbled back to the bed, sat on the edge, and tried to staunch the flow of blood from his leg with his good hand. A dark red stain quickly spread down his pants and began to accumulate on the floor. A smaller puddle formed on the bare mattress beneath his left hand. Even as he realized his fate, his head shook with shock and denial. “You stupid bitch.”

“Smart enough to hit your artery.”

I never showed him my back as I edged around the bed and inched past the fire, toward the door. When I finally turned, I was in Griffon’s arms. He had my back now. I pressed my face against his chest. “I’m so sorry,” I whispered. “I’ve ruined—”

“You’ve ruined nothing, and he’s paying dearly for bad judgement, that’s all.” He kissed my forehead and took a step back to look me over. “Nice armor.”

“Oh, this old thing? It came out of nowhere. When Kivi said we were invincible, she must have known about it. I have no idea how to get it off.”

“Perhaps it will withdraw when the threat has been eliminated.” He shot Timo a withering look, then never looked

his away again while we stuffed our things in our bags. The last items we grabbed were Bridie's basket and Daphne's box of stones. I barely noticed when my protective gold receded to my arm.

"You cannot leave me here." Timo's voice was weak. He'd pulled his leg onto the bed and teetered on the edge. "I need... hospital."

I followed Griffon to the door but turned back. "Yes, you do. A pity you don't deserve one."

Kivi appeared as soon as I called her. Once we were seated and secure on her shoulders, I asked, "Can you breathe fire?"

She stood on her haunches and filled her lungs with air while we hung on for dear life. The white flames she aimed at the mökki gave off impressive heat that melted the snow around us and stung my face. I just hoped Timo was conscious enough to feel the same heat coming for him.

The buzz of a snowmobile cut through the crackle of angry, hungry fire, and I watched as another red snowmobile pulled off the road and slid to a stop.

You wish them to see me?

I do.

If Tuuli Ahonen went to the police to report that a dragon had burned down her mökki with her husband inside, I wasn't worried anyone would try to track us down. Even if she omitted the part about the dragon, she didn't know our real names.

The woman lifted her visor and, after she laid eyes on Kivi, never gave her burning property a thought. Even Timo's terrified screams couldn't get her attention.

It's all right. We can go now.

LETTING GO OF A BALLOON

*L*ennon...

I plugged my ears to hear my thoughts over the concussion of Kivi's beating wings.

Lennon?

Flann!

Are you all right?

I am. Perfect timing. Where are you, exactly?

A house in Inverness.

I've got a surprise for you...



WE'D LEFT FINLAND AROUND FOUR IN THE AFTERNOON. EVEN though the winter sun set early in Scotland, we arrived with another hour or two of daylight. Nice, bright daylight, comparatively speaking, which boosted my mood immediately.

Kivi assured me that neither mortals nor Fae would see us as we sank lower and broke through the cloud cover.

Griffon nudged me and shouted, "You all right?"

I nodded, but I wasn't. I'd never killed a human before. I guess I thought it wouldn't feel any different than killing one of Orion's minions, but I was wrong. Thirty-five years of

Christian mentality made sure I felt a keen sting of guilt when I thought about Timo. But as a Fae, would my sense of morality change?

What happened to Timo was justice, even if some laws wouldn't see it that way. But for someone who lived part of her life flying above and beyond boundaries, which laws should apply?

Until I knew otherwise, my own sense of justice would have to do.

Below, someone blindly waved a lit torch in a snow-covered yard, showing us the way, just as Flann had promised. Kivi honed in on it and descended gently. I hoped my mortal friends would be able to see her in her full glory.

The dragon chuckled, and her chest vibrated beneath us. *They can now, because you will it.*

The grounds were a fraction of those at Hope House, but there was room enough for a dragon to land. I tried to act cool as we approached, but I got a little thrill from the awe on my friends' upturned faces. They were all dressed for the cold, but I recognized them all.

Kitch tossed the torch away, grabbed Persi's hand, and together, they hurried out of Kivi's path. But despite the snow, my pretty girl stuck her landing, proving they could have stayed where they'd been.

Brian and Flann stood at the edge of a small patio, grinning, like they'd always expected Hank to turn into a dragon.

Out of everyone, I was surprised when Urban was the most timid. Even his wife hurried forward for a close look. Or maybe she just wanted to be the first in line for a hug.

I did manage to impress the brothers when I touched my armband and the gold from our saddles was sucked back in, out of sight, as if with a straw. They rushed forward for a better look, like a couple of kids.

Once Griffon and I were on the ground, I laid my hand on Kivi's neck and introduced her. "Kivi, these are my friends.

My dearest friends. They are to be protected.” I grinned. “Everyone, this is Jalokivi. It’s Finnish for gemstone. I call her Kivi. Hank was just a link between us. There is no more Hank, but I’ve planned a little demonstration to help you understand.”

Each of them came forward, one by one, so I could name them. Everly was first. After hugging me, she reached up and stroked her hand along Kivi’s cheek. “Hello there.”

I particularly like this one.

So do I. She has been good to us. “And this is Persephone.”

Kivi nodded. “Persi the Powerful.”

Persi laughed. “Oh, we’re going to get along just fine.”

“And this is Dominic Kitchens.”

“The Protector.”

He nodded. “Exactly right. Pleased to meet ye, Miss Kivi.”

The dragon chuckled, which startled everyone.

“This is Alwyn and Rinky.” The chef and the former holder of the Power of Fertility clung to each other, and I suspected it had nothing to do with meeting a dragon.

Kivi gave Rinky an extra sniff, then bowed her head to the woman. “I am honored.”

I couldn’t help beaming with pride, as if I’d just introduced my child to the queen and they’d handled themselves perfectly.

Brian and Flann stepped up and both offered a deep bow. “Ye’re the most exciting possible answer to our most elusive riddle,” Brian said. “I cannae tell ye how pleased we are. I won’t be sleepin’ for a week! A month, more like.”

Kivi blinked at Flann. “You speak to my marka.”

I explained, “Marka means rider.”

“Aye,” he said. “Not the only one, though, am I?”

Kivi’s smile was all the answer he needed.

“This is Wickham and Ivy Muir,” I said, watching to see if that white mist in Wickham might react to my dragon the same as it did to me. But Wickham’s hands were busy trying to hold his sons back. “And these are their boys, Alexander, J.W., and Gavin.”

Gavin’s mouth hung open the whole time. J.W. asked, “Can we ride it?”

“*It is a her,*” Wickham corrected. “And not tonight.”

Kivi bowed her head again. “*Seanathair,*” she said, using the Irish term for Grandfather.

Alexander backed away, never taking his eyes off her. When he tripped and landed on his butt in the snow, he just stayed there, folded his legs, and stared.

Urban still stood on the patio. I waved to him. “Come on, Urban. She’ll like you, I promise.”

He shook his head and backed a step. Everly marched over and grabbed his arm, whispered something, and dragged him, by degrees, to stand by me.

“This is the injured one,” Kivi said. “I am pleased I could help.”

He blinked at her, confused, but still leaned away. He was terrified.

“Urban?”

He closed his eyes. “I am...intolerant of snakes.”

I snorted. “She’s not a—”

Kivi’s sudden laughter made us all jump. The booming of her barrel chest was loud enough for the entire district to hear, and when she gasped for breath, I worried flames might come out of her mouth. She even tipped onto her side and rolled onto her wings while she got it all out. And by the time she was done, all my friends were huddled near the back door, deliberating whether or not to hide inside.

Urban hadn’t moved an inch. Instead of leaning away, he stood with his arms folded, glowering.

Kivi, control yourself.

She immediately sobered, rolled back to her feet, and shook the white stuff off her wings. She stomped her hand on the ground just two feet from Urban. “Come, MacKenzie. Let me show you the difference between a snake and a *nathair sciathánacha*.”

I didn’t understand. “What did she say?”

Urban inhaled and exhaled violently. “Winged snake.”

I couldn’t resist another minute and threw my arms around him. “I’ve missed you.”

He wrapped his bulging arms around me long enough for a squeeze, then pulled back. His nervous gaze wasn’t on Kivi then, but on Griffon, who didn’t look happy at all. I laughed at them both.

“Rides can wait until tomorrow,” I told her. “Why don’t we deal with the broken cloches?”

Everly hurried back to us with a furry coat in her hands. “You must be freezing.”

I shook my head and explained that I don’t get cold anymore, for the most part. But I took the coat just to show I was grateful for the thought. The rest of them trickled back to us. Griffon opened one of the bags to get out the box of rocks while I explained that we were about to attempt to free the damaged stones.

“I’m not sure what will happen, exactly,” I said, “but Kivi thinks we should be safe enough.”

“Safe enough.” Brian laughed. “So an unknown degree of safety.”

“Exactly.” I opened the box and passed it around. “I don’t suggest you touch them.”

“No gemstones,” Kitch pointed out. “And no gold?”

“I guess that’s why Kivi calls them broken. I can hear them. They want me to touch them.”

Griffon explained what happened when I finally put Hank in my bare hand. “I have been assured these should *not* turn into dragons.” He glanced at me, his message was clear—he was prepared for the worst.

To be honest, so was I...



FOR SAFETY'S SAKE, EVERLY SUGGESTED URBAN STAY BACK with the boys. “Gladly,” he said, and lifted Gavin by the scruff of his neck to march the protesting child back to the patio. His nod was all it took to get the other two moving. And the thought struck me that every boy needed an Uncle Urban.

Griffon was watching me. He looked pointedly at Urban, then back at me. “Something I should worry about?”

I giggled and stretched onto my toes in a wordless command to kiss me. “You’re cute when you’re jealous.”

He kissed me a second time, but still scowled. “That doesn’t answer the question.”

The way he looked at the box of stones, as it was passed back to me, explained his sudden worry. He was afraid I was about to get six new friends that might come between us. In fact, he was probably worried that any of my friends, arrayed behind us, might do the same.

To reassure him, I extended the box to him. “Hold this. And stay close. Anything happens, we’re out of here, right?”

He finally smiled. “Right.”

“Okay, Kivi. We’re ready.”

She nodded and moved backward, leaving a dragon-sized space in front of me. “Do not press it to your arm, Marka. No matter the compulsion.”

I studied the silent stones for a few seconds and decided to try the smallest one first. It was light gray with a green cast to it. Its three empty holes had gouge marks and damaged rims. Its gemstones had been removed with clumsy tools. With my

experience of being violated so recently unearthed, I reacted viscerally to the marks.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, on behalf of whomever broke it. “And I’m sorry you lost your DeNoy.”

The *cloch realta* warmed quickly against my fingers. I laid it in my left palm and watched the empty lawn in front of me, but the stone demanded my full attention. It wobbled, broke apart, then dissolved into sand that trickled out between my fingers. My friends gasped. A second dragon stood on the snow Kivi had compacted with her laughing fit. Some inner sense told me it was male.

A full head taller than my dragon, his handsome silver coat shimmered, his pale green belly matched his eyes. But he was only a ghost.

He stretched his neck and extended his spectral head to me. “Marka. Reach out. Touch us.” His voice was deep, seductive.

Do not!

I smiled. “I respectfully decline.”

He straightened. “Then I am free.”

“You are.”

He inclined his head, maybe to thank me, then he silently launched himself into the sky and disappeared before he reached the cloud layer.

The boys whooped and hollered. Brian and Flann, who stood closest to me, were clearly disappointed, as if someone had let their balloons go. They both looked so young in that moment, with those expressions, I had to laugh.

Well done, Marka. He is grateful. Let us hope the others are so...willing.

NICE TOY

J.W. shouted, and when I followed his pointing finger, I noticed Kivi had started to fade. She shifted sideways to close the distance and lowered her head for a quick pat and a purr. When I turned back to my friends, they were wide-eyed and waiting for an explanation.

“Without me,” I said, “she won’t remain solid, so no one else can ride her. No one can take her from me. No one can get...far.” I nearly let our little secret slip, and just to be sure Griffon couldn’t read guilt on my face, I reached for Kivi again for one last pat before returning to his side and reaching for another stone.

Brian wasn’t ready to give up the subject. “So, without you, she needs no physical sustenance?”

“She can eat, if she wants. Not often, though. And she hunts. It’s not like I have to buy a side of beef every week.”

Flann gestured toward the house. “And where does she sleep?”

I turned back to Kivi and tipped my head. “Do you sleep?”

She smiled with her eyes and said nothing. The brothers didn’t press.

“Right then. Everyone ready?” I reached for the next stone. It was darker than the last with five empty holes. It started quaking the instant I touched it and shattered into sand before I could put it in my hand.

The ghost of a dark purple dragon fidgeted in front of me, unable to hold still. *Touch us! Touch us!* The impatient male finally danced closer, then scowled when I put my hands behind my back.

“Wait!” Brian and Flann rushed past me and reached up. Their hands brushed through the misty form.

The dragon never noticed them. “Suit yourself,” he said, then ran to the end of the yard and took off.

Flann shrugged and laughed with obvious relief in his voice. Brian’s shoulders fell, as they often did, when an experiment didn’t go his way. They both wandered over to Persi for a quiet conversation, and I knew as soon as the next dragon appeared, they’d try to get her to touch it. Witches had no effect, but a *Third* might?

Kitch was clearly alarmed but said nothing.

The next dragon was solid sky blue, a female who was in no hurry at all. She noticed everyone in the yard, even Urban and the boys, before she approached me. “I have no name,” she said.

I shook my head. “It is not my place to name you.”

“Can a marka not have two dragons?”

“This one cannot. I am sorry.”

She accepted my answer with a slight nod, then watched as Persi stepped closer. “Hello, Fae Queen.” She bowed until the spikes of her chin were inches from the ground and stayed there.

Persi exhaled. “That’s not necessary.”

The blue one lifted her head slightly. “What would you have of me?”

My friend was shaking. She looked at me and grimaced. I shrugged my shoulders, no help at all. Finally, said, “I just wonder...if I touch you...what would happen?”

The dragon smiled with her eyes. “Try and see.”

Kitch stepped close but didn't try to stop Persi. He was there, though, if something went wrong. He and Persi exchanged a look, then she reached up to touch the dragon on the side of her nose. Her hand never met resistance, but when her arm fell to her side, a sunny yellow mist, in the shape of her hand and arm, touched the dragon as if both of them were real.

We all held our breath.

A long moment later, the yellow mist disintegrated, and the dragon bowed again. "I have been honored by the Fae Queen."

Kitch put his hands on Persi's waist as she stumbled back, her attention shifting between her hand and the dragon. She seemed more in awe of the yellow mist than the ghostly creature and had no attention left for her footing. But Kitch had her. He would always have her.

Just like Griffon had me.

Alexander shouted, "Da! Have a go!" His brothers went nuts at the idea, and none of us were surprised when Wickham reluctantly agreed to try. If he hadn't, he would never have heard the end of it. Obviously, Ivy had no say in the matter.

The next stone was the one with the orange cast. Its holes matched Hanks and I hesitated. If the Hank's stones mimicked the Pleiades, and they represented *home*, then the DeNoy who lost this must belong, somehow, to the same place I did.

"I'm sorry," I whispered again, and put the *cloch realta* in my palm. Without gold to hold it together, the rock cracked before shattering. The sand flooded my hand with colors—orange, blue, and hot pink. The dragon that appeared had the same shade of blue as Kivi in spirit form, with a dark pink neck. If solid, her colors would have been brilliant.

It first bowed to Kivi, then to me.

"Who will have me?" she asked, like she was inviting bids. The voice was musical, like a bird's. A female who knew how pretty she was.

Wickham stared for a few seconds, then stomped forward. “I would.”

The dragon laughed as she bowed. “*Seanathair*, you flatter me. But you are no marka.”

I was relieved he had no reason to reach out because now that I knew I was DeNoy, and that I had a dragon at my disposal, I preferred not to see that white mist reaching for me again. Even when we’d greeted each other, I’d reached out my hand to keep him from hugging me, just in case.

“And you, Marka?” When I declined, the dragon cocked her head. “But we shall meet again.” I waved instead of replying. She spread her wings and showed off her pink webbing, then left the ground with a gentle hop, as if it took no effort at all.

The fifth dragon’s reaction was much the same as the first. A single invitation to touch her, then a nod and she was gone. Three holes. Yellow with a white underbelly. No insult taken.

By the time only one stone remained in the box, I was emotionally spent. Not only had I weathered a stormy day of my own, I’d felt each and every one of Kivi’s emotions as well. She’d been pleased with Griffon for collecting the *cloch realtas*, eager to set them free, but worried what they might ultimately do. And she was still nervous.

Just one more, I told her. *One more and it will all be over.*

Yes, over. She was sad about it, which surprised me. But I realized she wouldn’t be seeing her own kind again anytime soon.



THE SIXTH AND FINAL STONE WAS SHINY BLACK, AN ONYX SO large it had to be tilted on its side to fit into the box. Nine holes—a shinier version of Hank. As I reached for it, Griffon leaned down for a quick kiss. “For luck.”

The onyx was cold against my fingers, but then again, it had been waiting for a long time, just like my friends, who

were stomping their feet to keep their toes from freezing. Their faces were eager, though. And no one complained.

The onyx held its form while I transferred it to my palm. For a good ten seconds I waited, wondering if this one was so broken my touch meant nothing. But eventually, it shivered, then rocked, then exploded into beads which dissolved into sand.

“Very dramatic,” I said, then dusted my hands and looked for a dragon.

Nothing appeared.

Seconds turned to minutes.

There. Kivi’s chin pointed to the sky.

I followed her line of sight and saw a dark smudge in the darkening blue. As it grew closer, everyone started moving back, making more space, just in case.

“Someone likes drama.” I shared a smile with Griffon, and then an idea froze my heart in my chest.

Nine stones. Home. Home of mountain-sized, black dragons...

I couldn’t explain. I couldn’t move. I couldn’t believe it had never occurred to me before! I could have put off this last one, could have made some excuse to wait for another day. I was such an idiot!

Or maybe this creature wasn’t connected to the onyx stone at all! Maybe those dragons and riders had found their way here!

Breathe, Marka. It is only spirit. Breathe. But I could tell Kivi was also shaken by the mere memory of those others.

The beating of its wings was as silent as its landing. The webbing and its chest were red, its eyes black, its body barely double Kivi’s. Though its head was similar to hers, the snout narrowed sharply.

This was no mountain-sized guardian.

It lifted its chin and ethereal fire shot from its snout in an obvious attempt to impress me. When its breath was spent, its chest puffed. Of course, it was a male.

“I am yours, Marka.” Its voice was gravel and ash.

“I appreciate the offer—”

“Not offer. Fact.” He lowered his head, then stretched it toward me. I backed away to keep from touching him accidentally.

Kivi freaked out. *Stand your ground! Show no weakness!*

I planted my feet despite Griffon tugging on me from behind. When he realized what I was doing, he reversed and brushed past me, to jump between me and the threat. The gold on my arm recognized the danger and within the span of a couple of heartbeats, I was covered from my throat to my ankles.

“Ho. Ly. Shite.” “Did ye see that?” “Nice toy!” “I’ll be blessed!”

My friends made enough of a ruckus to draw the dragon’s attention. It didn’t appreciate being upstaged, let alone thwarted, so it lifted its chin again and sent a steady stream of ghostly fire thirty feet above its head.

While it was thus distracted, I stepped around Griffon, who was surprised but pleased to see my armor. I waved him back and he retreated willingly, with a grin on his face.

I called to the dragon. “If you’re finished, you can be on your way.”

He gasped. “You would dismiss me?”

“I have no power over you. You can dismiss yourself.”

His head came at me again. “You *will* claim me, Marka.” The beast was within two yards of me when Kivi’s head came between us, stopping the black dragon with a furious hiss. He recoiled and blinked, as if noticing for the first time he wasn’t the only dragon present.

“Go,” Kivi growled. “Go and find someone to make you whole. And when you are, I will find you and I will use your skull to drink your blood.”

The ghost unfurled his blood-colored wings and ascended without taking his eyes off her, without another thought about me. Once the smudge was completely gone from the sky, Kivi chuckled. I felt her glee and laughed too, though I couldn’t say why.

Brave Brian asked.

“He had no need to be cowed,” Kivi said. “He will never be whole. I can never do him damage, just as he can never hurt us. But it was pleasant, Marka, was it not, to see a dark dragon fleeing *us*...” She realized, too late, that she was speaking aloud. “The little bird acquitted himself well. You should celebrate.”

Griffon didn’t look like celebrating when he gently spun me into his arms. He hadn’t missed a thing. “So, love, tell me. How was your Christmas?”

“Um. Fine. I mean... Should I keep my armor on while I tell you about it?”

He lowered his chin and searched my eyes. “That might be a good idea.”

SATIN AND PLAID

Due to our attentive audience, Griffon agreed, reluctantly, to hear about my Christmas later. In the meantime, I sent Kivi away and followed my friends inside. Many of them had noted my dragon's slip of the tongue, but only Flann dared mention it.

You'll tell me later?

Not if I can help it.

Over supper, in a long and spacious dining room, we told my friends where we'd been for the last couple of weeks. The boys grilled us with questions about Kivi, the taste of reindeer, and flying, which led to me explaining, again, how I was able to control my body temperature. The boys wanted to know if Kivi could breathe fire like the black dragon, which Griffon assured them she could, and that was followed by a dozen new questions that I promised Kivi would answer herself.

"If you don't eat your supper," Ivy said, "you won't be riding or speaking to any dragons tomorrow."

They all but licked their plates clean.

In the midst of our dessert course, Griffon caught my hand under the tablecloth and gave me a wink. "Wickham?" He turned to the head of the table. "Do you know any clergymen?"

Wickham's eyes widened. "I do. A friend of ours, Father Donne, is at St. Mary's here in Inverness." He glanced at me, swallowed, then looked at Griffon again. "What do you need?"

Griffon waited for my nod of permission—or maybe just my reassurance that I still wanted to marry him—but I gave both. He lifted my hand and kissed my knuckles, making promises with his crinkled eyes.

All the women in the room sighed.

“I had trouble with a reverend in Finland,” Griffon continued. “Said he couldn’t marry us in his church—”

Everyone gasped.

“Unless we were members of the congregation. Do you think Father Donne would mind performing a civil ceremony for a couple of...”

“Fae?” Brian offered.

“I was going to say heathens, but yes, Fae.”

Wickham nodded enthusiastically. I was pretty sure there were tears in his eyes when he reached for Ivy’s hand. “I am sure of it, mate. Welcome to the family.”



WELCOME TO THE FAMILY. THE WORDS ECHOED OVER AND OVER in my head.

I had refused to kick the boys out of their room and insisted Griffon and I were fine sleeping on the dining room floor. The parlor was already being used at night by Alwyn and Rinky, who had married in my absence.

Welcome to the family.

Yes, we were an odd collection of humans, witches, and now Fae. But a family we still were. And knowing we were all back under the same roof, for the moment, was its own kind of magic. It was easy to forget that there was someone powerful out there, hunting us and planning to destroy the world we knew.

Wickham had insisted we put off talking shop until tomorrow, but I could tell something was seriously wrong.

When I'd reached for Flann's thoughts during dinner, I'd teased, *You'll explain later?*

Not if I can help it, he'd teased, then sent me a reassuring wink that was anything but reassuring.

Come on. Something's wrong. Can't you give me a hint?

It's Orion. He found where Wickham was keeping the Naming Powers.

He took them?

Not all. You'll find out tomorrow.

Yes. Trouble tomorrow, contentment tonight, I thought, as I wobbled on the tightwire between awake and asleep. If Griffon would just stop kissing the back of my shoulder...

"Lennon?"

"Mmm?"

"Is it cold, out in space?"

I froze, weighed my options, and answered as coolly as I could. "I couldn't tell. We were in some sort of protective bubble. It surrounded us long before we reached the edge of the atmosphere." I rolled away from him, so I could face the music.

He was leaning on his elbow, holding his head, obviously happy I was ready to confess, but not at all pleased at what I was confessing. "Why didn't Kivi explain this protective bubble before?"

"I don't think she knew."

His nostrils flared and I could see him gearing up for a lecture about taking risks.

In a preemptive move, I reached out and laid a hand on his chest. "Listen. We're not dealing with a logical being. She's an animal, and she lives on instinct—magical instinct that has been guiding us all through this learning phase. I can tell when she's only wishful thinking as opposed to following some sense of purpose. And that purpose is what we're after, right?"

He nodded, then sighed. “Go ahead. Tell me the rest. Just where were you when you had to flee a dark dragon?”

I started from the beginning and left nothing out, even when he winced at the idea of Kivi calling that other place home. I placated him by swearing I had no intention of going there again.

“Interesting.” He toyed with a tie on the stretch of quilt between us. “The Pleiades features prominently in very old lore. If we ever find *The Queevna* again, we’ll have to ask them about it.” He suddenly yawned and stretched and tugged on me until I scooted close. “Long day. We need sleep.”

“Sleep?”

“Yes, sleep.”



AFTER BREAKFAST, THE OTHERS SAT IN WHILE WICKHAM TOLD Griffon and me that most of the Naming Powers had been stolen from the tunnel between Muirsglen and Castle Ross. He explained how Orion could have learned about the tunnel from any of the Muirs he’d tortured. And even if the Fae hadn’t sensed the powers through the porous bottoms of the jars, Orion could have guessed it was Wickham’s hiding place.

“The only powers still in our possession are Persi’s and Fallon’s. Persi warned me not to keep all our eggs in one basket, so I wrapped the Hope jar in an old, oiled skin and hid it inside a tomb. If anythin’ happens to me, one of the Rosses can get ye to it. They’ll know the tomb I’m talkin’ about.”

Wickham and Persi exchanged a long look, then he took my hands in his and demanded my full attention.

“If anythin’ happens to Persi—if we suddenly cannae find her, if there is a chance Orion has taken her, I want ye to get to the castle and take that last jar far, far away. Dinnae bury it in the earth. We must keep it from Orion no matter what the cost.”

I stared deep into his eyes and willed him to believe me. “I can do that.”

He smiled, nodded once. “I believe ye can.”

I realized Griffon wasn’t happy to hear that, but when Wickham released my hands, Griffon was watching the man with a new appreciation. Of course, there was no way Wickham could have known that I was capable of flying to another planet, but maybe the old Grandfather had given him some sort of hint. Or maybe that white mist inside him knew things...

It was more plausible that Wickham had taken a peek into my recent memories, but if he had, I didn’t want to know.

Our next logical move was to find *The Queevna*. If there was a way to thwart Orion now, they might just know a way to get the Naming Powers away from Orion. Or at least a way to end this war with a stalemate.

Griffon interrupted the conversation to announce that we would have our wedding before we hunted anyone, which sent the household into chaos. Everly said we’d need two weeks to pull it off. Griffon refused to hear it.

“Two days,” he said. “And that’s being generous. If I had my way, we’d head to St. Mary’s this morning.”

Everly gasped, then shook her head. “Five days.”

“Two.”

“All right,” she said. “Four days.”

“Two.”

And that’s how Griffon became her least favorite member of the family.

SATIN AND PLAID

Urban and Kitch took Griffon into town to speak with Father Donne while Everly, Persi, and I went shopping for a wedding dress. “If we have time for nothing else,” Everly said, “you’ll at least have a gown to help you remember the day.”

Alwyn started planning a supper to follow the ceremony. Wickham and Ivy were given a list of dresses and things to salvage from abandoned closets at Hope House. The Irishmen and Wickham’s boys were enlisted in Rinky’s army, to “red up the house” and help her do a little decorating.

I tried to convince them all a fuss wasn’t necessary, but I got the same reaction from both the men and the women—they’d roll their eyes and walk away.

In town, we three women seemed amusing to the local purveyors of wedding gowns. We hit four shops and the question was always the same. *Why would ye American tourists be shoppin’ for weddin’ dresses in the Highlands?*

The dress I met and fell in love with had a name—Jess. I could hardly believe it was me in the mirror, and the saleswoman had to move fast to catch my tears before they spilled on the fabric. It was made of flowy, off-white satin and sat off my shoulders, which left plenty of space for my Blunt Collarbone haircut to lay where it was supposed to, against my collarbones. It also showed off my fancy armband, which made me feel that Kivi was with me in some way.

Instead of a veil, Everly talked me into a delicate and narrow tiara which was almost lost in my hair.

“It only matters that Griffon will see it,” she said. “But I’ll have Macklyn add a few more diamonds.” Macklyn McFie, the family gemologist who would be sad to learn that Hank was no more.

I was long past arguing for a simple ceremony. My dress was perfect—more breathtaking than I’d ever imagined. So, Everly was right. What else mattered?

Other than the groom, of course, who was equally perfect and breathtaking.

In the evening, we went to a restaurant to meet with Dezi McHenish, one of the women who had first decorated Hope House, to talk about my bouquet. With her help, I chose white ranunculus symbolizing charm and attraction. Star of Bethlehem for honesty. Seeded eucalyptus represented protection, and the tiny sage-green succulents I adored—they were common in Wyoming—were a symbol of timelessness.

When we returned to the house late that evening, Griffon pretended to be moved by my choices, but he was just like the rest of the men in the house. Flowers were flowers. I hoped he’d have a stronger reaction to the dress.

Wickham let us know that Orion had been at Hope House, but the only things he’d disturbed were a section of the rear wall and a chess board inside. “I’ll hire the wall to be repaired, to keep the place from bein’ ransacked, but Hope House is officially off limits.”

I spent the following day, Thursday, in the kitchen, mostly getting in Alwyn’s way. Everyone else was seeing to finishing touches, and Griffon went home to Bridie’s. If there was no trouble, he planned to bring her and Archer back the following day, for the wedding. If there was trouble, he’d come back alone, on time. He promised.

We would spend the night apart, which seemed to please everyone...but me.



AS SLOW AS THURSDAY PASSED, FRIDAY MORE THAN MADE UP for it. Breakfast was served in the kitchen, so no one would disturb me. When I finally woke, I worried I was late for something and felt that way all day long, even though there was nothing on my schedule but getting dressed and getting married.

Finally, when I was sitting in a chair letting Everly do my hair and makeup, I felt caught up. The tiara weighed twice as much as it had the day before, and Everly's idea of a few diamonds would have made a rich man wince. It was still delicate and thin, but the shine of the stones ensured more than just Griffon would notice it.

The two of us were the last to get to the church and I was secreted through a back door so the groom wouldn't see me. It was unnecessary and silly, but it also made me feel special in a way I couldn't describe. I only hoped my grandmother was looking down from Heaven, having a good laugh, and crying her eyes out.

With forty-five minutes before the ceremony, I was left alone in a room barely big enough to hold my dress. My bouquet sat in a holder until Wickham came to collect me. I'd already held it in front of the mirror for a mental picture. Now all I could do was wait.

I heard voices in the next room and tried to make out what they were saying. It sounded like Persi and Archer, arguing. But since the two of them didn't really know each other, I figured I was wrong. When the argument continued, I finally cracked my door open and sat back on my stool. If it was two priests, one with a higher pitched voice, I could stop guessing.

"What do you mean, that's all that matters?" It was Persi all right, which meant it was probably Archer too. *"She deserves to know."*

I didn't move. I didn't want them knowing I was there, listening. Since I was the only "she" they had in common, I

was invested in the conversation.

“I shouldn’t have told ye, but I cannae take it back. Can ye nae be content with the fact that he loves her?”

“No. She’ll be mortified if she thinks fairies insisted on this wedding.” Persi lowered her voice. *“Any idea what someone with a dragon might do if upset?”*

“Yet another reason ye should keep yer gob shut, woman.”

“Yeah, go ahead. Call me woman just one more time...”

“What? Ye’ll sic yer man on me? Go ahead.”

Zing! A blade had left its scabbard. I knew I should speak up and break up the fight, but I was busy trying to hold my heart together. Though I was numb, I had a vague thought—I didn’t want blood spilled at my wedding any more than I wanted a rapist in my honeymoon cabin.

Now I had to decide if I wanted a wedding at all.

After a long silence, Archer spoke quietly. *“He must bind her to him in any way he can. If we’re lucky, he’ll plant a babe in her belly. Anything to keep her loyal. Anything to circumvent what Moire saw. All our lives depend upon it, Persephone. That includes yours, mine, Lennon’s, Griffon’s. It includes every life out there. My ma. That includes yer man’s.”*

I could hear them breathing heavily, then the swish of cloth and the click of fast-moving heels filled the hallway and faded, followed by a slower set of boots, leaving me alone again in the quiet.

I didn’t dare think. I could barely breathe. I kept clinging to three little words.

He loves her...

He loves her...

He loves her; so it shouldn’t matter that he didn’t intend to marry her?

He’d claimed me. Was that the Fae equivalent? So a civil, mortal marriage was redundant, but was it meaningless? Just a way to reinforce sentiment on my part?

No. What I really wanted to know was how much he'd protested. Had it taken all of Christmas Day to convince him? Had the ring honestly belonged to his real mother?

I stared at my hand. The piece was very old. Very, very old. But it didn't matter if he'd been telling the truth about the ring. The point was, it wasn't the universe tearing us apart this time, it was Griffon.

I glanced at my bouquet. The green center points of the Star of Bethlehem blossoms stood out against the white of the ranunculus. *Honesty. Honesty. Honesty.* And in the depths, the tiny green berries of the seeded eucalyptus symbolized *protection...*

So, every life out there depended upon my loyalty to Griffon. If I hadn't cracked that door open, I would have happily gone along, oblivious to the machinations that brought me here. A baby wouldn't have made a difference because a baby was impossible. And now, knowing the wedding was someone else's idea, not Griffon's, did it mean I would turn on him? Did it diminish my feelings for him?

This betrayal was a knife in my chest, the handle sticking out. It was hard to look away, but I had to. The clock was ticking down.

For the sake of everyone I loved sitting in the pews, waiting for me to walk down the aisle, I would go through with the ceremony. It wasn't to save my pride or Griffon's. I would call it off if it would do any good. But it wouldn't. I had to think about my friends. And Bridie. And yes, I had to protect Griffon, despite the fact that he couldn't be honest with me.

I'd go through with it. I'd play along. I would never let anyone know what I'd heard.



I JUMPED WHEN SOMEONE KNOCKED ON THE DOOR AND EASED it open. It was Wickham. "Are ye ready, love?"

I took a deep breath into my lungs and let it seep out. “Ready.”

His eyes widened. “Somethin’s amiss?”

“No. Just nerves. I’ve been sitting back here a while. Started to think you forgot about me.” I forced a smile.

He didn’t buy it. He eased through the door and closed it behind him. “What is it, Lennon? Second thoughts?” He studied my eyes. “Somethin’ more serious, I think.”

I grasped for anything that might appease him. “I’m just a little old to be a bride.”

He chuckled. “Not so. I reckon, for a DeNoy, ye’re a babe yet. Barely out of nappies.”

My smile turned genuine, and he relaxed.

“Shall we go? Or would ye like to make him sweat a mite longer?”

“Is he sweating?”

“We forced him into a proper wool kilt with full regalia. The whole nine yards. Winter weight. Of course he’s sweatin’.”



WHEN WICKHAM AND I PAUSED AT THE BACK OF THE AISLE, someone signaled the organist and the wedding march began. I’d never planned a wedding, so I couldn’t say the moment lived up to my expectations—I didn’t have any. But to keep up the farce, I had to look happy, so I concentrated on the fact that my dress was perfect. I would never in my life look as good as I did at that moment. And I would never have such a handsome man waiting at the end of the long walk.

Griffon Carew was about to be mine...whether he liked it or not.

At the far end of the aisle, a stranger in a Jacobite kilt turned to face us. The face was Griffon’s. The body was his, as

was the mouth that fell open at the first sight of my dress. The guests sighed.

As was expected, I exchanged nods and smiles with everyone we passed until I finally had to face the man who didn't want to marry me.

No mussed hair this morning. He looked perfect. When our gazes locked, his eyes crinkled. He lifted a finger to catch a tear.

Nice touch.

My chest hurt like someone had punched through and pulled out my heart, leaving a gaping, weeping wound. I was going to be sick, and I hadn't reached my mark! How would I last the whole ceremony?

Wickham took one look at my face and stopped. With only a few steps left, he refused to hand me over. Griffon looked from me to Wickham and back again, trying to figure out what was going on.

Father Donne waited patiently, all smiles.

Archer, the best man, looked like his head might spin on his shoulders if I didn't keep moving. He gave his brother a shove from behind, and Griffon closed the distance and took the one hand available to him.

"Griffon?"

"Lennon, what is it, pet? What's wrong?"

I forced up my chin and searched his eyes. *This* was the man I loved. He couldn't have betrayed me...but he had.

He grasped my hand to his chest and pressed it against the plaid sash over his heart. "Tell me what's wrong, my love. None of this matters. Whatever it is, we can deal with it together. Trust me."

Trust me.

It was the last straw. Tears leaked from my eyes and Wickham finally let go of me. Griffon grabbed my freed hand and waited. I couldn't tell which of us was shaking, him or me.

“Griffon,” I said quietly, “I need to ask you something.”

HOW TO RUIN A PERFECT DRESS

They found me in a field of flowers...in Fairy.

When I'd first popped into the meadow, I'd lost my footing trying not to step on the little blue buggers shifting close to the ground. As I fell, I aimed my wide, satin-covered arse at a section of tall grass I hoped didn't have faces.

I was down. The world stopped spinning. No need for Dramamine. But I would have killed for a tissue. My eyes ached and I put my hands over them, so the flowers wouldn't see how puffy they were. A thousand prying eyes weren't going to help me at the moment.

Something nudged my ankle. An orchid-colored blossom smiled sweetly and held out a couple of thick leaves she'd obviously torn from the bottom of her own stem. She demonstrated by putting them over her own eyes, then held them out to me again.

I accepted them. "Thank you."

She pointed to my eyes and waited, frowning gently. She wanted to know why I was crying.

I laughed and held out my hands. "Doesn't the dress say it all?"

"Weddin' didnae go as planned, Miss Morgan?"

I turned my head so fast that heat shot up a muscle in my neck. Standing at the edge of the meadow was the woman I'd called Feathers at Daphne's wake. This time, her feathers were

pink and blue and just as long as the originals. Her dress was iridescent, like shiny ice, and reflected all the colors of the surrounding flowers. Her sleeves extended over her hands in points, making her arms look extra-long. And she waved one of those points at her short, dully dressed companion, shooing him away.

He ran a few steps and disappeared.

She smiled unpleasantly. “Auch, that isnae yer real name is it? Not Lucy...” She tapped her fingernails on her lips. “Lemon, is it?”

“Lennon, but you can call me DeNoy.”

“And ye admit it?” She had an ugly laugh that faded as her gaze raked over my dress. “No wonder Griffon left ye at the altar. Or was it someone else who couldnae stand the thought of beddin’ a beastie?”

A smile spread across my face. She didn’t have a clue what a DeNoy was. And she was only guessing about Griffon. Hoping.

“There you go again, Lettuce,” I said, “speaking of things you don’t understand.”

Her jaw popped. “Letitia.”

Griffon had shut her up the same way at the wake, and she didn’t like it any better this time. But she cheered instantly when Orion appeared beside her, her short dull friend at his side. The woman’s expressive eyes danced with delight while she waited for me to realize my fate. When I greeted her “king” with just a lift of my chin, her mouth fell open.

Orion’s smile was genuine. “Delighted to see you again, my dear.”

Feathers turned to him, thinking he was talking to her. Again, her face fell.

“Hello,” I said, and waved a few fingers.

“Comfy?”

I shrugged my bare shoulder. “I was hoping for some privacy. I’m not in the mood for company, obviously.”

Letitia couldn’t get her jaw off the ground. Orion bit his lip, trying not to smile too big. But I knew how happy he was to see me. He thought he’d won the lottery. But he was wrong.

“How do you know this place?”

“Griffon brought me here. But I won’t talk about him. It’s the only place in Fairy I knew, except for your empty throne room. And that’s too cold.”

“Too cold? For a DeNoy?”

I laughed, busted. “You’re right. It wouldn’t be too cold now.”

“So, when you were here before, you—”

“Unlocked. Yes. I *was*.” I turned slightly so he got a good look at my armband.

Orion’s eyes turned black, proving he was furious I’d been able to fool him. But his smile lingered. “So. Tell me. Is my court truly too small?”

He was asking how big my dragon was. Since it was only a matter of time before he saw her, I shook my head. “Turns out, it was just about right.”

He inclined his head. “Then I extend an invitation to you both, as soon as you have finished moping.”

“I’m not moping. I just... Okay, I was moping. But I did intend to find you.”

“Rather convenient, since I’ve been searching the world for Lennon Todd. But do tell me what I can do for you. And then I’ll finally have that chance to explain what *you* can do for *me*.”

“Deal,” I said, then glanced at Feathers. “Don’t let us keep you...”

Orion waved his hand and she disappeared. I nodded at the short guy and Orion got rid of him too.

I patted the grass beside me. “Wanna sit?”

“I’d rather not.”

“Suit yourself. I wanted to find you because I really believe I can talk you out of ending the world.”

“Ending the world?” He looked genuinely confused. “Who told you I would end the world? Your witch friends?”

“Well, The Covenant said—”

“The Covenant said I would become God. Not quite the same thing, is it?”

“I guess that depends on what you decide to do with your power.”

“Oh, Lennon. You need to put your sulking behind you and come with me. We have much to discuss.” He glanced at the sky and his eyes shifted back to green. “But first, maybe you could demonstrate your good will, as it were...”

“And prove I’m no longer unlocked?”

“Here, where there is plenty of space, just in case.”

I called to Kivi.

You are safe?

I am safe. But please, only hover. We will not let him see what we can do.

I got to my feet and felt Kivi appear behind me, though I didn’t bother to look. “Satisfied?”

He scowled. “She is only spirit?”

“Unless I wish otherwise.”

His attention was torn between studying my face and staring at my dragon. For my own safety, I had to be honest.

“Look, buddy. I know for a fact that you would steal my dragon and kill me if you could. But you can’t. I’m the last of the DeNoy, and without me, there is no dragon.” Then I took a stab in the dark. “Without me, there is no...*transportation home.*”

He was genuinely taken aback by my frankness, and he opened his mouth to respond, but eventually shut it again. Instead, he offered his hand and helped guide me out of the thick growth of the meadow. One of the pink cosmos blossoms caught my eye and shook her little head, warning me not to go with him. I could only smile back.

I was sure many in Fairy would feel the same, as did some in the mortal realm. They just didn't understand. I had a world—maybe two—to save.

REFORMING THE DEVIL

Orion took my hand and popped us into the now-populated throne room, inside the arch at the back. I didn't invite Kivi to join us, so she would fade and go to wherever it was she retreated when I didn't need her. He held my hand high while he led me through the parting crowd to the throne and mini throne at the front of the room, with their high backs to the purple universe. He enjoyed making an entrance.

My dramatic dress and glittering tiara were worthy of the overdressed crowd. I just hoped my butt wasn't covered with grass stains as I passed Feathers near the front. And if she was jealous when Griffon called me his other half, it was nothing compared to her reaction when Orion insisted I take the second throne. I thought she was going to have a stroke. But then, Fae didn't have strokes...

A man with a ledger came forward to consult privately with Orion. They spoke so low I couldn't catch a word of it. But when the man stepped away, Feathers was there to hiss in Orion's ear. She was far too emotional to control herself, and I heard her easily.

"For my reward, sire, I want Griffon Carew. Nothing else."

Orion shook his curls. "Impossible. There will be little left of him, I think, when this is finished." He waved her away, then checked my reaction.

"I don't want him dead, you know."

"We shall see how you feel when the time comes."

He raised his hand, which cued the start of music played by an orchestra I couldn't see. The crowd took it as a signal their attention was no longer needed, and they meandered away from us and began speaking amongst themselves.

"All right," I said. "Let's hear what you have planned... once you become God."

"The Naming Powers already in my possession are impressive," he said. "Surely you've witnessed at least a few of them before they came to be mine?"

"I have." My friends and I had also noticed how he'd been wreaking havoc all over the world with his corruptive powers of Vanity and War. At least, we hoped he was behind much of it. It was impossible to believe otherwise. Whole countries were falling apart, and civilization wouldn't last much longer if we—*if I*—couldn't stop him.

"Since you are familiar, then, is it so difficult to believe I want power for power's sake? What more could I want than to be God over the entire earth? Fae and Man."

"And witch."

He chuckled. "Oh, yes. We can't forget the witches. Imagine my surprise when I learned Wickham Muir is now the *Seanathair*. I didn't know that particular power could be passed, but of course, if Wickham took his head... And all this time, I'd been looking for my old friend Afi Cean More." He cocked his head and struck a pose now becoming familiar to me. I suspected he liked the move because it drew attention to his golden curls. "Of course, you knew this all along."

"I did."

"I should have taken you that day, at the police station, to discover all your secrets. It would have saved me a great deal of trouble."

I didn't bother pointing out how useless I'd been then, how little I'd known. Instead, I teased. "Oh, you've enjoyed the game, and you know it."

"True. And what fun we shall have now. Two Fae, negotiating the fate of the world."

“So you admit we don’t want the same future.”

He bit his lips together. His eyes flashed hazel, then back to green.

I chuckled. “If we were keeping score, I would say that’s one point to me.”



PERSI KNOCKED ON THE DOOR TO THE BEDROOM THE BOYS HAD given up for Bridie.

“Come away, then.”

She pushed it open and found Griffon’s sweet mother sorting and folding little boy’s clothes in the dresser drawers.

“Never had children of my own,” Bridie said, without looking to see who had joined her. “My, but their clothes are weee.”

“Bridie?”

She finally turned.

“We’re having trouble...with Griffon. Wickham asked that you come down.”

Without another word, the woman rushed past Persi and preceded her down the stairs.

“Kitchen,” Persi said, as they neared the bottom step.

Bridie turned right and right again, then burst into the kitchen demanding, “Where’s my laddie?”

Cabinet doors hung askew. Some were missing. Some were still in place but sections had been sheared off by Griffon’s wings. Once his fit had started, they’d left him alone in the room until the demolition ended. Now, he sat on a kitchen chair. Urban had produced a white cable knit sweater and forced it over Griffon’s head. Wickham and Kitch had used half a roll of duct tape to secure it in place, hoping to keep his wings from unfurling again, despite Griffon’s slurred warning that it wouldn’t work.

Finally, Wickham had looked to higher powers. “Fetch his mother.”

“My poor son,” Bridie crooned, and pulled Griffon’s head against her bosom.

Wickham had been inspired. There was no chance the Fae would let loose those giant razor blades with his mother’s arms wrapped around him.

Bridie scowled around the room, searching faces. “Which bumpot spoke ‘er name?”

Urban dropped his chin and raised his hand. She snorted at him, then caught Wickham’s attention. “Pop us upstairs, will ye?” She spoke quietly, as if her wild-eyed child were napping. “I’ll watch ‘im whilst he sleeps it off.”

Wickham hesitated. “Do we really want him sober?”

“Unless ye prefer the rest of the hoos to look like this.”

The three of them disappeared, and Persi smirked. “Lesson learned. A bird that size needs a bigger cage.”

Urban shook his head. “A bird like that needs clipping.”

Kitch produced five whisky glasses and poured two fingers in each. “I hope ye’re not deludin’ yerselves,” he said, as he passed glasses to Urban, Alwyn, and Flann. “We might none of us survive what’s comin’.”

Persi took the last glass from him. “Are you kidding? We may not need to worry. We probably won’t survive Griffon.”

A DEAF GONDOLIER

Orion wasn't offended when I refused to take food or drink from him, even when he offered an American cheeseburger and fries. Apparently, the lack of trust in Fairy was a common thing. So instead, we went to the mortal realm to share a meal—or rather, I had a meal and he watched me eat. Maybe God-wannabes didn't consume real food.

I requested somewhere sunny. He popped us to Florence, Italy where my face and shoulders gulped up the vitamin D like a starving man. We negotiated over my plate of Michelin star pasta and a bottle of water I insisted on opening myself.

“I need a promise from you,” I said, after our waiter walked away.

“What promise?”

“That you will not use any of your current powers on me. If I think I'm being manipulated, Kivi and I will leave and not come back. And yes, I know what to look for. You used them on me last time.”

“Kivi?”

“My dragon, Jalokivi.”

“Fine. I will not use my powers on you, knowingly.”

“Oh, I'm sure you'll know.”

He dropped the innocent face and a little of his beauty fell away as well, like the lighting suddenly went bad. He was still

handsome but I was able to look at him head on and still think normally.

“Fine. No powers. And you promise not to run off without notice. If you have concerns, you must tell me. We will... renegotiate.”

I thought about it for a minute, tried to find a trick in his wording. He hadn't said I could never leave, just that I needed to give him notice, but I had to clarify. “As long as I am able to leave whenever I want, you have a deal.”

He nodded, reluctantly, and stretched his hand over the table. “You may leave whenever you want, as long as you first explain why.” We shook. “Deal.”

I grinned and dug into my dinner. “I feel better already.”

“And why do I feel as though I have lost another point?”

“Because you have.”



AFTER SUPPER, HE TOOK ME TO VENICE WHERE WE CLIMBED into a gondola whose gondolier didn't speak English. “So we won't be overheard,” Orion explained. He thought it would be appropriate for us to have a view of the stars while he laid out his case. Privately, I thought it was a great idea to have quick access to my dragon if I needed her.

Our gondolier stood on a platform behind our red-cushioned, slightly reclined seats, and when we were comfortable, he pushed off. Our shoulders touched, but I reminded myself there were layers of gold robes between us.

Everywhere we went, people took one look at my dress and his gold robes and assumed we were newlyweds. In Italy, that meant whole crowds had no problem demanding we kiss. Each time it happened, however, I would turn my head at the last second and Orion would only skim my cheek with his lips. He didn't act disappointed, seemed to understand I wasn't interested in more.

“Too early for stars,” I said.

“There will be plenty of time. Now,” he patted my forearm. “Where was I...before you fled with your friends?”

“All I remember is that you were in love with someone who was stolen from you, and you wanted my help to get her back.” I omitted the part about not believing a word of it. “I don’t know why you’d need to be a god in order to do that, but —”

“If you are to have any hope of understanding me, I must start at the beginning, which might be difficult for you to hear.”

“All right. Shoot.”

“Very well. A very long time ago, in a place we call Hestia, our king had two sons, Gloir and Afi.”

Gloir and the Grandfather were brothers?

“The residents there worshipped two jealous gods who were constantly at war with each other. And when people began dying, infected with some illness no one could cure, the king called upon the kinder god to save his people. But the kinder god did not respond. Soon, the king’s sons fell ill, and with no alternative, he desperately called on the more severe god for help, and the severe god answered.

“A bargain was struck. For a favor to be named in the future, the god agreed to save Hestia’s inhabitants by making them immortal. The king accepted. All of Hestia rejoiced. But in no time at all, the severe god demanded his favor. The king was ordered to sacrifice his two sons.

“Now, as you know, dealing with our kind requires... precision of language.”

I shivered. “Oh, I’m aware.”

Orion continued. “So, the king quickly agreed before the god could clarify. He volunteered to send his sons away, sacrificing the chance to see them again, but ensuring his heirs would survive.

“Unhappy with the king’s ingenuity, the god created the DeNoy, who would transport the sons away from Hestia. And he declared that, should either son return, the blessing of immortality would be lost. As my parents told it, they were a part of the contingent sent away with the two sons, the contingent that would thenceforth be known as the Fae. All immortal now, they traveled to Earth and enjoyed dominion over the resident mortals until the realms were separated, for the most part, and balance was achieved.

“Now, I must take you back, before the plague hit Hestia. Gloir and Afi had fallen in love with the same woman—Moire, a young prophetess who had tried to warn the king of the eminent disaster. Moire confided to the queen that she could not choose between the brothers, and she begged the mother to choose for her. The queen refused.

“Moire, too, fell ill with the others, but immortality not only saved her, it enhanced her powers. When plans were made to send the princes away, she foresaw that Gloir would become King of the Hestian Fae, and both brothers agreed she should be his Queen. Thus, her choice was made for her.

“The king bestowed upon Gloir the Naming Powers of Earth. For his selflessness, Afi was promised a position of power as well. Moire had foreseen a race of Earthmen set apart, who would have powers akin to the Hestians, and Gloir declared his brother would be their *Seanathair*.

“The contingent consisted of both High and Lesser Fae. At Moire’s insistence, one of the first acts was to create Moire’s Embrace, a place where the spirits of deceased High Fae could dwell indefinitely, until they could be returned to Hestia to live again. Of course, the place has evolved since then...but I mustn’t stray from my story.

“Once here, our people settled on the most beautiful isle of the sea. Gloir and Moire began their reign while Afi went off to sort out the native folk. The Fae thrived, and the queen bore seven daughters, all beautiful and intelligent, all with differing talents. And life was good.”

Orion paused to check my reaction to his tall tale. I considered telling him it was all easy for me to believe since I'd already seen Hestia. But I chose to keep that little tidbit in my back pocket in case it might make a difference later.

“Shall I go on?”

“Yes, please.”

He settled back and gestured to the sky. “Because of our immortality, procreation is random and unpredictable. But during this time of thriving, I entered the world. While ambition was considered a vice in Hestia, I was born with an abundance. I grew up with the king's daughters, always believing I would marry one of them and someday have Gloir's throne. After all, immortality only goes so far. Accidents happen. Even High Fae are killed from time to time.

“Once I matured, I set out to woo the eldest daughter, Mercail. But Mercail saw my attention as ambition. Like her father, she viewed the attribute as a vice and rejected me.

“Uncowed, I moved on to the next sister, Thessa. She was wild, quick to love, and quick to move on. She dismissed me as soon as another Fae caught her attention, and again, I was left empty-handed.

“Gilliam, the most docile of all the king's daughters, became my next pursuit. Like her sister Thessa, she was full of trust and loved easily. But unlike her other sisters, she had a temper that could devastate. And when she found she was only my third choice, she was unforgiving. And for a time, I exiled myself for fear of her retribution.

“When I returned a century later, I bore a different face and brought a new tactic. I took my time, watched from afar, and came to Deona as one who appreciated her talents. And like all artists, she was easily flattered. The day before our planned union, I had a foolish notion that I should confess who I was and thus earn, with my honesty, an added measure of her trust. But I was wrong and lost her heart completely. When she vowed to destroy me, I was forced to flee again.

“This miscreant the sisters called Ambition was long forgotten when a creature of light and beauty arrived in Fairy. With hair of gold and a face like a Greek god, he sought out Palida. There was no time for wooing—she recognized me clearly. Perhaps she’d been expecting me. In any case, I was promptly banished.

“But alas, Ambition did not leave empty-handed. I charmed Neia and took her with me. At that time, she was far too young to take to wife, however, so I kept her on a solitary island and waited for her to mature. But Neia remained young, stubbornly so. And she never gave up hope that her father, the king, would come for her.

“Decades passed. I finally returned her to Fairy, intending to slip out again with no one the wiser.

“After leaving the sleeping Neia at the door to the throne chamber, I hurried away in the dark. In my hopeless state, I found a boat and let it take me where it would. Rocked by the waves, I fell asleep. When I awoke, I had grounded on a pebbled beach that stretched to eternity. I walked along the shore for what seemed like days before I came across a young woman surviving on her own—a woman who did not speak.

“I was enchanted, all but forgot my ambitions, and fell in love. I was renewed.

“One day, a boat appeared on the horizon and we hid. As we watched the king’s guard disembark, she finally spoke. Her name was Rowena. She’d been sent away for her own safety, to keep her from Ambition, a man who’d stolen her sister and was expected to come after her. And if the guard was there to take her home again, it must mean Ambition had been thwarted.

“Tearfully, regretfully, she bid me goodbye and left me to my own devices.” Orion looked away, then, and I was almost convinced he had a heart.

“I’m sorry.”

He shook his head, smiled, and continued. “I deliberated for a long time, whether to return to court or seek another life.

In the end, I chose Rowena. Ambition wasn't something that could be cured, only neglected for a time. And now that the woman I loved was also the last of the king's daughters, I believed I could have everything I wanted. If I returned to court and Rowena declared her love for me, the king would have no choice but to approve our union. Or so I thought.

“Gloir denied us. But stubbornly, I returned each new moon to plead my case. Powerless to sway her father, Rowena silently looked on. Each visit, her heart grew more distant. Tears no longer filled her eyes. She had lost hope.

“One final time, I returned when I wasn't expected. I held a blade to the king's throat and demanded he hand over his powers, for if I controlled those powers, the throne would be mine...as would Rowena.

“Gloir only laughed. Before I could remove his head, the guards came to his rescue. And as they led me away, he confessed he had divided his powers long ago and gave a portion to each of his daughters. The only power left to him was that of Beauty, which he kept to prevent any of those daughters from succumbing to Vanity.”

I could tell Orion's memory of it was still alive enough to rile his emotions, because his irises were black again. And for a long time, he glared at the sky like it was somehow responsible. Eventually, he sighed and remembered he wasn't alone in that gondola.

“Much of the rest you know because of The Covenant,” he said. “I was incarcerated for a time, but Gloir worried I would escape and come after his family—which I had vowed to do. So he and his brother carved out a section of Hell for me and created the contract to seal me inside. My only view would be of Orion, the one who hunted in vain, who would forever pursue the seven daughters of Atlas and never succeed. A bedtime story for eternity. A nightly torture supplied by the universe itself.

“Gloir reclaimed The Naming Powers and hid them among those set apart—Afi's witches. And Moire and her seven daughters were sent back to Hestia for their safety. You see,

Moire prophesied many things. Among them, she saw that I would, one day, escape. The rest of her foretellings are known only to *The Queevna*.

“This nonsense about the end of the world is just hysteria caused by the wording of the contract. It reads, *That these powers can never be reunited...to the probable destruction... and sorrow of all*. But all I want is justice. I want Rowena back. And I will exact revenge. But not on the entire world.” He tapped me under the chin. “And you should want the same. Your race was nearly eliminated for the sake of Gloir’s family. You’re lucky you survived.”

I nodded, vaguely, committing to nothing. I knew how lucky I was. After all, I thought my own friends would have to kill me...

“One day, the walls of my prison vanished. I knew The Covenant had been broken, which could only mean that one of those set apart had given their power to another. I went directly to the throne room, much to Gloir’s surprise. I took his head and I took his one power, then went in search of the other seven and the DeNoy I would need to return to Hestia.

“Imagine my surprise when I was told there were no DeNoy left, and I would have to settle for revenge only and abandon hope for justice.”

“Then, one day, I heard Colm Mulrooney speak of a woman with an odd haircut, staying with the Carew brothers. I was convinced she could lead me to the witches I sought... You know the rest.”

I believed all of it. Orion hadn’t tried to paint himself as some noble soul that deserved my pity. He hadn’t tried to convince me there was anything truly redeemable in the choices he’d made. And he hadn’t used any of his powers to sway my opinion of him.

For a long time, we sat and stared at the darkening sky and watched stars struggle to be seen. There was a rhythm to the trickle of water against water each time the boatman lifted his oar and put it down again. The music of voices and laughter and accordions sounded far above us as we slipped, quiet as

thieves, below their notice. We were interlopers in a city that wasn't ours, in a realm that wasn't ours. And I had a sudden urge to go where I belonged.

“Orion?”

“Yes?”

“Let me treat you to a dragon ride.”

SHOWING MY CARDS

*I*f Orion hadn't known the difference between a locked and unlocked DeNoy, he sure didn't know how things worked between Kivi and I. So when I called her to me, I tried to make it a little more complicated than it was. For my own safety, he needed to believe that he couldn't just chop off my arm and use it to make my dragon whole. Nor could he call her himself.

The gondolier pulled up against a low dock and Orion helped me climb out. Then we wandered through a maze of sidewalks until we found a large open space without an Italian in sight.

Kivi.

She hesitated. *Just hover?*

No. I feel like riding.

With him?

With him. Play nice. It's just a ride. A little taste of reciprocity.

When Kivi appeared, she couldn't hide her distrust, but I figured a show of honesty was a good thing.

Press your head to mine, close your eyes, and pretend this is more complicated than it is.

She did as I asked and was able to hold off becoming solid until after we'd finished bonding.

First thing she did was hiss.

Orion took a small step back, then chuckled. “So this was the hissing I heard at the wake.”

“Yes. It was here, communicating through my *cloch realta*.”

His eyes lit up. “There were more of them, in a box—”

“I know. But they’re gone now. I released the dragon spirits inside them and the stones dissolved.”

“You’ve been a busy girl.”

“You have no idea.”

“So where are these spirits now?”

I shrugged and pointed to the sky. “Flown the coop.”

He didn’t try to hide his disappointment. “Will your dragon allow me to ride her?”

“I guess we’ll see.” I laughed and stepped onto Kivi’s foot. She lifted me to her shoulders and then put her foot down in front of Orion. “I think that’s a yes.”

He wobbled just a little, but he kept his balance as she lifted him. I was already seated and secure when he reached for me, then jumped on behind me. He made no sound as the saddle slipped under his butt and clamped around his thighs. But once we were aloft, he breathed the word, “Perfection,” next to my ear.

A shiver ran through me and he laughed. His hands, wrapped around my midsection, took on a different feel, and I panicked. I couldn’t welcome his physical attention and I couldn’t pretend otherwise. So I gently took one of his hands and moved it to a ridged handhold. He found the other one on his own.

“Apologies,” he said near my ear. But this time, his voice was loud, not seductive in the least.

Obviously, he couldn’t know how relieved I was. In the last month, I’d been faced with simple and profound kindness in the person of Jamie Godstone and the other extreme from Timo Ahonen. At the moment, Orion was beating out Timo for

most evil, though he was currently pretending to be reasonable. I was a big fan of reasonable.

I'd seen Orion's vicious cruelty unleashed on the streets—and backyards—of Muirsglen, and I'd watched Everly bleed and Urban suffer because of him. That's what I kept in mind at all times. But I was grateful for his current civility where I was concerned, even though I knew it grew from pure self-interest.

We flew south along the Italian coast with Kivi skimming her toes in the Adriatic Sea and dodging boat masts with little lights at the top. She gave an excellent impression of a rollercoaster, and even she took some pleasure in drawing out a few shouts of wonder from our dangerous guest. But I was careful to keep the ride brief, to leave him wanting more.

We stood on the seawall at Rimini and he watched, transfixed, as Kivi shook the sea salt from her wings and body.

I would prefer a good roll in the sand, she said.

I laughed and Orion sobered instantly. “What is it?”

I told him what she'd said, and he relaxed. He must have worried she was laughing at him. Apparently, the man really didn't like to be mocked.

“Listen,” I said. “I'm going to leave you now. But I'm going to propose something. You've admitted that you want revenge and you want justice. At the moment, you're guaranteed neither. I am willing...to offer you *one* if you're willing to walk away from the other.”

He smirked. “You can guarantee me justice if I'll walk away from revenge.”

“I can. If you leave this world and forget about us, I'll get you back to Hestia, where you can find Rowena and have your justice.”

He bit his lip and walked a slow, leisurely circle around me. “You're forgetting—I also want the other two Naming Powers.” His smile might have stopped anyone else's heart, but it had nothing to do with the power of Beauty and everything to do with a millennium of honing his charm. “I do love the idea of a complete set.”

“I’ll tell you what. You make the deal. I take you to Hestia. And when we get there, when you’ve proven your part of the bargain, I’ll give you one of them.”

He froze. “You can deliver one of the two?”

“I can. Those powers have no place in this world, let alone the mortal realm.” I dusted my hands together. “That’s it. That’s my offer. You sleep on it, or whatever. I’ll meet you back at the meadow tomorrow to...discuss it. But remember this—my offer won’t last forever.” I nodded toward Kivi and he turned to see her fading fast.

“Wait! How is it you can enter Fairy on your own?”

“After I realized I was Fae, it wasn’t difficult to figure out.”

He nodded, accepting my answer. “And just how, Miss Todd, can you prove you can fulfill your part of the bargain?”

“Because my dragon and I have been to Hestia. Only we can find the way.”

“Hestia.” He barely breathed the word. “You have no proof.”

I shrugged. “Did your parents ever tell you about a mountain with a dragon carved into the top? I guess maybe it was after their time.”

Wide-eyed, he gave a nod.

“We didn’t stick around long. I remember one big moon.”

Orion’s attention caught on my intricate armband as if seeing it for the first time. He reached out and stroked fingers along a gold tendril, but he never touched my skin. “I have never seen the like.”

“And you won’t again.” I headed toward Kivi, removing my slippers as I closed the distance. “It’s a part of me, by the way. Can’t be removed. It’s in my bones, in my blood. Without it, I will die. Without me, it will disappear into dust, just like those other *cloch realtas*. Get any big ideas about leaving me out of the picture and you’ll have nothing.”

Kivi stretched out her foot and when I stepped on it, she turned solid again. As she lifted me, I grinned over my shoulder.

“Think about my offer. We both get something we want. Besides, Gloir and Afi are dead. Haven’t you had enough revenge?”

“I have not!”

“Well, consider this. You and me, on the back of this dragon, on our way to Hestia.” I lifted my brows high. “What if that’s what Moire saw?”

Kivi took to the air and when I looked down, the sea wall was a long, blank, concrete line. Orion was gone.



DEALING WITH BIG BAD WAS EXHAUSTING.

I willed Kivi and I back to the meadow, then sent us to the only place I could think of where I might feel a little peace and maybe get some sleep. Hope House.

The place was deserted, but thankfully, the wards were gone and I could see it clearly from the road. Kivi took me over the wall and I let her go, assuring her I would be fine. As I walked up the drive, it was the manor now that was the ghost in my life. It was a massive box of shadows despite the layer of bright white snow surrounding it. Mine were the only footprints, so no one had been inside since the last snowfall.

I was truly alone, but I reminded myself that was what I wanted.

I was surprised to find the inside of the house even colder than the outside. My soft footfalls echoed like whispers as I moved through the hallway. I went directly to my room, and closed the door. I glanced at the closet but didn’t look inside for fear I might want to slip back into familiar clothes...and slip back into an earlier, simpler version of myself.

In another life, a fresh fire had been laid and forgotten in the fireplace. With just a thought, I lit it up, so the chill air could stop kissing my face.

A movement caught my eye and my heart jumped. But the other woman in white was just my reflection. My dress and hair looked like hell, like a bride who'd escaped her own wedding on the back of a motorcycle and went rolling in a meadow with someone other than the groom. I stripped out of the dress and laid it over the chair before I slipped between the frozen sheets, confident my armor would protect me if necessary.

But no one was coming. I'd stepped back in time for a good night's sleep, and no one would come looking for me here.

A few thoughts invaded my head as I tried to relax. I still didn't know why Afi Cean More allowed the contract to be broken. It wasn't like he could return to Hestia, or everyone there would become mortal again, vulnerable to who knows what.

Maybe he did it for revenge. After all, his brother got the girl...

OLD JEANS, NEW SNOW

Morning brought with it a fresh snowstorm.

Back in Wyoming, we'd look up at a sky like that and say, "It's too cold to snow." In response, it looked like Oxford, England was saying, "Hold my beer."

Though I was toasty warm on the inside, the surfaces of the kitchen were biting cold, and the metal handles didn't immediately warm to my touch. Someone had cleaned out the refrigerator and left nothing but a box of baking soda. I found enough dry and canned food in the pantry, though, to make what Urban would call a slap-dash breakfast.

I'd been wrong. Wearing things from my old wardrobe didn't make me regress—it made me feel grounded, reminded me who I was and what I'd been through. It made me want to celebrate that I'd survived it all. My body was intact, as was my mind. My heart and soul were another matter. I wouldn't be able to assess any damage to them until this was over.

And I had a new style. I wore a perfectly fitting pair of black jeans, a gray t-shirt, and an army green knitted vest. The pieces of shiny jewelry and my brown boots were nothing new. When I slipped on my black leather jacket, I didn't pull it over my left arm, but still zipped it up halfway. My arm and armband were free.

I caught my reflection in the glass door and smiled. "Not bad." Then I went outside, hit the release button on the gate, and stepped into the road before willing myself to Fairy. Old

habits died hard. And though the wards were gone, I hated the idea of pointing anyone back to Hope House.

I tried not to think about it, worried it might bring up my breakfast, but by the end of the day, the war would be over. One way or another, this was it.



IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE, I ARRIVED AT THE MEADOW—OR AT least, what had been the meadow. Every flower and blade of grass had been chopped and now lay on their sides, as if a monster-sized scythe had taken it all out in one swipe. No little faces looked up to greet me. The blue blossoms that usually ran underfoot were just flashes of color under the pile.

I sighed. “Well, this isn’t a good sign.”

“You are late.”

Orion stood on the edge of the massacre. His golden robes were brighter and more stunning than anything I’d seen him wear. A large swath of grass was now a wet mat, suggesting he might have been pacing for a long time.

“I thought *Time* didn’t mean much here.”

“It does when the king is left waiting.” He noticed the pink jar under my arm and his mouth fell slack.

I shifted it to my other arm. “I guess I shouldn’t have brought this along until I knew your answer.”

His eyes lightened and he continued to stare. I kept expecting him to drool. Eventually, he blinked and drew his gaze up to my face. “Yes. Yes, I agree.” He held out his hands, expecting me to hand the jar over.

I laughed. “Oh, no. The deal is that you can have this only after we arrive in Hestia, after you promise you will leave this world alone.”

He stared at it for a long time like he was trying to see what was inside. Then he inhaled deeply and smiled. “Which...” He gulped. “Which power is it?”

“Hope and Despair. You can’t have Light.”

His eyes shuffled back to black, but he smiled. He didn’t seem to like being told what he could not have. And he probably thought that he would still get it, that he would still be a god. I had to let him believe that.

“I am surprised you didn’t take this power yourself, just for a taste.”

“Oh, no. I’m not interested in power. I just don’t want anyone to have power over me.”

He laughed. “Typical American.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment. You ready to go? Don’t need a suitcase or anything?”

He laughed and shook his head.

“Fine. But I’m not going anywhere until our deal is official.” I pulled out the contract I’d prepared. “I kept it simple. Just what we discussed last night.” I pulled a pen from my pocket and signed it, then let him do the same. He’d only glanced at the wording, unable to take his eyes off the jar for very long.

“It says you’ll leave this world alone and not come back.”

“Yes, yes.”

“And we need blood to bind it.”

His eyes shot to mine. He hadn’t expected that.

“I never said I was clever, but I’m not stupid.”

Instead of giving an opinion, he snorted and lifted his arm. With his fingernail, he made an inch long cut in the side, just below the wrist. His blood shifted as it fell, like a wind had caught it, to draw it out into a thin line. Then it settled on the paper, on top of his signature, turning the letters purple.

He reached for my arm, but I recoiled. “I’ll use my clean blade, thank you.” I pulled my little dagger from my boot and cut my arm the same way he’d cut his. My blood did just what his had done and turned my signature purple as well. A minute later, we’d both healed.

I rolled up the contract and tucked it into my jacket, then called Kivi. Once we were mounted, the gold from my saddle created a cradle for the jar, along Kivi's neck and well out of Orion's reach. I laid it into place, more gold stretched over to secure it.

I turned my shoulders to give Orion final instructions. "Listen. You need to hold tight to the saddle. No matter what happens. There will be a protective bubble as we leave the atmosphere. There are bridges. There will be flashes. It gets a little crazy. After that, there's a leap of faith required, and we're there. Oh, and once we are inside their atmosphere, watch for dark dragons. They're sentries. We won't want to make any sudden moves. Other than that, we'll have to wing it."

"Leap of faith. Wing it." He nodded. "And the jar and the contents are mine once we're there?"

"Yep. Hold onto your butt."

All right, baby. Time to fly!



ONCE WE WERE OUT OF FAIRY, WE GRADUALLY ASCENDED INTO an ominous sky. Thunder rumbled as all the white was pushed out and replaced by dark shades of gray. As if my friends had suddenly taken control of the weather, the wind tried to blow us sideways, trying to prevent what I intended to do.

Maybe they thought there was another way. I knew there wasn't.

I was too deep in thought to notice the passage of time, but it seemed like we spanned the distance between the clouds and the outer atmosphere much faster than the first time. As we neared and the green bubble surrounded us, I broke into a sweat.

Easy, Marka. We have each other.

"This is it," I shouted over my shoulder. "No going back."

Though he'd kept his hands off me thus far, Orion released one of the grips, wrapped his right arm around my waist, and pulled himself against my back. I couldn't blame him. I felt an instant rush of peace pulse through me, and I realized it wasn't for me—he was using one of his Naming Powers to keep himself calm.

We eased out into the darkness where Kivi paused, as planned, and turned us for one last look at Earth. The moon was blocked from view. The Northern Hemisphere, below us, was shrouded in clouds.

Kivi turned and we were off again. I found the bridge and she saw it in my mind. We plunged into the first bridge, the streak of passing stars surrounded us with light and Orion's arm tightened. We travelled through two more before I paused to look around.

“What's wrong?” Orion shouted.

“Just looking for the bridge.”

Kivi pounced around like a puppy for a while, then I found the tunnel and we were rushing through stars again. Two bridges after that, I made my move just as we emerged.

A shout burst from his chest. “The Pleiades! I see it! We're already inside Taurus.”

I felt him shifting in his seat, probably looking for his namesake.

“Sit still,” I said. “It gets tricky here! Don't let go.”

Kivi shot toward the familiar array of stars. She dodged unseen obstacles, up and down, back and forth, and I hoped Orion didn't have a problem with motion sickness. I hadn't been ill myself since locking with Kivi, but if I were ever to have another bout, her current antics would have caused it.

And suddenly, we were there. Kivi came to an abrupt stop, and a gentle sense of gravity made us sway forward in the saddle.

“We get off here.”

Orion laughed.

“I’m serious.” I said. “This last bridge we cross without Kivi.”

My beauty lifted her foot and the saddle began to slip back into itself. He had little choice but to allow her to lower him or fall off on his own. But with no surface in sight, he chose the easy way. I held my hand out to help him find his balance, then she lowered him down. He turned carefully to scowl at me. “Where do I step?”

“Leap of faith, my friend. One step and you’ll be fine.”

He looked all around, saw the protective bubble still surrounding us all, and took that step.

Instantly, a black marble floor appeared beneath him. Kivi pulled her foot back and iridescent bars appeared between Orion and her. Along with three slightly opaque walls, his complete prison became visible. He spun in a circle, over and over again, trying to understand.

I grabbed the pink jar and slid down Kivi’s leg to land ten feet out from the cage. I dismissed her, but she resisted. Orion looked for me and reached through the bars. I could see him straining, trying to summon all the powers he possessed, his eyes blacker than the strange universe surrounding us.

“Your prison nulls your powers,” I said. “But Persi’s works fine. She was able to hide your old prison cell without any trouble.”

As we watched, that Pleiades star cluster moved closer and closer. When it stopped, seven brave souls were visible—souls holding mirrors of various sizes—and tethered together with lengths of soft black rope. I smiled at Loretta, Lorraine, Archer, Alwyn, Urban, Flann, and Brian, who all grinned back at me. To one side, Persi stood with Kitch and Griffon. From her hands shot powerful rays of light which bounced off the mirrors and reflected a slightly wonky replica of the Seven Sisters.

She let the light die and everything became clear enough for Orion as well. Just beyond his prison wall was the inner side of that familiar bronze wall with a door in the center.

“Welcome back to *Ifreann*, your favorite piece of Hell.”

An unholy growl erupted from him. “We were on our way!”

“You’re right. We were. But remember when we were looking for that fourth bridge? That’s when we turned around and retraced our steps. Half our journey was our return. As it turns out, popping into Moire’s Embrace is as easy as popping into Fairy.”

Kivi chuckled, then finally obeyed me and left.

I locked eyes with Griffon and tried to say a hundred things with my smile. He did the same.

Orion stepped back from the bars, straightened his shoulders and his robes. “We have a contract.”

“Oh, right. Only you didn’t read the fine print that says the contract is null and void if another contract supersedes it.”

Griffon stood at the corner of the cell, his wings half furred, one foot crossed casually over the other. I had never seen anything so swoon-worthy in my life. He gave me a wink, then returned his attention to a large white scroll held open in his hands.

“For your crimes,” Griffon read, “Orion/Ambition shall be returned to his prison and sentenced to one millennium for each life wrongfully taken by his command, along with an extra five thousand years for regicide.” He said the last through gritted teeth and his jaw popped, indicating he was more upset by the loss of the Fae King than he’d ever let on. “The murder of Gloir Cean More, *my father*.”

LONG LIVE THE KING

Orion lunged to the end of the bars and tried to get his hands on the contract, but Griffon turned away in time and handed the white parchment off to Lorraine. The gold curls lashed back and forth in denial. “No one but *I* am qualified to bind such a pronouncement!”

“Oh, the signatures are in order,” Griffon told him. “King of the Fae and the *Seanathair*. And the death of the signatories or the passing of their authority will not dissolve it.”

“King of the Fae? *I* am King of the Fae!”

Persi waved her fingers. “Apparently, so am I.”

Orion looked for me again, saw the jar in my hands. “Liar! That jar holds no power, admit it!”

“Oh, it does. Just not the one you were hoping for. It’s the gift of *un-wishing*. Useless, really, unless all you need is the faint scent of power...”

Griffon’s arms came around me. All the relief I felt at that moment was reflected in his eyes, and he rewarded me with a kiss. “Well done.”

“Well done all of us.”

“Wait!” Orion held onto the bars and sank to his knees. “Don’t leave me here. Don’t do this. I would rather be destroyed. Carew! You can behead me!”

Griffon shook his head, no sign of amusement. “Send you into the Embrace for the High Fae? Never.”

Orion released the bars and sank back, his chin fell to his chest. “Then Nothingness, I beg you.”

I stretched my neck to see past Griffon’s wings. “Anrai?”

One of the ancients that served on the judgment seat and had helped us prepare, hurried to us. “Milady?”

“If our friend the Fae King,” I nodded at Persi, “asked to have this prisoner moved directly to Nothingness, could you do it...without any chance of a detour?”

“If the Fae King asks—”

Orion rallied and pointed at Anrai. “You, there! You must do as I ask! I have the bulk of the Fae King’s powers!”

The ancient man bowed. “Good to see you again, sir...in your old home. But I admit I sense none of the Naming Powers in you.” The man faced Persi. “What would you have of me?”

Persi came to stand in front of Griffon. “Your call. It was your father. He doesn’t deserve mercy.”

The arc of his bronze wings lifted with Griffon’s deep breath, then lowered slowly. “I wanted revenge,” he said. “I’ll settle for justice.”

Persi lifted onto her toes and gave him a kiss on the cheek. Then she turned to Anrai and nodded. “First, we’ll need to remove his Naming Powers. For that, we’ll need Wickham.”

Alwyn raised a finger. “I will go take his place.” He hurried out the door that led to the judgment room, where Wickham’s job had been to keep earning us more time.

I squeezed Griffon’s hand while we waited. Wickham soon joined us. “No worries,” he announced. “The female judge owes me four turns of the hourglass. We have plenty of time.”

While Persi brought the *Seanair* up to speed, Kitch leaned toward me and put a hand to the side of his mouth. “Dinnae be impressed. He cannae lose at cards.”

I was surprised. “He cheats?”

Kitch shook his head. “It has more to do with his recent acquisition of a wishing power.”

Anrai assured us we could extract Orion’s powers without the need to open his prison. Then he offered a suggestion. “Might ye consider allowing the Naming Powers to choose the rightful King? It might mean more stability, in the end...”

I knew this was coming, but I hadn’t had much time to prepare myself. As Griffon was the eldest son of the true Fae King, we all assumed he would be expected to take the throne. But I couldn’t see us sitting around that cold throne room all day or making our lives in Fairy. I didn’t want to live in a house like Bridie’s, filled with trees and fairies, feeling like I was camping all the time.

I wanted to live somewhere...cozy, like Bridie’s house before my eyes had been opened. With room out back for a dragon...

And finally, I couldn’t imagine what those creative and destructive powers would do to my levelheaded Griffon. Or maybe I assumed too much. Maybe he’d been designed to bear that kind of weight on his shoulders. But whatever happened, I intended to stand by him, or sit beside his throne, or mop his kitchen floors and bake him cakes. Whatever it took to ensure he was as happy as humanly or non-humanly possible.

Of course, Wickham might be a logical choice. He wasn’t Fae, but that white power inside him proved he was capable of handling that kind of burden.

I watched Persi and wondered if she’d now be expected to give up her Power of Light—the single power that saved us all. I prayed she was ready to let it go. It might not be possible to crown a new Fae king without all eight Ideals and Corruptions.

Lorraine and Loretta took positions at opposite ends of the iridescent bars. They looked ready to wrestle an alligator if necessary. Wickham stood six feet away from where Orion still knelt in defeat, surrounded by a puddle of gold fabrics, glittery fringe, and rich embroidery.

Flann and Brian stood with Archer on the far side of Persi and Kitch, watching every movement. I wondered if they planned to write down our adventures for posterity. Or maybe they'd already started.

Flann caught me looking his way. *Ready for this?*

No.

Come now. It'll be grand.

Wickham stomped his foot three times. "Orion, known as Ambition, in exchange for yer move to Nothingness, do ye surrender yer Naming Powers of Beauty and Vanity, Fertility and Famine, Peace and War, Art and Destruction, Youth and Decay, Life and Death...for the greater good, with all the contracts and conditions with which ye might have multiplied those powers?"

The prisoner's chin fell against his chest once more. "Yes." It was little more than a whisper. Then he shouted it again without ever looking up.

"Do ye give them freely and without compulsion?"

"Yes."

"Then let them be surrendered."

I stepped to the side so I could see clearly. With no green mist like the last ceremony I'd witnessed, I wondered how Wickham would get the powers out without cutting off Orion's head. But I didn't have to wait for the answer. The white mist that unnerved me seeped out of Wickham's open palm and dove through the bars. It punched into Orion's chest as if in punishment.

The prisoner's chin lifted with a snap, sending his golden curls swinging. Colored mists shot out of his forehead and puddled twenty feet in the air, as if they'd encountered some invisible ceiling that kept them from escaping. Green, pink, orange, red, purple and indigo never mixed as they percolated for a few seconds, then began swirling, slowly, and moving toward the bars.

The white mist retreated from Orion's chest. The Fae's head fell forward and hung limp. As the mist was pulled back into Wickham's hand, it beckoned the colors to follow it. They turned toward the taunting fingers. Like a pack of leashed dogs, they strained for Wickham like they were considering him for their new host.

Wickham reached into his pocket and pulled out a flask, spun the top off, and held it out. A mist of bright ocean blue rose out of the small hole, expanded, and stretched up to join the others. After a few seconds, the colors moved on together, headed toward Griffon.

I had stepped away for a better vantage point, so I wasn't there to hold his hand, and I sure as hell didn't want to draw their attention. I could only cross my fingers and watch.

Again, the thick colored mists strained forward. The orange stretched closer, closer, until the others pulled it back. When they turned away as one, relief flooded my eyes with tears and they poured down my cheeks.

Griffon was mine! All mine!

I side-stepped back to him and took his hand. He gave mine a squeeze, but his attention was glued to the colors hovering in front of Persi.

Queen of the Fae? It was a great idea. I'd trust her with every one of the Naming Powers, but Persi wasn't Fae either. The colored mists seemed to have come to the same conclusion, because they moved on. Passing Kitch without notice, slowing as they neared Brian and Flann, then stopping completely before a wide-eyed Archer.

Archer. *Son of the Fae King!*

Together, the mists lowered as if bowing. Then they hovered, boiling and gathering themselves, waiting for something.

Archer looked at his brother and held back his hands, afraid they might touch him. "Nay! They've got it wrong. Ye're the heir!"

Griffon shook his head slowly. “I was chosen to be something else. I was chosen to be Seraphim, the king’s guardian. But don’t you think it strange that Father gave me other duties? To occupy my time *until the king needed me*. The *next* king. I was meant to guard *you*, brother.”

“I can’t possibly,” Archer whispered to the mists.

Griffon released my hand and started closing the distance to his brother. “The Fae need you, Archer. They need a rightful king, not a pretender, not a stand in. An unassuming heir who was content to drive a taxi and serve his sister until he was needed.” Griffon stepped around to stand behind Archer and dropped a heavy hand on his shoulder. “Archer Carew, Son of Gloir and King of the Fae. Long live the king!”

“Long live the king!” We all shouted, all of us with tears in our eyes.

A nervous but resigned Archer sucked in a breath and gave a nod. The colors separated, and Brian narrated as they poured down, one at a time, into the new king’s head.

“Indigo, Beauty.

Blue, Hope.

Violet, Fertility.

Orange, Peace.

Red, Art.

Pink, Youth.

Green...Life.”

SOMEONE CLAPPED LOUD AND SLOW. IT WAS ORION. HE WAS back on his feet, and grinning. “Anrai! Would you be so kind as to remove these bars?”

Electricity jolted my heart. “No!”

His grin widened. “Your contract is void. If that woman signed it as King—”

Persi laughed and waved her fingers. “Still, technically King.”

“And you weren’t listening.” Lorraine unrolled the large white parchment close to the bars. “You see? This bit here? Totally transferrable. Before Persi gives up her power, Archer will sign—”

“No.” Archer kept one eye on the mists and another on his brother. “I want her to keep her power. I’ll...I’ll agree to be king, but I have nae interest in bein’ any version of a god. The power is hers, if she wants it.”

With tears on her cheeks, Persi nodded. Archer hurried to her to plant a kiss on her cheek and wrap his arms around her. But he sobered when Kitch made it a threesome, and the rest of us laughed.

When I finally remembered Orion, he was on his knees again, gripping the bars and raging at his fate.

Persi noticed too. “Well, Orion? Still prefer Nothingness?”

“Yes! Do it!”

The place fell silent when she waved Anrai to her. “Do it. Move the prisoner to Nothingness.”

Orion’s hands on the bars disappeared, along with the rest of him. For a long time, we all stared at the empty space left behind. It was over. It was really over.

Anrai inclined his head to Persi. “Do you require anything else?”

She smiled. “I require a safe exit out of here for me and my friends.”

He turned to Archer. “And you, sire?”

Archer laughed. “Nothin’, thank ye.”

Anrai nodded. “I am afraid I must ask one of you to stay.” He pivoted on one heel until he faced me.

My stomach sank.

FOR THE LOVE OF A BROTHER

One of us had to stay behind!

The only explanation I could think of was that Alwyn had failed. His job was to keep winning us more time, to keep that hourglass turning. And without Wickham's wishing power, he must have run out of luck!

Griffon stepped between me and Anrai. "Why must she stay?"

The ancient lifted his brows high. "Once this business is concluded, my instructions are to request that the DeNoy present herself at the doorway to the High Fae's Embrace."

"Over my dead body."

Anrai chuckled. "That is neither necessary nor relevant, my prince. The DeNoy has been summoned."



MY FRIENDS REFUSED TO ABANDON ME, AND WE ALL followed Anrai through the doorway that led out to the judgment desk. We marched around the rear of the counter and to the entrance of the archway with the purple universe beyond, the galaxies swirling like those that had once swirled on Daphne's fingernails.

Flann waved from the counter where he sat on a stool playing cards with the long-haired ancient woman who

seemed to be enjoying herself despite the fact that the top half of the hourglass was full.

I planted my hands on my hips and glared up at Griffon. “I don’t care what happens, you stay the hell back. I’m not going to lose you just because you stood too close to death’s doorway.”

He sucked in a breath and begrudgingly nodded before he put another ten feet between us. I waved the others back too. Then I turned to face Anrai. “Why are we here?”

“You have been summoned, madam, by someone on the other side.” He gestured, and a thin cloud appeared just on the other side of the door. It morphed into the face and then the body of a very large man. Handsome, but unfamiliar.

“Are you Gloir?”

“It’s Afi Cean More,” Wickham whispered beside me. “A younger version, aye, but it’s him.”

The man spared Wickham a long, loving look I hadn’t expected.

I bowed my head slightly to show respect, though this man had run us ragged. After all, he’d been the one to tell me who I really was. “What can I do for you, *Seanair*?”

He looked a little sad as he shook his head. His voice was deep and raspy when he said, “Take my brother home.”

Anrai seemed shaken, but he waved his hand again. Another cloud appeared and eventually turned into a man who looked surprisingly like the first.

I bowed deeper this time. “Your Majesty.” I just hoped I got that right. “I am...DeNoy.”

The brothers looked at each other as if reuniting for the first time in ages, even though they “rested” in the same place. The king asked Afi, “Why am I here?”

“You’re going home,” his brother said. “Moire needs you. She came—”

“She came to me too. I refused. I will not take death back to Hestia—”

“Then you weren’t listening, so she came to me.”

“You fool. You love her so much, still?”

“No, brother. It is you I love. But there is a need, in Hestia. Think of it. Moire told me where to find the last DeNoy. She believed the need was greater than keeping Orion away from your daughters. You must go. But what swayed me in the end was knowing you would live again. How could I refuse that?”

If it was possible for spirits to weep, I believed the two would be blubbering. The fact that they couldn’t was heartbreaking.

They weren’t paying any attention to us, so I took the chance to learn Griffon’s reaction to seeing the spirit of his father. He and Archer had their arms locked around each other, expressing emotions the spirits could not.

I looked at Persi and was relieved to see I wasn’t the only hot mess in the room. Struck by a sudden thought, I leaned close to Anrai and asked a favor. He nodded and gestured again.

“Griffon. Archer.” I waved them closer, then turned and watched another nebulous form become Daphne Carew. Her eyes lit up when she found the king, her father, standing beside her. Then she saw me. For a while, we stared at each other. We didn’t need words.

She was sorry.

I forgave her for so many reasons.

Archer lifted his arm to reach past me, but Griffon grabbed him so he didn’t get too close to the threshold, where death waited on the other side.

“Archer, you have the power now,” I said. “It’s all up to you. You can bring her back.”

Archer sighed. “Nay. I dinnae reckon that’s what it was meant for.” He smiled at his sister, and she smiled back. Then

she spared a smile for Griffon, who struggled to clear the emotion from his throat.

Griffon cleared his throat. “I believe she’d rather...go with Father.”

Daphne’s eyes widened and she nodded.

“Is this how this place is supposed to work?” I asked Anrai.

“This is what Moire intended, yes.”

“Does I have to take them now, or can I see my friends home first?”

Anrai smiled. “The only way to leave this death behind is via DeNoy. They will be here when you return for them.”

Each word he spoke added weight to my shoulders. This was what Moire intended. This is what I was made for. Moire needed Gloir, and I was Gloir’s ride home. I worried I wouldn’t be allowed to come back, though, from this Uber ride to another freaking planet. But if I spoke my worries out loud, Griffon wouldn’t let me go. And I knew, somewhere in my soul, I had to do this.

Wickham gestured to get Afi’s attention. “Will ye not go with yer brother?”

The man’s head shook slowly. “I have done all I was meant to do. I am ready for my Nothing. And Wickham?”

“Aye?”

“She’ll make a grand *Seanair*.” Both Afi and Wickham turned to Persi. We all followed their gaze.

Archer laughed. “A fittin’ holder of a Naming Power, I’d say.”

Persi and Wickham stared each other down and I had the impression the two of them had discussed this possibility before. Then she and Kitch had a long silent exchange. After a minute, she turned back to Wickham and relented with a nod.

He nodded back. “So let it be done,” he whispered, and the white mist climbed out of him like he was an amusement car.

First one limb, then another, then the rest of it. When it was free of him, Wickham shuddered, then tipped his head back and rolled his shoulders as if getting accustomed to his own body again.

The mist floated to Persi, grew a little denser, a little more human in shape, then bowed deeply. Instead of straightening, though, it dropped to swirl around her feet and slowly disappeared. She leaned on Kitch while she wiggled one boot and then the other. "I'm sure it's in there somewhere."

Watching Persi clutch at different parts of her body, each higher than the last, I could easily imagine that mist moving through her, spreading up to her neck. When she started gasping for air, Wickham was suddenly in front of her, pulling her hands away from her throat, using a soothing tone to remind her to breathe.

She suddenly collapsed, but it was Kitch who caught her.

"She's all right," Wickham crooned. "I promise, nothin's amiss. It happened to me just this way." He looked over his shoulder at me. "There's room. Maybe it's time to call yer dragon."

But we weren't done.

I turned back at the spirits. The brothers were sharing the same genuinely affectionate look Afi had given Wickham, then the former *Seanair* searched our faces and found Archer. "Nephew, I am ready."

Archer nodded to Anrai. "Do it. Move Afi Cean More...to Nothingness."

A slow peaceful smile, and then he was gone.

"Archer. Griffon." Gloir reached for his sons, then let his arms fall. "I should have explained. I thought I had more time."

"It's all right, Father," Archer said. "Tell us now. Which of us did you intend to be king?"

I saw Griffon stiffen, saw him exchange a look with his father. Then Gloir nodded. "You, Archer. It was always meant

to be you.”

Griffon relaxed and slapped his brother on the back. “You see? There was always a plan for you.” He stretched to catch my hand, then pulled me beneath his arm. “Father, the DeNoy is mine. My wife, Lennon.”

Gloir looked me over, peered into my eyes, and smiled. “Reminds me of your mother. And Bridie.” I was then the recipient of a wink honed and perfected for fifteen thousand years by a man who once held the Power of Beauty and Vanity.

I willed my blush to fade while I searched Griffon’s face to see just how much genetic material he’d inherited from the man. And it was there. Sadly, I’d have to explore it another time.

“I’ll return soon,” I told the king, “to take you back to Hestia.”

Griffon shook my shoulder. “*We*. We will take you to Hestia.” He turned me to face him and leaned down to kiss me. Just before our lips touched, he said, “Do not call that dragon until after I finish kissing you, my love. I don’t like surprises that big.”

Alwyn joined us, out of breath. “Best be goin’. Sand’s runnin’ out.”

“You couldn’t buy more time?”

He shook his head. “I’m fair to certain the woman cheats!”

DEAR READER,

The next chapters cut to the scenes purposefully hidden from you so the surprises could keep coming. You will want to know what happened when you weren’t allowed to watch. Hopefully, all your questions will be answered. Then we’ll get back to the crew’s dragon ride out of Hell...

HIDDEN SCENE 1—GET IN THE CAR,
MOTHER

(Backing up just a little, to Griffon, Archer, and Bridie in her kitchen.)

“Just what do you know of dragons, Mother?”

Bridie rolled her eyes and went back to the oven to set the timer. “M’ daughter was a DeNoy hunter. Ye don’t imagine she discussed her business with meee? Who better to entrust with her seeecrets?”

“That’s it.” Griffon pointed to the door. “You and Archer. In the car. Now.”

Bridie was affronted. “’Ere now. I have a goose in the oven. Why must we go to the car?”

“Because your walls have a hundred ears...at least.”

Once Archer’s car was checked for pixies, Griffon saw Bridie into the front seat and slid in behind the wheel. Archer climbed into the back and leaned forward just as eager as Griffon was to learn what their step-mother knew.

Griffon started them off. “Well, Mother?”

“What would ye like to know?”

“First, I think you should know that when Lennon and I were here for the wake, she had no idea what it meant to be DeNoy. As a Fae, she shouldn’t have needed to have her eyes opened—”

“That’s where ye’re wrong, dear. DeNoy are not Fae. The DeNoy are Hestians, from Hestia. It’s where the Fae come

from, but Lennon isn't Fae. Once she is locked into that dragon, she can go anywhere she pleases. She can will herself to whichever realm she likes."

"Where did Daphne learn all this?"

"Yer father gave her a book. His history. All about how his father had to send him and his brother away, to Earth, to save them from a sly god. Did ye never meet Afi?"

"When I was young."

"Ah, well, in the beginning, the brothers were close. So close, in fact, they both fell in love with the same woman. Moire, the oracle."

Archer bounced in his seat. "Moire! Mother, how could you not tell us?"

"Because yer sister swore me to secrecy. Now that she's gone, I reckon it won't hurt. Poor lass. After she learned that only the Highest Fae can summon a DeNoy, she spent too much of her life tryin'." Bridie patted Griffon's hand. "Lennon's kind, though, isn't she?"

Griffon's head was reeling. He gripped the steering wheel and breathed deeply so he didn't scare the woman. But on the inside, he was once again angry with Daphne for not sticking around. It was the thought of Lennon waiting for him in Finland, however, that calmed him. "It doesn't matter what Lennon is. I'm going to marry her."

Archer gasped, then bit his lips together, which was probably wise. If he had something unkind to say about Lennon, Griffon didn't want to hear it.

Archer took one look at Griffon's face and shook his head. "No, Griffon. I am thrilled for you. Truly. I was just caught off guard, that's all. Are you sure she won't mind you being the son of the king?"

"I'll find a subtle way to tell her."

Bridie grinned. "Look on the bright side. At least the pair of ye haven't fallen in love with the same woman."

Archer's eyes flared. "Yes. Lucky thing."

Griffon grabbed his brother's head and sent him flying against the rear seat. Archer just laughed, which told Griffon nothing at all. But he prayed, fervently, his brother was only teasing. "I mean to give her my mother's ring," he said. "It's one of the reasons I've come. I'm proposing as soon as I return to her. But let's get back to dragons, shall we? Where is this book Father gave Daphne?"

"Afi stole it. After a long time without contact, Afi went to yer father, who invited him here for supper. Daphne was already living in Dublin, but the book was here. It was weeks before she came for a visit and found the thing gone. She searched a long time for yer uncle but could never find him. It was ten years ago, maybe. Afi never came again."

A memory clicked into place for Griffon. "The Book of the Fae King. Of course!" He relayed the story Lennon had told him about the three books, in three boxes, that Afi left to his replacement, Wickham Muir.

Archer literally hit the roof. "Wickham Muir is the *Seanair*?"

Griffon waved a hand. "There is no time for that conversation now. We need that book. There are still things we need to know. For instance, why did Afi allow the contract to be broken? And what did Moire see that earned a mention in The Covenant?"

Bridie shrugged. "All I know is that yer father was adamant that all the DeNoy be found and eliminated, to keep his brother from temptation."

"Temptation?"

"He worried Afi might decide to travel back to their old home, which would mean disaster of some sort. And no one can travel there without a DeNoy and their dragon."

"Why would Afi want to return after fifteen thousand years?"

"Because Moire went back to Hestia, along with their seven daughters. Yer father believed Afi still loved her." Bridie frowned, then patted Griffon's hand. "But don't worry,

love. If there is a new *Seanair*, it means Afi is gone. Whatever the disaster might have been, it's been averted, ye see?"

Griffon bit his lips and nodded. He'd let her believe what she would. And no matter what, he'd keep Kivi from taking Lennon beyond the atmosphere—not because she couldn't survive, but because disaster might be waiting in Hestia.

"Mother." Archer leaned forward again. "You must know more about this disaster. Did you never read Father's book?"

"I did." She shrugged. "But yer sister left it here, didn't she? A mortal woman can only stand so much temptation, can't she?"

"So you do know."

Bridie wagged her head, deliberating. "The Hestians are immortal now. If either yer father or his brother were to return, that immortality would cease...for all Hestians." She looked at her lap, smoothed her apron.

Griffon finally understood. "You're saying if one of them returned, Lennon would no longer be immortal."

The woman gave a gusty sigh. "The one I pity is Moire. Do ye ken about Moire's Embrace?"

"We do."

"They created it so that the High Fae, if killed, might someday return to Hestia and be born again. Then later, she had the vision of that Ambition fellow taking advantage. I am sure visions are a burden, but can ye imagine how hard it must be to know things and hold yer tongue?"

Archer started laughing. Griffon wanted to know why.

"Don't ye see? She's not talking about Moire. She's talking about herself. *Holding her tongue.*"

Griffon reached over to hug the woman's shoulders. "Don't worry, love. We forgive you."

"If the spirit of Father or Afi goes back, if the Hestians are no longer immortal, will the Fae, here, become mortal as well?"

Bridie shook her head. “As long as the Naming Powers remain on Earth, your immortality is promised. Just be sure no one takes them away. I’d prefer both of ye outlive me.” She suddenly sucked in breath and pasted a wide smile on her face. “See now, I’ve been without yer father for seven years. I’m ready for some comp’ny. How old is this Wickham fellow?” She suddenly checked her watch and cursed. “Time to baste or Christmas will be ruint!”

HIDDEN SCENE 2—WE HAVEN'T
THROWN THE RICE YET

(Picking up where the intended bride confronts her would-be groom in the aisle of St. Mary's Church.)

Wickham took one look at my face and stopped. With only a few steps left, he refused to hand me over. Griffon looked from me to Wickham and back again, trying to figure out what was going on.

Father Donne waited patiently, all smiles.

Archer, the best man, looked like his head might spin on his shoulders if I didn't keep moving. He gave his brother a shove from behind, and Griffon closed the distance and took the one hand available to him.

"Griffon?"

"Lennon, what is it, pet? What's wrong?"

I forced up my chin and searched his eyes. *This* was the man I loved. He couldn't have betrayed me...but he had.

He grasped my hand to his chest and pressed it against the plaid sash over his heart. "Tell me what's amiss, my love. None of this matters. Whatever it is, we can deal with it together. Trust me."

Trust me.

It was the last straw. Tears leaked from my eyes and Wickham finally let go of me. Griffon grabbed my freed hand and waited. I couldn't tell which of us was shaking, him or me.

"Griffon," I said quietly, "I need to ask you something."

“Anything.”

“You’ll tell me the truth?”

“I swear it.”

“Whose idea was it to marry me?”

Off to Griffon’s right, Archer groaned. But I didn’t have time to worry about him.

“My idea. Why?”

“All yours? No one suggested it was the best way to keep me from being seduced by Orion?”

Griffon’s jaws flexed. “Who suggested that was even possible?”

Archer came forward, pushed his way into our space and into our conversation. “I did. I happened to say somethin’ stupid to Persi a while ago. She dragged me out of the chapel...and apparently, Lennon overheard us.” He closed his eyes and groaned again. “I swear to ye, Lennon, I never told Griffon what the fairies told me. I never had a chance. When he came home on Christmas, he announced he was goin’ to marry ye before I could say a word.”

“And just what did the fairies say?”

“Those Queevna. They had me pretty riled up. Tellin’ me they saw more than Moire did. Making me swear to warn ye, Griffon, that Orion would win her heart if ye didn’t bind her to ye any way ye could.”

I’d heard enough. I turned and grabbed Wickham’s hand, then headed back the way I’d come, dragging the witch Wickham along with me.

Despite the sacred setting, Griffon shouted. “Lennon Todd, where do you think you’re going?”

I kept marching but turned my head to shout, “Cue the music! I’ll do it right this time!”



THE CEREMONY WAS BRIEF, AND A BLUR.

I held my breath waiting for Griffon to say I do, though he was careful not to pause, knowing I would notice if he had. I think I said I do before Father Donne ever finished the question. That might explain the laughter from the peanut gallery.

They were definitely my hands that were shaking while Griffon slipped his mother's ring on my finger for the second time. I'd handed it over to Wickham the night before, who promised to get it into the groom's pocket. This time, when it slid onto my ring finger, it was to me the most beautiful ring in the world.

I remember that we were harassed for all the kissing, but I recalled it being much too brief.

All of that was forgotten a few minutes later when Griffon and I were led into the priest's small office to sign documents. Our marriage license had pretty gold swirls and doves along the edges...and a glaring surprise filling one of the blanks.

Parents of the Groom, Bridie Trahern and Gloir Cean More.

I dropped the pen, but Griffon caught it. I searched his eyes, waiting for him to tell me it was a joke.

"Forgive me for never telling you."

"But why?"

He shrugged. "If Orion knew... Well, you can imagine what he would do to Archer and me. Probably Bridie. We've never told anyone until this very minute." He stroked his fingers along mine, stopping on the emerald. "Will you still have me?"

I tried to put all the love I had into my smile. "If you can overlook a little thing like my dragon, I can overlook a few drops of purple blood."

He leaned down to kiss me, but we were distracted by the sound of a choking priest. "A drag...dragon?" The man held up his hands. "Never mind. I dinnae wish to ken!"



ONCE THE EXCITEMENT OF THE WEDDING SUPPER BEGAN TO DIE down, I stood at the door of the dining room and tapped a knife against my champagne flute, like I'd see in the movies. "May I have your attention?"

Griffon gave me a quizzical look and came to stand next to me.

"First, we thank you all for sticking with us all day today, and all the days before. I never thanked you for *not* cutting off my head after you knew I was DeNoy. Anyway, I plan on making it all up to you with dragon rides."

Urban rolled his eyes and cursed, making everyone laugh.

"That being said...I think I know how to get rid of Orion and end this war."

When that second bout of laughter died down, I tried again. "I'm serious. Bridie just let me know that I am technically not Fae, but that the DeNoy are able to go wherever they want. And if I can pop into Fairy, like Wickham pops us everywhere, then I have a plan."

A seed of an idea implanted in my brain while I was back in that little room, freaking out alone, waiting for my doomed wedding to start. I pictured myself as a runaway bride and imagined how horrible it would be if Orion found me in my dejected state.

Now, I explained to my friends and my new husband, that I was confident I could convince Orion that I was that runaway bride. And then I would confess that I'd been looking for him to propose something that would make both of us happy, which would include offering to take him to Hestia.

That last bit necessitated a side bar where I explained where Kivi and I had gone on Christmas Day. They then understood Kivi's reference to dark dragons.

After that, the idea of luring Orion back to his prison snowballed. Lorraine suggested a contract. Loretta suggested a

second contract. Wickham had a clever idea about using the pink jar to win Orion's trust. Persi thought of a clever use of Light, and a way to keep Orion from knowing exactly where I'd taken him.

Griffon and Kitch grew more and more concerned with each suggestion.

I asked for everyone to take a breath and tried to reassure them, ending with this point... "If it means we can all live happily ever after, then I'm doing it."

Griffon huffed. "We can discuss it after our honeymoon."

"We *had* our honeymoon. And we can't look forward to our future until we make sure we'll even have one."

"We must think of a better plan." Hands on hips, he inched closer until we were nose to nose. "I will not allow you to do this."

"You're playing that card already? Forbidding me as my husband—"

"As your king."

Though he'd whispered the last, the words reached the far corners of the house. Everyone had been listening. And now, they held their breath, waiting for answers.

I chuckled. "Well, husband, you won't be king with Orion's arse on your throne. Unless we can remove it, you'll have to settle for being my bridegroom." His worry was no joking matter though, so I asked him what bothered him most.

"What if..." He gestured to my gorgeous wedding gown, or more specifically, at my bare shoulders.

"You're suggesting he might seduce me? You have no more faith in me than those fairies?"

"I cannot possibly answer either of those questions safely. I trust you, but I can't see...how he can resist you."

I suppressed the impulse to laugh. "Believe me. He can resist me. I'm sure the only one Orion will ever love is Orion. And he wants more important things than a roll in the hay."

“Yes. He does. He wants a DeNoy of his very own.”

“Then he’s fresh out of luck. They’re all taken.” I wrapped my hands behind his neck and pulled him back for a long kiss. “I’m going to do this, Husband. For us. For all of us. And if you’re done puffing out your royal chest, I really believe we can catch him. But we need you to take us back to Moire’s Embrace. We’re going to need practice. And we need it fast.”

The hour was growing late when, out of the blue, Urban announced that his wife would not be participating in our plans to snare Big Bad. He leaned close to Everly’s face and said, “As yer husband, yer king, and the father of yon bairn, I forbid it.”

She smiled her deadliest smile and shrugged. “Then I forbid you to participate. If you think this baby only needs a mother, you’re sadly mistaken.”

Everyone in the room concurred. The Mackenzies were uninvited. Archer was only too happy to take Urban’s place in our little ruse since Kitch was unavailable for anything but protecting Persi’s Six.

In the middle of our brainstorming, at two in the morning, Wickham’s phone rang. It was his sisters. They were calling to volunteer, though they weren’t sure what for. Since our plans wouldn’t take us anywhere near a Bridge of Sighs, Wickham accepted their offer.

They added a warning that they had no intention of living forever, and if they were still around in a couple of years, they planned to buy a flower cart and sell flowers next to the Bridge of Sighs until someone took them out.

While the rest of the team made bets on how that plan might end, Griffon dragged me out of the house and drove me to a small hotel. Sadly for him, I fell asleep with my dress on...

BACK TO THE ENDING

*K*ivi had no trouble fitting into the judgment hall when I called her. As an enchanted, ethereal place, it seemed capable of adjusting according to need as proven by the ceiling hovering much higher than I remembered.

I climbed on first, and once I was seated, my saddle stretched and folded itself into an impressive line of seats that looked like an exterior spine. Plenty of room for everyone. We weren't going far, just popping back to Inverness, and I promised everyone we would save the rollercoaster tricks for another day.

As one, we thanked Anrai and the others for their help, and I assured them I would be back to finish what was expected of me. Then I willed us within a mile of the rental house so my friends could have the experience of coasting in and landing.

It was late, but the boys were still awake. After a little whining on their parts, I caved in and agreed to take them on a short ride without the adults. Ivy saw how they were secured and begrudgingly agreed to let them go. Griffon was busy saying goodbye to Bridie and Archer. Wickham popped his sisters home. Alwyn and Rinky left in a car.

Rides at night were more exciting, with all the lights flashing past beneath us. Once we were out of sight of the house, Kivi treated the boys to a couple of loops and a series of rolls that made them all pee their pants, even the twelve-year-old.

Back at the house, we found the adults gathered in the parlor, waiting for me to fill in the details of the day while the boys went off to shower. Near the end of the story, told by us all, Ivy realized Wickham was no longer *Seanair* of the Muir Witches.

She turned in her seat to face him. “You’re joking.”

Wickham’s head swung back and forth very slowly.

“You’re joking! You really did it?”

“I promised I would find a way. Now it’s just us, love. Ye’ll die of boredom in a matter of days.”

Ivy’s voice dropped to a whisper. “Are you happy about it?”

“Nothing else could have made me this happy. What the Muirs need is a loving leader now. Something Persi can give them but I never could.” He smiled across at his replacement. “I’ll be here for ye, supportin’ ye, of course.”

With tears pouring down her face, Ivy got to her feet and mumbled something, then started dragging Wickham toward the doorway.

Wickham laughed, trailing in her wake. Over his shoulder, he said, “Ye can catch me up in the mornin’. I believe we’re in for the night.”

I stopped him. “We won’t be here. I’ll check in, though, when I’m back from Hestia.”

The man smiled. “We won’t be far. We like Inverness. The lads might want to return to the ranch, but I think a fresh start, in the real world, would be good for us.” He nodded to Griffon, gave me a wink, and left the room.

Urban and Everly stood, and she worked her way around the room, hugging everyone. “Wickham will know where we are. Find him, and you can find us.” She kissed my cheek. “Good luck. Hope you’re back soon. We’ll go shopping for the baby.”

Kitch cleared his throat and lifted Persi’s elbow. She held up the back of her hand so we could all see the diamonds and

sapphires on her ring finger. The room erupted, so he had to shout to be heard. “She’s worn it for days! Everly’s the only one who noticed. The rest of ye are blind!”

Soon, the only ones left in the parlor were Flann, Brian, Griffon, and me. Brian kissed my cheek. “We’re off fer home in the mornin’. If ye’re every flyin’ near Dublin, ye ken where ye’re wanted.”

“I do. Thank you.”

He shook Griffon’s hand and stood aside, waiting for his brother.

Flann gripped my shoulders with tears in his eyes. “Ye ken I was rootin’ against this one all the while.” He nodded toward Griffon.

“I know. You wanted me for yourself.”

“Aye, I did.” He gave me a big hug, then took Griffon’s hand in a violent handshake. “Keep our lass safe. If only one of ye can come back, be sure it’s her. And I told yer brother, if he ever needs a couple of old Sedaparts, all he has to do is call.”



STREETLIGHTS REFLECTED OFF THE FRESH SNOW AND LEFT A trail of white glitter for us to follow as Griffon flew us back to our hotel. In his arms, I enjoyed a silent and leisurely ride, and I snuggled against his chest even though I wasn’t cold.

“You really want to go with me to Hestia? Don’t you think one of us should stay...just in case?”

Griffon laughed. “Don’t you know what tomorrow is?”

“I can’t even tell you what day of the week it is.”

“It’s Take Your Husband to Work Day. I’m not leaving your side. Dark dragons, remember? You’re going to need a copilot for sure. And an extra set of wings.”

“Fine. You can come. But you’ll be in charge of keeping my engine fueled.”

He grinned. “With what sort of fuel?”

I pulled his head closer. “Kisses,” I said, against his lips. Then I demonstrated the kind I meant, and I experienced my first example of turbulence with a Seraphim. When he found his balance, I kissed him again. “Gonna need lots and lots... and lots of kisses.”

THE END.

IF YOU ENJOYED WINGS AND WHISPERS, *PLEASE* SHOW your thanks with a review. The link to the page on Amazon is [here](#). Click on the ratings section.

The series that follows is not yet named, but the story starts in Hestia, and Kivi, Lennon and Griffon will be a part of that story. **Watch my website, www.llmuir.com for upcoming details and *early access* to Book 1.**

Book 6 in the Curse of Clan Ross series is in the works. If you haven’t read where the Muir Witch stories began, you can find Book 1 [here](#). The rest of my books are listed, with their links, on the following pages.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR...

Dear Reader,

I am thrilled that you've stayed with me through this fun series. I hope you found this third book all you were hoping for. I'll admit, I may have dragged it out a little so I could spend more time with Griffon...

If all your questions haven't been answered, and believe me, I tried, just send me a message through my website or Facebook, and I'll explain as best I can.

2024 is going to be an exciting year, with books added to some of my other series, along with the first book in the spinoff to CROWN OF THE FAE KING.

In the meantime, you can catch up on some of the other books that planted the seeds for this series long ago. You'll find them on my books page. I suggest starting with Ross, Book 1 of Curse of Clan Ross. Or if you'd like to skip right to the tales of 79 Highland Ghosts coming back to life, start with The Gathering, Ghosts of Culloden Moor stories. I promise, you'll find all the Highlanders you need.

If you want to stay in the loop, sign up for my newsletter at www.lmuir.com.

You can follow me on Facebook at [FictionbyLLMuir](https://www.facebook.com/FictionbyLLMuir).

And from the bottom of my heart, thank you for playing.

~Lesli

GLOSSARY

Seanair.....*shawner*

Seanathair.....*shawnaher*

Both mean grandfather, chieftain, or leader. The first is Scottish, the second is Irish.

Cuimhne—pronounced ‘*queevna*’—means memory

Cré means earth—GREEN DRESS

Blath means flower—PINK DRESS PINK CHEEKS

Farraige/Farrig means the sea—SEA BLUE DRESS

Gaothe—pronounced *Goy*—wind—PALE, PALE BLUE

Ifreann—hell, punishment

Srianadh—containment, control

Neamhní—nothingness

The Seven Sisters (stars) of the Pleiades: Alcyone, Atlas, Electra, Maia, Merope, Taygeta, and Pleione.

The seven daughters of Gloir and Moire: Mercail, Thessa, Gilliam, Deona, Palida, Neia, and Rowena.

NAMING POWERS CHEAT SHEET

1. <u>Beauty</u>	1. <u>Ghloir (Lori)</u>	1. <u>To make me bonny</u>	1. <u>Vanity</u>
2. <u>Hope</u>	2. <u>Mercail (Pearl)</u>	2. <u>To make me happy</u>	2. <u>Despair</u>
3. <u>Fertility</u>	3. <u>Thessa</u>	3. <u>To make me grow</u>	3. <u>Famine</u>
4. <u>Peace</u>	4. <u>Gillian</u>	4. <u>To keep me kind</u>	4. <u>War</u>
5. <u>Art</u>	5. <u>Deona</u>	5. <u>To be helpful</u>	5. <u>Destruction</u>
6. <u>Light</u>	6. <u>Palida</u>	6. <u>To help me see</u>	6. <u>Darkness</u>
7. <u>Youth</u>	7. <u>Neia</u>	7. <u>To keep me young</u>	7. <u>Decay</u>
8. <u>Life</u>	8. <u>Ronena</u>	8. <u>To keep me here</u>	8. <u>Death</u>

The mist color associated with each power:

Beauty: Indigo

Hope: Blue

Fertility: Violet

Peace: Orange

Art: Red

Light: Yellow

Youth: Pink

Life: Green

L.L. MUIR BOOKS

Romantic Fantasy

[Crown of the Fae King](#)

[Crown of Tides and Fury](#)

[Crown of Wings and Whispers](#)

Scottish Time Travel Romance

The Curse of Clan Ross (Introduction to the Muir witches)

[ROSS-](#)

[QUINN-](#)

[GASPAR-](#)

[WICKHAM-](#)

[JAMES-](#)

[PERCY-](#)

[The Curse of Clan Ross Series](#) Volume 1

[The Curse of Clan Ross Series](#) Volume 2

Stand alone Time Travel romances

[Christmas Kiss](#) (Gothic)

[Kiss This](#) (A Wedding Tale)

[A Good Day for Crazy](#). (A peek into the mind of a writer.)

The Ghosts of Culloden Moor Series (Of most interest to the Crown series are 1, 50, 56, and 79)

Series Order and Guidebook,

1. The Gathering (& McEwan) by L.L. Muir
2. Lachlan by L.L. Muir
3. Jamie by L.L. Muir
4. Payton by L.L. Muir
5. Gareth by Diane Darcy
6. Fraser by L.L. Muir
7. Rabby by L.L. Muir
8. Duncan by Jo Jones
9. Aiden by Diane Darcy
10. Macbeth by L.L. Muir
11. Adam by Cathy MacRae
12. Dougal by L.L. Muir
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32. Niall by Diane Darcy
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36. Alexander by Cassidy Cayman
37. Ronan by Diane Darcy
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40. Alistair by Jo Jones
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75. A Touch of Magic by Diane Darcy
76. The Guardian by Jo Jones
77. Fenton by Cassidy Cayman
78. The Last Highlander by L.L. Muir
79. The Wedding by L.L. Muir

*Scottish Historical Romance

Kilt Trip

Pirate Trip

Viking Trip (maybe someday)

Under the Kissing Tree

*Regency Historical Romance

Blood for Ink

Bones for Bread

Body and Soul

Breath of Laughter

Beat of My Heart

Lord Fool to the Rescue

*Romantic Suspense

Gone Duck

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They are all the best sort.

And thanks to you, my readers, who keep me writing with your encouraging notes and posts, who help keep my delusion-plates spinning.

I hope to deliver some lovely surprises this year. Stay tuned!

~Lesli

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

L.L. Muir lives in the Rocky Mountains with her husband and family. She appreciates funny friends, a well-fed campfire, and rocking sleepy children.

Wings was made possible with an entire truckload of Diet Pepsi and two truckloads of pebble ice.

The quote that kept running through my mind was one Wickham likes to say, when speaking about love—

“Why else are we here?”

You can reach Lesli through her website— www.llmuir.weebly.com , or through any of the social media sites below. Don't lose touch!

Thank you for playing!



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