



DARK HUNTERS TOUCH

COURT OF THE STEEL-BORN FAE

ELSA JADE

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A decorative banner with a dark, metallic-looking background and ornate, symmetrical scrollwork on either side. The text "COURT OF THE STEEL-BORN FAE" is written in a serif font across the center of the banner.

COURT OF THE STEEL-BORN FAE

DARK HUNTER'S TOUCH

Elsa Jade

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*Once upon a time, iron kept the fae from wandering the world.
But over the millennia, iron gave way to steel, and now the fae
are unbound...*

Yearning to be free, Olette has fled the idleness and illusions of the fae court to hide in the sunlit realm of humans. When the dark warriors of the Wild Hunt find her—and they will, because the black-winged shadows always find their prey—she will face the fae queen's wrath. But until the hunters come and clip her sylfana wings, she will seize this moment to indulge the real emotions of world beyond the walls she's always known.

After a chance encounter with a seductively handsome stranger, Olette longs to embrace the earthly passions within her, if only for one night. Vaile's dark eyes might see through her disguise and his tantalizing touch could make her forget her vow to keep running as long as she can.

Because it seems there are deeper dangers than she knew. In the ages since the end of the Iron Wars, the Court of the Steel-Born Fae has grown restless, the queen's power to hold them within wearing thin, and the sunlit realm has forgotten the old charms that once kept the oblivious human folk safe from the shadows.

Olette might risk even her freedom for Vaile's love, but when the Wild Hunt closes in, she has to wonder: has she fallen for a man—or beautiful lie?

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Prologue

The old Lord of the Hunt had finally unleashed his passion, and the faedrealii—the court of the steel-born fae folk—ran black with blood.

The hunter whelp, who was still very much leashed and would be until he had full control of his magics, crawled between the thin, grubby bodies of his young brethren, chained near him. They should have snapped and growled at him for such impunity, and he would have growled and snapped back.

Now, a few groaned, but most of them lay silent and unmoving.

The steel-spiked collar dragged at his neck, but the deadweight of his half-severed wing was heavier, though he tried to ignore the twisted burden.

The agony and dread were heaviest though he tried not to feel that either.

He edged toward the full-fledged hunter, fallen just moments ago, minus his head, hands still raised defensively. The hunter had not believed he would be slain by his lord and master. Biting back a whimper that would mean his own death, the whelp avoided the head with its open-mouthed expression of shock.

The old lord paced. The blood of his rampage was invisible on his widespread ebony wings, but the rusty-sweet scent swirled around him. The violent agitation in every boot step thudded through the ground and made the whelp quake as if his bones were cracking inside him from the tightly bound terror.

“You have brought this upon us, Queen of the Steel-Born, Queen of Lies!” The cry shivered the very walls. Mad he might be, but the Dark Lord of the Wild Hunt had magics to rival the queen herself.

And now he had turned his might against the faedrealii.

Too late, the whelp understood why the courtiers who had passed through the compound in the quietest hours had even more quietly sought the hunters' assurances that their lord was not suffering from the Undoing. An Undone fae let his sentiments run amok, a lack of restraint forbidden since the queen had ascended to the Steel Throne centuries ago. The hunters had scoffed at the courtiers' fretting. No fae had come Undone since the Hunt began enforcing the queen's edict upon pain of death.

But death had come for the hunters instead, and the whelp knew the unabated gush of blood over his shoulder meant he was on the same path.

He froze as the old lord swept past. His seeping blood crystallized in jet-black beads from the force of the ancient hunter's wrath when the fae bellowed, "Ankha, you wicked beguiler. *You* were my Undoing! Do you hear me?"

"Lord Hunter, every being in the faedrealii, and the sunlit world too, has heard you."

At the soft rejoinder, the old lord turned to face his queen. His fuming breath frosted the suddenly icy air.

The whelp shivered helplessly and reached for the ring clenched on the dead hunter's hand. The steel band froze his skin as he tugged, but the pain of his ripping fingertips was nothing compared to his wing, and the amber stone nestled in the metal was still faintly warm. He clenched it in his palm and dragged his hand to his chest. The stone—the likes of which would have been his one day had he become a hunter full fledged—returned him a small measure of strength.

The queen glided forward. With her white gown and her hair in a white corona, she glowed softly in the whelp's fading vision. Her voice was softer yet, so the whelp doubted any of the fae courtiers gathering in the shadows heard her, aside from himself and the old lord. "I will not let you do this, Lord Hunter."

"Call me by my name, Ankha."

"I told you I would not. This is why."

The old lord's face twisted. "Lies. All lies."

"And the blood?" She lifted the hem of her pure white skirts—spattered now with black and crimson—to point the toe of her gore-stained slipper. "Also a lie?"

The tangled lines of his face deepened. "The price of true passion. Mine and yours, the fae's..."

"The first never was, and the last cannot be."

"Without the hunters to enforce your ruthless edict, it *will* be."

"No," the whelp whispered. Not that anyone heard him.

But the queen also said, "No."

She raised her hands, and the glow around her edges expanded like crystals of hoarfrost. Behind her, the gathered courtiers exhaled as she drew her power through them.

But the old lord also raised his hand. Though the triangular glass sword clutched in his grasp did not gleam through the blood, its bone handle was as white as the his knuckles. It sang the hunger of the Undoing, and the song was sharp as steel, sweet as blood, bright as starlight in the deepest veil of night.

The whelp ducked his head down into his shoulders to block the seductive sound. The motion wrenched his wing into fresh agony, and he cried out just as the old lord charged the queen.

The whelp smashed the amber stone against his spiked collar. Light, shining like the sun he had heard stories of, burst asunder.

He cowered as the old lord whirled back with a surprised shout. The queen only smiled and loosed her power at the lord's back in a boom of thunder.

Half blinded, half deafened, half dead, the whelp drifted for a heartbeat...

Until a gentle touch on his cheek roused him.

"Here now, you mustn't cry."

He cracked open his swollen eyes. At first he thought the queen, pale and beautiful, had deigned to speak to a hunter's whelp. But no, it was just a silly little sylfana, younger and smaller than him. Her short white wing buds, not yet unfurled, stuck out awkwardly from her shoulders, bared by her palest pink shift. Even at the peak of their power, sylfaniia could barely fly. They mostly danced and sang and flitted around the court, their laughter as shiny and empty as mirrored bells. When she came into her knack, she would be nothing but a reflection of the idle whims and pleasures of the faedrealii.

But at least her wing wasn't hacked half through by the Lord Hunter's bespelled sword.

"I wasn't crying," he croaked.

She wrinkled her nose, easing the strain the queen's draw of power had left on her heart-shaped face, and held up her finger. A droplet sparkled. "I won't let them see."

He looked away from the startling blue clarity of her too-knowing gaze.

Behind her, fae were milling through the destruction. Some of the courtiers had swooned, drained by the queen's demand. No one attended the black-winged corpses though. Even in death, most fae avoided hunters.

Except this silly sylfana who knelt at his side. Between her bare toes, the end of his leash lay coiled in the dirt and blood. How had she struck the chain? Every other link was pure iron, sapping his fae magics until he was strong enough to control himself. A sylfana should have fled, shrieking, from the metal ore.

Reluctantly, the whelp's gaze slid back to her. "Where are my brothers?"

"Five are dead, two stayed hidden and won't come out, and three are wounded, though none as badly as you." She curled her hand into her lap, her fingertip still glistening with his tear.

He closed his eyes. When the patrolling hunters returned, they would choose a new Lord Hunter from their ranks and deal with the dead. And then they would deal with him.

A wingless hunter could not hunt. A Hunter who could not hunt was...nothing.

“You were so brave,” she murmured. “No one else stood up to him.”

“I could not even stand.” And now he would never fly.

“To fly? Is that what you want?”

Had he let the wistful words escape him aloud? He opened his eyes to glare his fury at her. “I am hunter-born. A hunter needs his wings to find what he hunts.”

She stared back at him, idly winding a lock of her hair around her undampened finger. The shining strands held all the colors of the amber he had smashed: copper, gold, and bronze. “Do you know what a sylfana does?”

“I know you’ll never reach even the lowest clouds,” he snapped.

“We have the power of wishes.”

The whelp sneered as he had seen the older hunters do when they complained about the sylfaniia who served a parallel court function to the hunt, acting as the Queen’s lures. Where hunters were the blade, the sylfaniia were the hook, wielding temptation and enticement in place of violence, equally merciless but masked in pleasures, the precise nature of which remained frustratingly unspoken around the whelps.

But for the first time, the whelp understood the anger—and the longing—in his older brothers’ voices. He leaned away from the sylfana. “I don’t need your wishes.”

“It is not my wish.” She reached around herself to poise her tear-gilded fingertip over the bud of her wing where the first scalloped edge was just appearing. “It’s yours.”

He shifted. “You can’t do that. It’s magic.”

“Of course it’s magic. We are fae.” She touched the tight furling of white. When she lifted her finger, tiny scales glittered alongside the salt of his tear.

He watched, warily, as she stretched her hand toward his shoulder where the joint of his wing had been so horribly slashed. He stiffened. “I don’t think—”

“It’s just a wish. Are you scared?”

He was. “No.”

“I am. Just a little.” She smiled at him, and he knew he would never forget the light in her blue eyes. “Ready?”

He wasn’t. “Yes.”

She closed her eyes and exhaled. The sweet scent of her breath and fae magic banished the stink of blood, and he found himself leaning toward her. She touched him.

The fire went through him in a ferocious blaze, a thousand times worse than the prismatic sword’s edge or the queen’s thunder. He screamed but could not pull away.

“Hush. It won’t always feel like this.”

But it would. He knew he would always feel like this.

Chapter 1

She wanted to feel it all. Her body burned. Sweat slicked down her skin, a sensuous tickle, and her chest heaved with each pounding stroke. When she gasped, the taste of salt prickled on her tongue.

Olette *needed* her sunlit runs. With her body, mind, and senses so immersed in the moment, she might camouflage her presence from the Wild Hunt. The inexorable path of the sun, immune to any magics, helped keep her on *her* path, pretending to be a true inhabitant of this earthly realm—but for how long?

She wanted to run forever. That's how long the queen's faedrealii hunters would search for her: forever. Creatures who stood with only one foot in the world's time had that advantage. Though the fae could be blithe and capricious, once hunters were loosed upon the object of their hunger, they would never falter. The black dogs and their dark masters were so dangerous that the queen herself chained them when they prowled her inner court.

The sun fell into the streaked clouds over the ocean like a fading ember. Its glow burned a red hole through the veil of the blue-gray sky, and the reflection in the water rippled with secrets. A chilly breeze breathed out from the pine forest rising from the rocky headlands beyond the dunes. Olette slowed to a jog and flapped her oversized T-shirt to let the breeze tickle her belly.

Pausing, she turned to admire the water. She had come to this shore because the humans called the ocean here peaceful, though this northerly part of coastline was more rough than tranquil. Its restless churn echoed her own quest to keep moving.

Speaking of moving on... A creep of awareness colder than the breeze between her shoulder blades made her glance back.

Down the beach, a dark silhouette closed the distance, tall and menacing. Her heartbeat ramped up again and all her

muscles tensed. For a confused moment, a swirl like black wings spread above the figure, and even the ceaseless churn of the ocean seemed to hush.

Then the sun flared out behind the clouds one last time, and Olette recognized him: just a fellow jogger she had passed many times over the month since she had come to this coast. He waved at her again—not wings, just a regular old human arm—and she chided herself for seeing monsters in every shadow.

Still wary, she let him catch up. All the other times, they had waved but never spoken.

“Hey, I think you dropped this.” Still a dozen strides away, he tossed something toward her.

Reflexively, she caught the chain that spiraled through the air. The metal tingled in her hand: steel. From a bezel at the bottom dangled an odd, blue stone—partly clouded but transparent in places with occlusions that caught and scattered the low slanting light. The pendant gleamed like a sky changing from the clear blue of day to the darker blue of evening, a sight she had longed for when she’d been trapped in the halls of the faedrealii.

With regret, she shook her head. “Beautiful, but it’s not mine.” She held the necklace out to him, looking up.

And her breath, which she had finally caught, escaped her again.

They had always passed each other at a distance—part of her promise to herself to stay far away from humans on *this* trip through the sunlit realm. She had noticed only that he was dark haired, had a smooth, gliding stride that ate up the beach miles, and didn’t usually bother with shirts despite the chill.

Shirts were overrated anyway—especially if they committed the crime of covering such a perfectly sculpted chest. The hard planes of his pectorals blurred beneath just enough dark curls to make her fingertips tingle in yearning, and a glimpse of the narrow line of hair beneath his navel commanded her attention downward.

She jerked her gaze up before she could wonder if the ripstop nylon fly of his shorts was rippling from the breeze... or from something else.

Judging by the sly smile playing around his lips, she knew he hadn't missed her once-over, but the confident tilt of his head said he thought he could take it. No doubt he got plenty of once-overs, not to mention twice- and third-overs. Even the haughty courtiers of the faedrealii who objected fiercely to the idea that there might be any shared blood between humans and fae would be willing to claim this one as kissing cousin.

The wicked edge of beauty's knife had carved jaw and cheekbones in bold relief from his deep-set dark eyes. Salt spray and sweat had frozen his dark hair in untamed tousles. Only the fullness of his lower lip seemed out of place, as if some all-powerful fairy godmother had decided this chiseled work of unassailable bravado needed a touch of bruised tenderness and had taken a soft bite of his mouth before breathing him into life.

Olette caressed the smooth, blue rock—still holding his body heat from his pocket—and imagined running her finger over that lip. Desire pooled low in her belly, warm and glowing as the stone. She curled her hand into a fist and crimped the chain in her grip. The slide of metal links through her fingers, each coiling into the next, echoed through her body. Her skin tingled again, not from the touch of steel but as she pictured his big hands on her.

His jet eyes glittered. “Are you sure it isn't yours? You seem like you want it.”

She wanted something anyway. For a heartbeat, she reveled in the sensations cascading through her. These were feelings the fae could never understand and would never allow. She would be able to summon this fantasy for months, forgetting the cold, remote, untouchable glory of the fae in this sizzling—if only imaginary—craving.

The Wild Hunt would never suspect such delicious longing in a princess of the faedrealii. A breeze whisked past her,

carrying the tang of ocean along with a hint of the man—a musk that fit perfectly with the salt and pine and coming night.

“I can’t take it.” She couldn’t keep the deep sigh out of her voice. “It’s not mine.”

He made no move to retrieve the necklace, only crossed his arms over that incredible chest. A silvery ring gleamed on his forefinger. “Well, it would look right on you.”

Yes, *he* would look gorgeous on her, she thought wryly. But she would never entangle a human in the dangers that followed her. She had gotten tougher since she left the hollow illusions of the court, but even a year and a day of determined running instead of careless dancing would not put her beyond the reach of the Queen’s hunters.

“Someone else must have lost it,” she insisted.

“Tell you what. You keep it, and I’ll let you know if that someone comes looking.”

She cocked her head. “And how will you let me know?”

“I guess you’ll have to give me your name and phone number.”

She shook her head. “I’m not in the habit of giving those to strangers.” Names had power; phone numbers, not so much, but she didn’t own a phone anyway. The fae often amused themselves with human toys—and the toys of humans—but she wanted only the brazen sensations of the earthly world.

“We’re jogging partners, not strangers.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Partners? More like two ships in the night. And the morning.”

“But this time we didn’t pass each other. My name is Vaile, and you’re the first thing I see before coffee. There. Not strangers anymore.” He smiled in a way that she thought was probably intended to make him look harmless. Instead, she was reminded of the smug wolf in Grandma’s bed.

Despite her own best intentions, she smiled back. After all, she should know how to handle fairy tales. Besides, the fae

knew the real story of that particular volken; Grandma hadn't at all minded being eaten.

"You can call me Ollie. And I can't accept gifts with strings attached." She waggled the necklace so the chain swung.

"Ollie? Really?" Vaile held up one hand. "Okay, fine. No phone number. I see you all the time anyway, and I don't think that necklace belongs to anyone else. High tide washed it up just to match your eyes. Pretty blue with a touch of heavy metal."

She slanted a glance at him. "Wow. There's a line. Too bad I'm not a fish."

His smile widened, and his dark eyes sparked at her with amusement—and a deeper, simmering heat. "So you won't bite?"

Her gaze locked on his lips and she sighed to herself. "Sorry, no."

Since her running shorts didn't have pockets, she slipped the necklace over her head. The pendant nestled between her breasts, warm through her thin T-shirt. While they were talking, the sky out to sea had gentled to seashell pastels. But the shadows under the trees had crept farther over the dunes, emboldened by the close of day. Rising above the spires of the inland pines, a slim crescent of moon failed to hold back the darkness.

Olette restrained a shiver. "I have to go."

Vaile's expression tightened. For a moment, his features were as still and hard as the rock cliffs, but then he nodded. "I'll see you around then. Maybe I can get the ocean to find me a few strands of amber beads to match your hair."

She shook her head but didn't say anything. She couldn't very well tell him that her freedom—and his life—depended on them moving in opposite directions. Her midnight fantasies might keep her grounded in the human realm, but they could never be more substantial than fairy dust in morning's light.

She turned reluctantly to go, indulging one last look at Vaile over her shoulder.

He opened his mouth—that fine, fine mouth—as if he wanted to call her back. But whatever words he might have spoken were lost in a sudden clarion call, bright and sharp as a blade slicing through the night.

Vaile glanced back just as dawn broke down the beach, from the deep shadows under the pines, the Wild Hunt burst forth.

For an instant, her heart flew at the sound of that silver-bell note, her blood sang with the wind of their coming, her pulse pounded with the beat of cloven hooves over sand.

Riding to the fore, the horned Lord of the Hunt lifted his bugle. At the klaxon, three streaks of mottled silver and black leaped ahead—the dogs, almost as tall as the lord's stag. The first hound lifted his middle head and cried fury. Eight other hounds' tongues answered.

“What the hell?” Vaile stood facing the onslaught, hands on hips.

Jolted from her reverie, Olette grabbed his elbow and whirled him around. “Run!” She took two steps, realized he wasn't behind her. “Follow me or die.”

He glanced once more over his shoulder, and then he was pounding the sand beside her. Cold both from fear and the rising wind, still she felt the hot bulk of him as he ran.

Though slowed by the soft dunes higher up the beach, the Hunt was angling toward them.

“They're driving us toward the cliff,” Vaile panted. “We'll be cut off.”

Earlier, she had jogged around the headland through shallow water where a small river cut through the cliff rocks. At high tide like now, she would normally hike up into the trees to catch the road back rather than risk a scramble over the loose stone on the high cliff. But if they headed inland or tried to descend toward the mouth of the river, the Hunt would capture them.

Anyway, she would be captured. With the three-headed dogs on their scent, Vaile wouldn't be so lucky.

“You’re faster than me,” she gasped back. “Run ahead, toward the ocean. The hunters won’t cross the moving water of the river.”

“Not gonna happen.” His voice was grim despite the wheeze.

“I’ll lose them in the trees.” Not likely, but at least he would have a chance.

“Won’t leave you.”

They were closing fast on the cliff edge, chunks of rock under the sand threatening to break an ankle. The Hunt was closer yet behind them, and the breath of the hounds was an icy dread on their heels. The enraged baying eclipsed the twilight, rising to a gibbering cackle and promising doom.

Still, Vaile didn’t veer off. The rock, brittle and gray, broke under their pounding feet. The scrabble of long claws hissed behind them.

Olette sucked in a huge breath, the mist of fresh river water on her tongue.

She slowed by one step, letting Vaile draw just a heartbeat ahead. He must have sensed her hesitation because he looked back for her. The black edge of the cliff made a broken line against the evening sky just a stride beyond.

She lunged at him and caught him around the shoulders. Salt and heat exploded between them at the contact. The force of her blow knocked them in an arc over the edge.

Below, the little river glimmered moon-silver. The breeze skirled around them, as if desperately wanting to hold them aloft.

The three hounds skittered to a halt at the edge of the cliff with a howled chorus of rage. When she dropped her glamour and the illusion of humanity fell away, their nine-part harmony of preternatural wrath spiraled to the stars.

She held Vaile close and spread her wings.

Chapter 2

It had been a very long time since he'd fallen so hard for a girl.

And from his precarious position dangling two stories above rock and sand and river, Vaile thought it just might get harder yet.

"Don't squirm," his flight attendant warned. "I'm trying not to drop you."

"That's comforting."

They came in low and fast, skimming the river. Then his trailing legs caught a dune, and they went rolling in a ball of sand, seawater and swearing.

He staggered to his feet, instantly whirling to face the cliff they had descended so fantastically. The three misshapen dogs paced the rim, drawing back only to make room for the horned rider who stared down.

Vaile gave him a vigorous middle finger.

"Don't mock them." Olette climbed to her feet a few steps away.

"Why? Will they do something worse than push us over a cliff?"

"Technically, they didn't push us. I did."

"Ah. True. But since you were trying to save my life, I forgive you."

She stared at him. "You're taking this awfully in stride for someone who just flew off a cliff."

"I have a long stride," he reminded her. "Plus, I have more pressing issues, such as the impressive amount of sand in my shorts."

Her gaze flicked downward. "Oh. That's all just sand?"

For a moment, he thought his cheeks actually heated. But it must have been road rash from the tumble.

She glanced away, brushing at herself. Along with the sand, she brushed off her T-shirt—all the way off. The cotton had shredded under the burst of her wings, and the sorry remains fluttered down around her sneakers.

Judging from the prickling heat that flushed through him, he had road rash all over.

She definitely blushed, raising one hand to shield her breasts. She had beautiful breasts, which he judged would fit neatly in his palms. The blue stone glowed dark against her pale skin. He wanted to lace his fingers through hers and spread her arms to expose her to the light of the moon, to demand she forget such modest notions after she'd so boldly defied their pursuers and gravity itself.

His blood pulsed in a hot tide through his limbs, roused by her moon-white curves. A gentleman would avert his gaze; he decided not overtly salivating was concession enough.

“Lingerie catwalks aside, I suppose you can't wear a bra over wings.”

“It does tend to ruffle feathers.” The silvery white wings that cascaded from her shoulders to midway down her thighs weren't truly feathered, more like shimmering metallic leaves or the scales of a magnified butterfly wing.

“I can't believe you managed to glide us down on those.”

“I'm stronger than I look.”

“I am starting to see that,” he murmured. The note of surprise in his voice should have gotten him a raised eyebrow at least, but she was obviously considering more immediate problems.

She stared up the empty cliff. “We have to find a place to hide. They'll go upstream until they can cross at the culvert, and then they will be after us again.”

“Where can we go?”

She directed her clear blue gaze to him. “Don't you want to know what they are or what they want?”

“They are bad news. They want you. I am in their way.” He ticked off the points on his fingers. “I was focusing on the important stuff.”

She pursed her lips. “You were focusing on my breasts.”

“Important stuff,” he reiterated. He flashed her a lazy smile. Another blow from the horn—farther away, but still too close—shivered each grain of sand and droplet of water so that the beach scintillated with uncanny brilliance. The otherworldly beauty froze his smile in place.

“The hunters are coming fast,” she whispered. She stepped closer to him. He breathed the scent of her, wild and heady, like a rare and delicate flower that shouldn’t exist trapped here between bare rock and vast ocean.

“There is no place to hide.” He didn’t bother whispering.

“In plain sight.” She took another step closer. Even streaked with sand, with her red-gold hair roughed into standing waves and her wings tucked demurely behind her, she shone almost too pure for his gaze.

His hands twitched, reaching out to her of their own accord—wanting.

She gazed up at him with glimmering gemstone eyes. “Do you trust me?”

How could she ask that, when he was the one with his hands settling at the tender junction of her neck and shoulders, just above her bare breasts and her delicate wings? He brushed his thumb along the line of her jaw and felt her tremble.

Afraid, was she? Of these hunters following? Of him or of herself?

“I just jumped off a cliff with you,” he reminded her in a ragged voice. “And I didn’t scream at all.”

“Then kiss me.”

His stroking thumb stilled. “Kiss you? Here? Now?” Even with those furious hunters on their path, his heart had not hammered as painfully as it did now. “But—”

“Kiss me.” Her voice quivered then smoothed, like bright quartz pebbles turning over in a gentle wave. Helplessly, his body swayed toward her, drawn by the undertow. “Kiss me as if there is no room even for moonlight between us, as if we have only one breath to share. Kiss me now.”

Before she finished speaking, he lowered his mouth over her parted lips and did as she commanded.

Ah, sweet good night! She was *more* than he had dreamed. Every time they had passed, with every fleeting glance, she had thrown one more loop of mystery around him. Now he had her in his arms, and he would finally have his answers.

She tasted of forbidden yearnings, of sunlight that made the shadows deeper. He curled his fingers in the fall of her hair, and the silky caress over the backs of his knuckles set his every nerve ablaze.

He drew her close against his body until the pendant ground into his breastbone. The twinge distracted him, and he tried to gentle his grasp. It was too much too soon. But she gripped his biceps and drew herself up to her tiptoes, surfing his chest like a perfect breaking swell.

Her tongue teased his. Yeah, something was definitely swelling.... He returned the favor, tracing the slick inner curve of her out-thrust lip. He nipped gently, and her grip tightened on his arms.

She pulled back just a bit. Her eyes, searching his, were wide enough to catch a last spear of moonlight just before the clouds closed entirely.

He stroked one finger down her exposed spine. Beneath his calloused palm, the trailing edge of her wing was softer than velvet. He rubbed the scalloped bottom, amazed how the tissue-thin substance flexed with curious strength against his gentle tug, as if at the memory of a restless wind. The sensation delighted him on some deep level. The feeling was obviously mutual because she closed her eyes and swayed into him.

He caressed her wing again in one long, slow sweep from shoulder blade to backside. His fingers were faintly slicked with a silvery powder that smelled like sex; as if she wasn't irresistible enough, her wings cast off an aphrodisiac.

He closed his eyes briefly, struggling to find his control even though the musk of arousal was pushing him toward an edge with a sharper drop than the other cliff she'd pushed them over. "Do you want me to stop?"

She shuddered. No, the movement wasn't hers. The sand beneath their feet quaked. Their pursuers were coming closer.

"Don't stop!" A chill mist rose around them, and her cry twisted in a desperate plume.

He gathered her closer. His shoulders stiffened as if he could ward off all that threatened her with his possessive stance. Even as he claimed her for himself, he understood why the hunters would never stop searching; with the silver glow of her spirit and the sky-blue sparkle of her eyes, she was too precious to lose.

The pounding of hoofbeats echoed in his ears, along with the sound of hungry hounds panting....

Or maybe that was just him.

He flattened one hand against her back to brace her and then bent her gently to trail his lips down her neck. The slender arch of her throat trembled under his mouth with the resonance of her breathy moan. He inhaled the earthy perfume of salt and damp sand and rousing flesh. His own shaky exhale unfurled like dragon smoke across her skin.

The mist had thickened and coiled in sinister figures, half seen and menacing...ravenous and seeking.

Well, they could back the hell off; he already had her.

The pendant had slipped off center and the V of the chain arched over her left breast. He framed the lower curve of her breast between his thumb and forefinger and plumped the flesh until the blue stone shifted over the darkening skin of her nipple. She moaned again as he pressed his lips to the center of

the V, just off the upper swell of her breast where her heartbeat matched itself to his.

“I refuse to scream ‘Ollie’ when I come,” he whispered. “Give me your real name,”

She shook her head fretfully. “Who said you are going to come? And my name doesn’t matter.”

“It does to me.” He looked at her. The cold nipped at the moisture of her skin, dampening his lips.

“Olette,” she gasped. “Just don’t stop.”

He dipped his head again and laughed against her flesh. His lower lip brushed over the steel and closed on her puckered flesh. He traced his tongue in a slow circle around her nipple, drawing the peaked pebble deeper into his mouth.

She moaned and threaded her fingers through his hair, holding him close.

Around them, the shadows shifted in vain, as if casting around for something gone missing. Vaile closed his eyes and ignored the cold darkness that pulsed around them in favor of the vibrant warmth beneath his hands.

His body shifted in response to each minute motion of hers, like a dance. She tilted her shoulder, and he suckled at her other breast. She angled one foot back to take his weight, and he nudged his knee between her legs. The wispy fabric of her shorts slipped over his thigh, less obtrusive than even the sheerest bedsheets. He might as well be naked for all the modesty his own shorts offered.

As if she’d read his thoughts—certainly she could not mistake his interest—her hands slipped along his shoulders and down his arms to settle just above his hip bones. Another scant inch and she could slip down his waistband.

Instead, she pushed him back. “Vaile.” Her voice was hoarse. “They’re gone. You can stop now.”

He kept his feet planted in the sand. “I’m not sure I can.”

“You will. You are not like them.”

The words doused his ardor like a sneaker wave. He straightened and let the leverage of her hands set him back a step.

As if the same invisible wave had cleared the shadows, the moon was back. The clouds had parted. The coiling mist was nowhere to be seen. “You are too cruel.”

“I used to be, but I am trying to change that.” She lowered her head. The moonlight glimmered on her wings as she pulled the forward segments around her ribs to hide herself. The short drape left her shoulders bare and a deep exposed V from neck to navel. The blue stone dangled like a hypnotist’s charm in the shadow between her breasts.

He dragged his gaze away and ran his fingers through his hair. The harsh rake didn’t erase the sensation of her hands clutching his head as she arched beneath his mouth.

“Damn,” he muttered.

“You’re safe now. They are too arrogant to double back; they will never believe they overlooked us.”

“They were right on top of us.” Almost as close as he’d been on her. “A kiss made us invisible?” Of course, it had been more than a kiss.

“They weren’t looking for two enraptured lovers on the beach. They are hunting a rebellious sylfana.” She clutched the folds of her wings tighter without looking up. “A sylfana is a heartless, worthless fae princess, cold as ice over stone, inhuman, unfeeling.”

He reached out to touch her averted face and tipped her chin up to meet her gaze. “But you hid us—which was quite a good trick, I think—and they didn’t see, so you must have felt something too.”

Her eyes caught the moonlight. “I could not lie about that.”

“From the stories I remember, fairies lie all the time.”

“Not when you get ahold of them. Skin to skin, they must tell the truth—if you can find the skin—the truth—under their glamour. But then you can never let them go.”

“I’m not holding you now,” he pointed out.

“No.” Regret throbbed in her voice. “Which is why I have to go. The hunters might not return tonight, but tomorrow when the sun sets, they will come again and try to catch my scent.” Slowly, she reached up to touch his jaw, echoing his caress. “I might not be able to protect you again.”

“Since when is protection in the job description of fairy princesses?”

“It isn’t.” Her hand slipped down his chest to rest above his heart. “Usually sylfaniia lead men out of the sunlit realm and into our queen’s court of illusions where you are summarily devoured, in more ways than one. But I will not do that—will not *be* that—any more.”

“Brave of you to fight them.”

She gave a harsh laugh and fisted her hand on his chest. “Brave? Not me.”

“Then if the hunters come back, I will just have to kiss you again.” Frustration made the promise sound vaguely threatening.

But she shook her head. “Not *if* they come back...*when*. They are relentless. I will never truly escape them. And they mustn’t find you with me. It is too dangerous.”

“Maybe I am dangerous too.”

A wobbling smile tilted her lips. “I will keep that in mind.”

“At least let me walk you home. If you’re wrong and they do come back, I...” He swallowed hard. “I suppose I can sacrifice my virtue for you.”

This time, she laughed softly. The sound lifted his heart in ways her wings hadn’t. “My noble knight. Where is your shining armor?”

Fifty pounds of steel would be no protection from her smile. “Must have left it in my other pants pocket. Which way are we going?”

She studied him pensively, and for a moment, the breath caught in his throat. His skin tightened, as if she was looking through his nakedness. Then she nodded. “Just for tonight.”

And he told himself one night was all that he wanted.

Chapter 3

Olette guided Vaile by the faint light of the will-o'-the-wisps that winked and teased amid the towering trees. When they had crossed into the primeval forest, he had laced his fingers through hers and stayed close at her side.

The forest rose, cathedral silent, on all sides. Once upon a time, she had played like this with her sylfana sisters, leading human males astray with sparkling lights and lilting voices in the darkness. It had all been mere mischief, a fleeting entertainment, hardly worth the remembering. Except now she knew sometimes the bewitched and bewildered humans never found their way out again.

The ring on Vaile's forefinger was a thick band in her grasp. The touch of the steel made her shiver a little—just enough to remind her that she was not and could never be human.

How many bones moldered unfound because of her? The thought wrenched a shuddering breath from her belly. Not that the exact number mattered. When the hunters found her, she would pay for her desires just as the human men had: with her life.

Vaile squeezed her hand. The warmth of his fingers seemed to trickle through her veins. "Are we getting close? You must be tired, and my shoes are soaked."

She knew her fae vision was sharper than his, making the shadowy forest less daunting, but his concern for her made her feel delicate and cherished—like a true princess must feel. "Almost there. I came to this place because of all the rain. Water runs everywhere here."

"And you said the hunters won't cross moving water."

She nodded. "That is why I took a cabin surrounded by streams." She tugged him onward. "There. See the bridge? That's the only way onto my island. At least I'll have some warning when they come."

Where the rickety bridge and stream had carved out an opening in the forest canopy, a blooming cherry tree struggled

to make a place for itself between the dark pines. At the bridge, he tugged her to a halt on the mossy wooden planks. “And what will you do with that warning?”

He pitched the question as if merely curious, but she heard the anger in the rumble underneath. “I can’t hope to stop them forever, but I will not let them take me back.”

“What are you saying?”

She set her jaw. “I can’t explain the faedrealii to you.”

He gripped her arms and stared his command into her eyes. “Nothing is worth killing yourself.”

“Exactly.”

“Right.” He blinked and released her. “Well, that was easier than I thought it would be.”

She rubbed her arms where the hot echo of his grasp was fading. “I mean *nothing* is exactly why I’d...why I won’t go back. The court life of a sylfana is nothing but a timeless, thoughtless mist of idle pleasures.”

Vaile’s lips twisted. “Sorry to sound dim, but I’m not seeing the downside of eternal beauty and bliss.”

She didn’t return the wry smile. “Our life span runs centuries longer than humans’, but we aren’t immortal. It just *seems* like forever.”

“Right. Now I see how death is your only other option.”

She squared her shoulders, though her conviction wasn’t quite strong enough to tighten her wings. “Many humans are driven mad by a single night in our presence. And I think even my own people have not entirely escaped that fate. Your poets call us merciless. Your church calls us devils. Your adults call us bedtime stories. I just wanted to live for a little while. Simply...*live*.”

“And fairy princesses aren’t allowed to live?”

“They won’t let me have what they are too afraid to want for themselves. Even those of us who walk in your world for a

while always return to the court. In the end, we lock ourselves away from what we most desire.”

“Maybe they have a reason to be afraid.”

She stared at him, trying to see past the rigid lines of his expression. But she’d never been strong enough to break anyone else’s illusions. “A man who dives off cliffs with strange fairies doesn’t know the meaning of fear.”

“Oh, I have fears.” He stepped closer to her, so close that a kiss was almost fated.

She tilted her face up. “I can’t imagine.”

“I was afraid I would never have the nerve to catch you on that beach. I was afraid I’d spend the rest of my life with the image of you running away from me.” In the murk, his pupils were blown wide, like a night-stalking predator, but his smile—the quirk of that soft, full lip—was a temptation she couldn’t resist. “And right now, I’m afraid you’re not going to ask me in.”

So close he stood and yet he didn’t touch her, but the memory of his kiss, of his hands roaming her skin and her wings, clouded her mind like the Lord Hunter’s confusing mist. She had no doubt Vaile’s mouth could lead her astray.

And maybe this time, she deserved it.

She wavered toward him. The cherry tree shivered in the breeze, and pale blossoms drifted around them. The will-o’-the-wisps danced between, illuminating the petals.

Vaile’s lips—which she was watching very closely—quirked. “See? Even the tree gives its blessing.”

“That was just me.” He wasn’t even touching her, but she felt compelled to tell him. “The fae are mostly illusions and lies, but we all have one gift, a knack, that is real and true. Mine is an affinity for breezes. They bring me sweet scents and little presents, like the cherry blossoms. Nothing powerful. The sylfania rarely are.” She closed her eyes. “Your knack seems to be making me babble.”

“Like the brook under the bridge,” he agreed.

“Sorry.” She bit her lip.

“Don’t be. I want to know more about you.”

“We don’t share, usually. According to your fairy tales, we won’t say our names—and we are private about that, because words have power—but it is our knack that reveals our true selves. Telling our knack is more intimate than...” This time she managed to stop herself before she said something embarrassing.

But the breeze fluttered around his shorts again. He glanced down. “The wind brings you *little* presents, huh? Should I be offended?”

“I couldn’t say. I would need to find out, first, which parts are real...” She clamped her hand over her mouth. “Babbling,” she muttered behind her palm.

“I like it,” he said. “And you should know, the smallest breath can herald the fiercest storm.”

One more half step brought him closer still, so that the circling breeze carried the fall of cherry blossoms in a helix around them both.

He tilted his head in the opposite direction of his crooked smile, giving him a charming-bordering-on-roguish air. “Your cheeks blush petal-pink. What other parts of you do that?” He reached out to pluck a blossom from the swirling air and tucked it behind her ear. “I suppose I’ll need to find what is real and true myself.”

She took his hand and led him through the fall of petals. “Then come in.”

She let him use the cramped shower in the minuscule bathroom. After ducking under the low lintel of the front door, he’d taken one look around the A-frame cottage’s tiny, rustic confines and said, “If there’s going to be a song and dance

number with talking forest creatures, I don't want to kiss the frog.”

His wry glance startled a laugh out of her...but when he disappeared through the doorway, she wondered how someone like him knew all the old stories.

She frowned to herself. Of course he must've been a child once, with someone to tell him the tales, some twisted, some true.

Outside the bathroom door, she left him her baggiest pair of boy's jeans—and her silly sylfana sisters thought diaphanous gowns of spider silk were comfortable—before she stepped out onto the back patio with its ancient wooden picnic table to shake the last of the sand from her wings. One whisper to the night breeze carried the dust and sweat away. Thanks to her heritage and her knack, she didn't usually need showers.

What a pity.

While she nibbled on a piece of a chocolate bar, she imagined the water coursing down the hard planes of Vaile's chest, feathering rivulets through the rings of his hair like the streams coursed through the dark woods. Down the water would go, around the pillar of his flesh... In the cottage, the pipes groaned before she could.

By the time he stepped out to join her, she had her breath under control.

Until he crossed under the dim patio light...then her breath was gone again. Oh, such a human pleasure!

What were lazy sags of denim on her was skintight midnight-blue over his lean hips. She swallowed past the lump in her throat. He had pulled the zipper barely to half mast, and the shadow behind the fly teased her with sights unseen.

She dragged her gaze up. When she had grabbed herself an open back halter dress, she hadn't found anything that would fit him better—not that he had seemed ill at ease with his state of undress out on the beach. Now the crisscross straps that normally felt so free and left her wings exposed seemed a strangling confinement.

He halted beside her on the edge of the pavers where the pine duff softened the stone. He hadn't put his shoes back on, but he didn't seem bothered by the damp night on his bare toes. Instead, he gestured at the pale will-o'-the-wisps that danced among the closest pines.

"I thought maybe you would hide your wings and weird lights again," he said. "Try to make me think I imagined it all."

"You'll forget soon enough once you leave. Humans can't sustain the memory of us without our presence. Yet another symptom of our nothingness." Which was worse? Being nothing, or being forgotten by him? She tilted her face toward the drifting sparkles that were only a shade lighter than her moon-green dress. "Besides, the wisps go where they please. Even our queen with all her power can't command them."

"They follow you everywhere, though. I saw them trailing after you on our beach runs." He snorted. "I thought I was hyperventilating."

She slanted a glance at him. "Do you often breathe heavy?"

He grinned. "Only when watching you."

The heat in her cheeks felt nice in the cool air. "The wisps actually gave me the idea to run away. They would dance in on my breezes. And then dance out again. As far as the fae are concerned, I am not much more significant than they are. I thought if they could just float off so could I."

"You aren't insignificant. You aren't nothing."

She shook her head, surprised at the intensity in his voice.

He was silent a moment, seeming to gather himself. "What will you do next?"

"Run again. They haven't caught me yet." This time, the thought of escape didn't ratchet up her heartbeat with the thrill of fooling the hunters. Instead, a twinge, sharp as a runner's cramp, made her cover her heart with her hand. The blue stone pressed against the pulse of her wrist.

"Not tonight anyway."

A grim note in his voice made her stiffen.

“You can’t run tonight,” he clarified. “They are out there, looking, and this is as good a place as any to hide. Now, are you going to share that chocolate?” When she passed him the gold foil-wrapped bar, he broke off a square. “Ah, the good stuff.”

He creased the foil carefully over the remaining bar and then licked a chocolate sliver off his fingertip, as if even that tiny taste was a treat to be savored. The steel band of his ring glinted, but the view of his tongue roused a damp heat between her legs and banished her moment of disquiet. A man who knew chocolate was a man to be treasured.

She cleared her suddenly tight throat as he handed her back the bar. “Dark, seventy percent, shade-grown, single origin. You need only one piece. Not that the fae understand that. They prefer multi-night feasts with dozens of courses. The napkins alone would cover the beach in both directions.”

“That must be something to see.”

The intensity of his gaze over the chocolate made her think of the hunters’ hounds eyeing one of those courses. She laid the bar on the picnic table; if she put it in her pocket, the chocolate would melt in an instant from the heat of her flushed skin.

Her wings flexed forward, curving around her to hide her hands—a silly, nervous gesture. She smoothed back the edges self-consciously. “That is pretty much all you get...what you see. Most of the banquets are illusion. You can have endless courses when the food never fills your belly. The wine is water, and silty at that, or so you notice when you wake the next day with mud under your tongue. The napkins are only dead leaves.”

“Then why not just be happy with a piece of real chocolate? The good stuff, of course.”

“The fae would laugh at you for even suggesting it. Our queen comes to power based on the force of her illusions. She keeps the throne by her ability to hold the entire court under

her spell.” She shrugged. “Besides, everything—even good chocolate—gets old after a century or so.”

He was silent a moment, letting the chocolate melt in his mouth. Finally he said, “Not everything.”

He took her in his arms, a slow embrace she could have fended off—if she wanted to.

“Tonight,” he murmured. “Tonight you can stop running.”

His kiss was even slower than his embrace. She tasted the chocolate first, of course: sweet complexity with a touch of bitterness. The night breeze flirted with the hem of her short dress, shifting over her thighs. His mouth slanted across hers, that full lower lip a soft and generous gift she accepted with delight.

His earthy desire wrapped around her, almost tighter than her own wings and so intense the hunters’ dogs would be hard pressed to find even a whiff of fae beneath his excitement...or her own.

Her pounding heart left no room for illusion. She wanted this. Wanted Vaile. She wanted him not just for the protection his touch offered but for the warmth that blazed from him, the life she could pretend to live as long as the night lasted.

“Come inside,” she whispered against his lips.

“Gladly.”

She led him to her room. The wisps outside the window provided the only illumination, dancing like silver and gold raindrops over the old glass.

He drew her close to kiss her again and then cast a dubious glance over his shoulder. “Will that bed hold us?”

“Side by side maybe.”

“Well, I don’t want you any farther away than that.” He stroked his hands down her arms, and his fingertips grazed the forward edges of her wings.

She closed her eyes and sighed.

“You like when I touch them?” His voice dropped with another stroke of his hand down her wings, more lingering this time.

“I...I didn't realize how much.” She stretched against the broad expanse of his chest. “No one else has touched me like this.”

“Silly fairies. Why not?”

“I don't know.” She fanned her fingers over his collarbone not to push him away but to steady herself. “The fae are afraid to touch, I think. It can be overwhelming, this feeling...”

“What feeling? This?” He ducked his head, and his tongue teased the pulse in the hollow of her throat.

“*Any* feeling,” she gasped. When he raised his head, she said more steadily, “The fae have always lived under the strict rule of our queen. For all the wildness of the faedrealii court, she allows no true freedoms. Feelings are too...”

His dark eyes glinted, reflecting the wisps outside. “*Unruly?*”

“Very.”

“And you want to be unruly too.”

She smiled. “That wasn't my intent. I've always been a proper sylfana. But now that you bring it up...”

“Oh, it is up all right.” He bent and lifted her, as easily as one of the hounds might snap a wayward wisp from the air. She shivered a little but not in delight this time. Why had that comparison come to her mind? Maybe because he was strong like the hounds, and lean, so the flex of his muscles played under her palm, denying any chance to pretend she might escape. Not that she wanted to escape him, though.

He laid her down on the bed beneath curls of ivy that decorated the headboard. Smoothing her wings as he pulled his arm out from under her, he stared into her eyes. “If you tell me to go, I will.”

She shook her head and reached for him.

But he resisted her tug on his bare shoulders. He wrapped his fingers around her wrists, gently pinning her to the mattress. “I want to hear you say it. And remember, I’m holding you, so I will know if you lie.”

“Stay,” she whispered.

The darkness of him loomed over her like night. But instead of extinguishing the glow in her core, his nearness only stoked the blaze higher, a bonfire of desire that sparked all the brighter for the shadows around them.

She arched her hips toward him, echoing her words with the curve of her spine. He growled low in his throat and released her wrists, freeing his hands to unknot the halter from behind her neck.

He anchored his arm under the small of her back, holding her in the arch while he danced his tongue from one nipple to the other.

She gave him a breathy laugh and laced her fingers through his dark hair. “That tickles.”

“You wanted to feel.” He traced a slow circle around her areola with his lips, still a tease but hard enough to make her gasp, as if he was drawing the air from her body. “And I want to feel you *here*.” He settled square between her thighs.

She sighed and corkscrewed into his embrace, entwining arms and wingtips around him. She felt him all right, his heat and the friction of his skin. This was a physical enchantment not even the most powerful fae could conjure.

With the halter top undone, she easily shimmied the dress down to her knees and kicked the crumpled fabric aside.

“No panties,” he noted with an approving leer.

“Bras get in the way of wings, underwear gets in the way of —” She smiled slowly. “Flying.”

He stilled, and his arm behind her tightened. “You think I can make you fly?”

“I know you can.” While he was distracted, she tucked one hand between them and eased the zipper on his jeans all the

way down.

With each tick of zipper teeth, he pushed harder toward her. “Olette...” On the last tug, he hissed out a breath as she took the hard length of him in a gentle grip. He bucked against her hand. “Olette, wait. I didn’t think...”

“Then I won’t think either.” She stroked him once, delighting in the velvety slide of his flesh, holding him fast though his body trembled over hers. “Don’t worry. Human and fae might share some commonalities of flesh and blood, but this encounter won’t have any consequences, for either of us, unless I wish it.” And even if she might wish it otherwise, their time together would be as fleeting as the moon’s path across the sky.

“But...”

She captured his mouth with her own, tangled tongue to tongue to draw him back to her own earthly spell. He came willingly.

With fumbling hands, he shucked the denim. Each awkward bump of his hips against her center sent another crest of excitement through her. The cool skin of his flanks, the hot press of his erection left her senses reeling.

But when his hands settled on either side of her, pressing the mattress down, she had to open her eyes, to see him naked.

All that running had given him a warrior’s body, lean and strong. She could spend hours—the kind of enchanted hours that passed as centuries—tracing each line of muscle, each ridge where his pulse throbbed. But she didn’t have that kind of time.

Only the wisps against the window lighted the side of his face. Their dreamy illumination caught and refracted in his eyes and gleamed back at her like a promise. His skin held darker shadows that lured her closer.

When she reached for him though, he caught both her wrists in one hand to still her. “Let me see you,” he murmured.

She squirmed a little under his intense regard. “There’s not that much to see. The fae may be physically more diverse than

humans, but we were all drawn from essentially the same well.”

“I want to see *you*,” he emphasized. “To be sure...”

“This is what I want.” She spread her wings to either side, making a lure of her own, an irresistible soft landing. “I want you.”

Supporting himself on one arm, he cupped her jaw and leaned in for a long, lingering kiss.

“I want that,” she whispered against his mouth. “And more.”

With a sudden flex of her wings, she rolled them.

He caught the edge of the mattress before they fell. “There’s more where that came from. Much more.” With both his hands free, he roamed her body, reshaping her flesh with each stroke of his fingers, each lap of his tongue.

And somehow, through her skin, he loosened her spirit too, made her soar where her wings had never taken her, urging her toward an elemental release unlike any of the magics she’d known.

She gasped, her whole body flush with sensation. Her breasts plumped for his caress, and her nipples drew almost painfully erect. The tingling that rang like silent bells through her depths echoed the ache until her hidden folds wept for his attention.

But when she looked down, his face was as severe and remote as that brief moment on the beach when he had frightened her. He was holding something back. But why?

She touched the chiseled edge of his cheekbone. “Don’t worry,” she whispered. “No consequences, remember? The perfect one-night stand.”

“What if *I* want more?”

When she tried to draw back, he tangled his fist in the pendant. The chain tightened at the back of her neck, not biting—not yet—but a tightening snare. “I don’t have anything

more. I *am* nothing more. Just a dream, gone with the morning light.”

His jaw clenched, the muscle flexing against her palm. “That sounds like something a fairy would say as a tease.”

“It is not a tease. It’s only the truth. See? I’m touching you.” She eased down against his chest, loosening the pendant’s restriction. The brush of her thighs over his didn’t smooth his expression, though. If anything, he clenched harder, all over.

She brushed her cleft down that most rigid of muscles at his center. The jerk of his hips was a truth too, despite the furious set of his mouth. She dipped her head and nibbled at his lower lip. “We have to take what we can, while we can.”

“Definitely spoken like a fairy. *La bella dame sans merci.*”

A cold draft of disquiet swept through her. He’d seemed almost too familiar with the tricks and transgressions of her kin, from the cruel old tales to the carefully sanitized cartoon versions that had fascinated her when she discovered them, and the haunting words of Keats’s poem in Vaile’s voice felt uncomfortably close to the truth. “I didn’t mean—”

“You did mean it. You were touching me, remember?” In one powerful heave, he flipped them again so he was on top, pinning her with his knees between her thighs. “Take it then. Take what you want.”

“Vaile...” Despite her weak protest, she wound her legs behind him. The nudge of his rampant erection made the trailing edges of her wings curl inward as every part of her body made a welcoming nest for him.

His hand worked between them to part her folds, slick with wanting him. The play of his touch made her arch and gasp, and still he held back, making her want and want and want until she thought she would unravel.

She clutched at his biceps, her knees drawn high, while he slid first one finger then two inside her. She writhed against him, a cry caught between her teeth. This was what it must be to come Undone.

He tilted his head back, the pulse of anger in his throat lost beneath the maddening acceleration of his heartbeat. She felt the tidal pull of his blood, his desire, and still he held himself apart while the whirlpool in her belly and thighs circled ever closer to the verge.

Unwilling to go alone—not tonight—she pulled herself up with her hands anchored on the bunched muscles in his shoulders and ducked to bite his nipple. The thud of his heart almost deafened her, and he gasped out her name as he buried himself in one thrust.

Chapter 4

Vaile froze as all breath left him, as if he had just fallen off a cliff after a heart-shredding run.

Oh wait, he *had* done that. This was definitely better.

Olette gazed at him. He stared back, dazzled. The illusion that had hidden her wings earlier in the evening had dampened her otherworldly beauty. Not that she'd been hideous in her human camouflage but since she'd dropped her disguising veil, the pale glow of her skin and the dark red-gold of her hair shimmered—untouchable, and yet here, within his grasp.

She tightened around him in delicious torment. “Now who is without mercy? Don't you dare stop.” She set her teeth over his other nipple, and he shuddered at the cascade of sensation that threatened to... No. How could she be a threat? So delicate, never mind the heft of her wings and her bold resistance to those who pursued her.

She cupped his ass, and the tickle of her wings across his backside made him jerk again. She smiled up at him with fiendish delight. “I said don't stop.”

“Never,” he gritted out.

She was so hot and close around him, pulling him in with such ease he decided he had better rethink that threat—if he had the ability to think, which he didn't, not with his flesh so perfectly bound within her, the aphrodisiac scent of her wings an invisible cloud around them until he was almost dizzy with need.

A grind of his hips, slow and certain, made her gasp and loosen her grasp, letting him ease back and into her again as a wordless appeal trembled on her lips and deep in his bones. He wanted to be here, wanted to give her what she wanted, wanted her to feel all of him.

Again, he eased back and in, setting up a rhythm that she followed with every clench of her hidden muscles, as powerful as her other secret strengths. A tease, a promise, a threat...it all swirled in his head, washing away reality.

There was magic in the world, and by rights he should be terrified to realize how it had captured him—how *she* had captured him with a nip, a tickle, a smile.

And the lush, swelling *feeling* she demanded of him.

Because, damn, he felt it too. How could he not? No wonder the others wanted her, why they wouldn't let her go. They knew, as he now knew, the passion in her was something to be coveted, stolen if necessary.

He raised her hips to his, tilting her to reach deeply, fully. The slick dampness of their coupling glistened where his cock met her smooth mound, gleaming in the wisp light. Underneath his knees, the bed groaned, and Olette echoed it with a moan of her own. The sound quickened his pulse, and he quickened his rhythm, just as they had sprinted together with the hounds of hell behind them, toward that cliff's edge.

This time, he would push them over. This time he would carry her as she fell.

He felt her muscles tightening with anticipation, tempting him to lose control, to forget everything except the lust exploding in his veins, but he powered through every stroke—deeper, fuller—counting the wisps beyond the window to stop himself from coming.

Her breath rattled in sensual pants, singing along his nerves until he was breathing with her, each thrust moving them closer, closer...

Despite his best intentions to linger, the force of her climax seized them both. She jackknifed against him, clasping him tight with arms, wings, the vibrating flesh inside her that contracted around him with a power that made his eyes roll back in his head. Helplessly, his body followed her lead. His cock spasmed in violent bursts. Every spurt rocked him against her, and she called his name in time, more breathless with each gasp.

A last shudder racked him as his limbs collapsed, and he slumped over her, chest heaving. If he'd been thrown down a cliff, rolled across a sand dune and tossed into the ocean to

wash up on the distant shores of some exotic land, he would not have been left more wrecked.

Arms trembling with a mortifying weakness, he managed to prop himself to one side of her. Their legs sprawled entangled, her wing limp across their thighs.

She stared up. “Oh. Oh my.”

The wonder in her voice made him grin. He settled one hand on the soft curve of her backside. Her skin quivered in aftershock. “Did you feel that?”

She rolled her head across the mattress to meet his gaze. “You know I did. Don’t get cocky.”

He lifted one eyebrow and flexed inside her.

She giggled. Then she put her hand over her mouth, but her eyes twinkled at him. Slowly, she lowered her hand. “Very well then. You may get cocky. Again.” She was obviously trying for a tone of royal indifference, but her lowered hand kept lowering, sweeping down the length of him, which made sure that no part of him was going lower.

Thinking of going down was giving him ideas, and he flexed again. Her smile faded and she half closed her eyes, a sultry look.

“We have the night, you said,” he reminded her.

“Every minute. I did not forget.”

“I won’t either. I’ll count each second.”

“So few.” Her whisper tingled on his skin.

“Enough.”

When she might have objected, he kissed her, drawing her in, losing himself again.

It was still dark when they finally fell, side by side, sated.

She splayed across his chest, stroking circles over his skin. With one limp flap of her wing, she covered them both.

As her breath evened, she laughed softly. “Phew. Good thing I’ve been running.”

“Good thing I run faster.” He tightened his arm over her shoulder.

She snuggled down to bump the crown of her head under his chin, her head resting over his heart. “Good thing I got caught.”

Her sigh was warm down his bare chest. But something inside him went cold.

“Not caught,” he protested. “Merely...where you belong.”

She nudged him again. “You think I belong here, hmm? That is what the fae say too. I am a wanted sylfana. Lucky me.”

When he swallowed, the weight of her—which had seemed so negligible before—pressed hard on his chest. “You are lucky to be wanted.”

She tilted her head back and captured his gaze before he could look away. “Wanted by you?”

“Obviously.”

“That makes me feel...” She peppered a row of kisses along his jawline. “Happy.”

“Happy.” It came out as a growl.

“The court is a place of violent expression, from riotous glee to bleak agony, but never just happy. That is too much of a real emotion. I am beyond happy to feel happy.”

He pulled her higher on his chest, never mind the weight that now seemed to push every breath from him. “Then I am... happy too.”

She grinned at him, a slow dawning smile that lightened her blue eyes. “I can tell.”

With a louder growl, he rolled her and slipped into her ready warmth.

She held him close, never looking away, so that he wondered who exactly was caught.

He took his time, measuring each stroke to the depths of her sighs. Her orgasm was slow and languorous, and she stretched full-length against him, her wings spread wide to either side in a shimmering background.

And still she looked at him, so he felt as if he were falling. Unable to bear such intimacy—even with his body buried in hers—he dipped his head to kiss the arch of her neck. The steel chain he had given her was cool against his lips.

“Come with me.” Her murmur vibrated her throat against his tongue.

“I will.” And he did, in one wild tumble like a bird on the wing pierced through the heart.

It was a long time, if not quite an eternity, until he caught his breath. So much for all the early morning and late night running.

But finally he pushed himself up off her and looked down. “This is how I will imagine you.”

She had been smiling—a satisfied, sleepy smile that made him want to summon another hundred hunters just so he could fend them off by kissing her again—but at his words, a faint shadow crossed her eyes. “You will forget.”

“Never.”

“Then maybe I will, with the faedrealii walls around me. When I fade back into the nothing again.”

“No. You aren’t like that.”

“You don’t understand.” The edge of her wing curled to cover her. “I was exactly that.”

Careful not to fall off the narrow bed, he rolled to one side and pulled her close. “That is why you ran away.”

She nodded against his chest. “At first, when she took power after the end of the Iron Wars, the queen would send fae out here just to watch. She has always been curious about humans—many of the fae are—and since you purified your iron into steel, we can walk more freely in the sunlit realm. Sometimes humans would follow us back to the faedrealii.”

He kissed her crown. “I’d follow you anywhere.”

She twisted her head to frown up at him. “Don’t say that. You must never enter the court, or you might never leave.”

“Maybe I wouldn’t mind”—he kept his gaze fixed on hers—“if you were there.”

She bit her lip, hard enough to leave crescents like tiny, blood-red moons. “That would make it worse.” Her eyes glimmered. “If you are feeling something... The queen uses emotion to enhance her power. The rush of anger that speeds the tongue. The lightness of laughter that makes the heart seem to float. The swell of desire that makes the world narrow and deepen. These are magics she wants to take for her own. But she wants more, more than the fae can give.”

He reached up to smooth his thumb over Olette’s lip. “How bad could it be?”

“Bad.” She let out an unsteady breath. “Not long before I ran away, I was summoned to the queen’s chambers. When I arrived, her chancellor made me wait in the corner, because she had a man—a human man—in her bed. He had fallen for a fae and followed one from the world back to court.”

Vaile lifted one eyebrow. “I’ve read the story of Tam Lin. Fairy queens seem prone to such behavior.”

“And fairy princesses too.” She looked away from him. “It wasn’t me that led him to the queen—but it could have been. It *would have been* another like him if I’d stayed. Because the queen asked me to bring more hungering, craving souls like his to the court for her pleasure. But I... I couldn’t. I *won’t*.”

“And if the man wanted a fairy princess?” He flexed his arm, tightening his grip on her.

“Yes, some fae take human lovers, but this man wasn’t just enthralled. He was...empty. The queen had taken everything from him.”

“She killed him.” Vaile kept his voice matter-of-fact.

Olette shook her head. “All that remained was a husk, but he lived, if you want to call it that. She was still working with

her glass knives and burning steel when I arrived, and she spoke aloud as she took the man apart. She was saying, *And this is his heart, which we will call love, because we save the cock for other uses.*”

Vaile winced. “What use is that? No, I don’t want to know.”

“The chancellor keeps a dozen stolen smart phones, and he was so thrilled to show me pictures of what they had done to enhance the queen’s power. They had taken the man’s spleen to render down for anger, a lung for laughter, his leg for fear because the chancellor said cowards run.” She tucked herself tighter against him. “That is when I knew I would run. I looked into the man’s eye—they had plucked out one, and all I can think is the eyes are the window to the soul, and they took his soul—and I saw he knew what he had lost. That man was losing himself, as the fae have already lost themselves. As I will lose myself again and become the nothing I feared.”

“Olette—”

She surged up to kiss him, hard. “When you say my name, I think maybe it is possible I could be more, with you. But I won’t risk you.” She kissed him again.

When she lifted her head, he smoothed back her hair. “Skin to skin, we can’t lie, you said. I see there is something more in you. You have something they don’t. You feel something they can’t. Or won’t. That is why they want you back.”

“That is why I am doomed.” She tried for a wry smile and failed.

“Olette...”

“You made me happy. You don’t have to save me too.” She stroked her fingertip across his lower lip when he would have argued more. “Till tomorrow.”

She opened her wings over them, and a delicate swirl of her aphrodisiac drifted around them. He closed his eyes at the rush of pleasure, not just at her touch but at her happiness.

And he awoke to a tickle against his lashes, light as a fairy’s kiss. He smiled slowly and opened his eyes.

Above him, the morning sky gleamed pale gray between the coils of ivy that framed his resting place. The soft mist sifting down between the leaves—too fine to register on his skin, just heavy enough to remind him of fairies and kissing—had wakened him.

Where was the damn roof?

And where was Olette?

Vaile prowled the boundary of the tiny island. Shallow creeks encircled the area, just as she had said, but the cottage where they had spent the night was mostly a crumbled ruin. The hole over the bed that had let in the rain was one of many, and the bed itself was a pile of pine boughs and damned ivy.

All an illusion—and not one she had cast since she said she wasn't that powerful. No, he had seen only what he wanted to see.

He cursed low under his breath, little more than a growl. What else had been a lie? Her story of running away from her heartless brethren, of wanting only to *feel*? What about her breathless cry as he had sunk into her?

He scratched at a tender spot on his shoulder. It was probably just a rash from the pine needles. Maybe she had never dug her nails into him while she whispered his name.

A glint of gold lured him to the picnic table where they had stood, watching the wisps. Time and rot had eaten through the boards of the tabletop to reveal the cracked concrete patio slab underneath.

At least the chocolate had been real.

He devoured the rest of the bar and crushed the foil into the pocket of his jeans—her jeans. The scent of her was also real, lingering deep in his skin, rare and precious.

A faint imprint of slender bare feet led through the moss across the bridge. The cherry blossoms lay undisturbed—pink and still in the spiral where they had fallen when their sustaining breeze vanished. There, the footprints disappeared.

Olette had disappeared.

He spun the ring on his forefinger. Set in the brushed steel band, the blue stone he had kept turned toward his palm looked dull under the sullen sky. He breathed in the fragrance of her again, his pulse accelerating at the memories, false though they might be.

From the depths of the rare blue amber, a cat's eye gleam sent a ray of light across the smooth surface. He pointed, aligning his fingertip with the arrowing glint of light. That way.

He spread his wings—black as his mood, to match his hunter heart—and launched into the mist.

Chapter 5

Olette ran.

This time, there would be no escape.

She had gone south along the coast, as quickly as she could, hoping the salty air and flowing water would disguise her scent and her tracks. When her thighs started to seize from the running, she flew, though using her fae magics would draw the hunters' attention. Not that flying gave her much advantage in speed or distance; sylfana wings were meant for coy fluttering, not fleeing.

But she had to get far away—not to save herself. The Wild Hunt was too close this time to lie, even to herself, about having a chance to evade the hounds.

She had to lead them as far as she could from Vaile.

The memory of his fingers trailing down her wings made her falter, and she landed with a harsh sob in a spray of sand at the edge of the high-water mark. Thankfully, much of the coast was still wild, and with night coming, the span of beach was empty except for one strutting gull. The bird gave her a sideways glance of professional disdain at her fumbled landing and launched himself inland.

She sank to a crouch, one leg folded under her in the wet sand. She hugged her other knee so the pendant pressed into her breastbone. The muscles in her thighs and wings quivered from exertion. The sensation was nowhere near as pleasant as the night before when Vaile's touch had inspired shivers of desire. She drew the hot memory around her to ward off the chill since her halter dress wasn't much protection from the settling mist.

She needed just another moment to remember the tilt of his smile and how it had lifted her heart like a perfect breeze angled beneath her wings. Another moment, and then she would force herself to rise and run.

But she didn't rise, because more than his touch she longed for the piercing intensity of his gaze, how he had looked past

the illusions and gave her what she so wanted: a chance to feel.

Her throat ached from the wheezing gasps. No wonder more than one of her sylfana sisters had kept their human lovers entranced, never to find their way back to the world. No wonder the queen was stealing and binding the power of emotion. More than the endless running, more than the strain of flight, Olette was crippled by the truth that she would never again feel this way.

She stifled the sobs. Fae tears were too dangerous to shed in the sunlit world. Any magical thing might fall—poison, evil dreams, a river to drown a village. More reasons the faedrealii abided under prohibitions against the Undoing.

Not that she would have to feel anything much longer...

While she mourned, the mist had grown heavy and pressed too close to be natural. She lifted her face, and the droplets beaded on her lashes.

Through the swirling veil, the three hounds paced. Under heavy studded steel collars, their nine heads hung low, blunt muzzles fixed on her scent, panting up geysers of sand. At least she had led them a merry chase—merry for them anyway.

She pushed herself upright, grabbing the pendant as it swung drunkenly, and locked her wobbling knees. Mere exhaustion... She was too numb to feel fear.

The center hound lifted its middle head, and the red-yellow glint of its eye pierced the mist.

But the hounds didn't lunge toward her as she expected. Without a sound, they fanned out to surround her. As they prowled in shrinking circles, their claws left tracks filling with water like fatal wounds in the sand; they could have her in pieces in less than a heartbeat.

Equally silent, another dark shape coalesced through the mist. Black wings arced sharply above the figure, nothing like the languid drape of her wings.

It was a hunter, a being as remorseless as the sylfaniia were silly. Facing him now, she wondered why she had ever thought

she had a chance, even in the good old days when she was still lying to herself.

This made her stolen time with Vaile even more wondrous. She lifted her chin as she waited for the hunter's inevitable command to attack.

He halted, still wreathed in the mist. One of the hounds raised its head and whined, eager for her blood, no doubt. The hunter snapped his finger and pointed. The hound half closed its red-yellow eyes in appeasement, and all three slunk back to his side.

She locked her gaze on the hunter's finger. A stone gleamed in his ring. Hunters usually armed themselves with amber in flaming colors like the hound's eyes. The fossilized tree resin held magics perfectly suspended, much as it encased insects, leaves and small stones. But this amber ring was blue.

Blue, like the pendant around her neck.

Her fist clenched around the stone, driving the edge of the steel bezel into her flesh. Though the iron was too refined to hurt her, still her heart constricted painfully. "Vaile. If that is your name. I have never heard of blue amber."

"Olette. And yes, that is my name, though I give it as rarely as one finds blue amber." He stepped out of the fog he had woven to disguise himself from her.

Actually, part of that fog—the seductive lie that pure sensation would save her—she had held together herself. Her own fault. But it shredded now on the sharp talons that topped his wings and the cold, cruel winds of reality.

All that time she had been fighting against the faedrealii's love of delusion she had never wanted it so badly as this moment. She would just have to reweave it herself, out of the tattered threads of her pride.

Lies and pride offered thin coverage at the moment, though, so she drew the edges of her aching wings around her as she tilted her chin imperiously. "One night. That is all we were supposed to have together. That night is long past."

"It wasn't enough."

The low pitch of his voice reverberated through her, finding a yearning echo in places deep within her core.

“It was more than you deserved,” she said. “Even skin to skin, you lied.”

As she yanked the chain over her head, she swallowed against the hurt that cracked her voice. That was not a truth she would give him.

“I didn’t lie to you. You didn’t ask me anything.”

As if that made her feel less the fool. “You should have just let the hounds shred me yesterday when they caught us on the beach.”

“No.”

Without the softening human glamour he had worn, his skin shone like the backlit razor edge of an obsidian blade, highlighted against the velvety black of his wings and the darkly mellow gleam of his leather leggings. The steel-studded collar around his neck glinted like bared teeth. But his naked chest was the same, a broad expanse of flight-honed muscle where she had rested her head last night.

She squelched the memory and lifted her lip in a sneer. “I know the Lord Hunter keeps all his killers on a short leash. Did you need a night with a sylfana so badly?”

His bare shoulders squared against the arc of wings as he met her gaze without flinching. “No. I wanted you.”

The answer silenced her for a heartbeat. “Why?”

He shrugged, and his wings dipped in an almost bashful movement. “This.”

At first, she didn’t understand what he was showing her. Then he reached up to spread his long fingers in a V on both sides of a raised scar at the joint where his wing met his shoulder. Though the edges had knit well, the wound must have been horrific. In fact, his wing must have been nearly severed...

“You,” she whispered. “The hunter whelp.”

“I did not even have a name then.” His finger slid over the knot of scarring. “You told me I wouldn’t feel it forever. You were wrong. I still feel it. But it reminds me of what I wished for, what I wanted most.”

“To fly.”

“No, I wanted you,” he repeated. “Apparently it was you who decided to fly away.”

Her throat tightened. “Not soon enough, not far enough.”

“After I became a hunter fully fledged, I saw you at one of those never-ending feasts. The wisps danced around you, and the breeze tugged your hair into loops around your shoulders. You just stood there, but every part of you yearned for flight.”

That could have been any one of hundreds of nights. “The queen’s illusions are much too strong for me to see through, but her court always stinks of ashes when I face into the wind.”

“I never noticed anything except you. I wanted to make you dance.”

Olette narrowed her eyes. “You are probably a fae strong enough to force me to burn through my slippers.”

“No. I meant...” The hesitation went on long enough for even a long-lived fae to get impatient. “I wanted you to want to dance. With me.”

She wished she had seen him on that night, just another one of the queen’s hunters, keeping watch from the shadows—watching for trouble both beyond and within the faedrealii. They could have indulged in one of the court’s meaningless liaisons and parted ways without this pain. “You felt that longing? Then don’t you see that the Lord Hunter was right? The fae should be free to want, to desire, to feel. It is a magic within us, and we have no right to steal it from others.”

He loosed a rough laugh. “You say the Lord Hunter was right? He killed my brothers, almost killed me. Wanting you as I did—until you filled all my senses and every path I took on the hunt brought me back to you—only proves the queen was right to outlaw the Undoing.”

She shook her head with bitter resignation. “So you told the queen you would hunt me down, show me the error of my ways.”

“I told them I could bring you back alive.”

“I won’t go back. Especially not with you. You are everything I finally left behind. Cold and unfeeling.”

His eyes darkened as he stepped into her space. The arc of his wings made his looming mass even more imposing. “Not cold at least,” he growled. “Didn’t I prove that last night?”

Rage at the reminder—and the sudden, fierce longing it roused in her that made her whole body clench with need—conjured one last burst of strength in her, and she hurled the necklace at him. The breeze spun up in answering agitation and flung an arc of sand with the chain. Vaile lifted one arm to shield his eyes.

She whirled and ran.

The hounds howled in delight at the renewal of the chase. Their claws hissed in the sand behind her.

With their hot breath on her heels, she took a half-dozen steps and launched herself out of the hunter’s mist into the crystalline night sky.

A sylfana’s wings might not be made for high-speed chases, but desperate fury pumped fresh power past her aches. The breeze belled under her wings, urging her upward. She thrust herself higher with each stroke and swirl.

The woeful howl of the earthbound hounds, deprived of their prey, echoed in the air, but a darker pressure threatened her from behind.

Without looking back, she darted sideways. She tucked her shoulder and angled her wing to catch the wind. The force tumbled her end over end, and she jolted onto the new trajectory like a butterfly catching erratic breezes.

Vaile overshot her like a black eagle—a cursing eagle. The downdraft from his heavy wing beat almost sucked the air out

from under her, but she caught the rising edge of the vortex in his wake and flitted away, out over the waves.

She would not lie to herself. She could tease the hunter only so long; his strength and stamina completely eclipsed hers. He could fly circles around her—literally. Even now, he was looping around in pursuit, and though she might dodge him with a butterfly's whimsy, he would double back again and again. But she would not walk meekly back into her prison. He would have to drag her back. And he would have to catch her first.

He dove. She dodged. They had skipped the winged faes' aerial foreplay in their first encounter, and now the dance was a deadly game with only one winner. Another lunge and evasion, but this time she lost altitude. The spray from the waves tickled her legs and added damp weight to her wings. Another reckless midair tumble edged her farther out to sea.

Too far.

Her heart crashed in her chest, louder than the waves breaking on the shore that now seemed frighteningly far away.

“Olette, come back. Olette!”

When she had thought he was human, she told him that the fae believed names had power, but only now did she appreciate how that string of syllables that defined her could lift her—as when he had shouted her name on the verge of his release—or tear her apart as it did now. How she longed for her fae lies.

He overflowed her, and she darted to evade him, but her wings were tiring. Her bones burned with exhaustion, and the fitful wind of her knack whistled a weak apology past her ears. She faltered, and her wingtip grazed the water.

She gasped as she cartwheeled through the air. Her fingers touched the water. She closed her eyes to wait for the chill kiss of the ocean. This was not such an unexpected way to die—in the embrace of the ocean as cold, relentless and unchanging as the faedrealii itself, but oh no, she had never meant to bring Vaile down with her.

A heavy weight slammed between her helplessly spreading wings, and her eyes snapped open at the impact as Vaile, clamping his arm around her belly, tried to lift them from the fatal plunge.

The trailing edges of his wings hit the water with a vicious slap, and water sprayed up around them. He strained against gravity and the weight of water, as if by the magic of his ferocious will alone he could power them skyward.

His leathery wings snapped out to full extension, shedding droplets in a shimmering arch that caught the moonlight. For a heartbeat, they hung together, suspended in the monochrome rainbow of night-dark ocean, pale foam and silvery droplets. Then one more powerful downward thrust rocked her head back against his shoulder, and they shot free, high above the waves.

She had never commanded such power on the wing, and the wild thrill of it made her pulse sing in her veins.

Or maybe that was Vaile's arm, locked tight under her breasts.

"Drop me," she hissed. "Leave me to drown."

"Let you escape, you mean? After all I did to hunt you down? That's *my* knack, you know. I always find what I want."

"Your prey."

"You."

Why would he tell her his knack? Maybe he thought telling her would keep her from running again. As if she would ever have another chance. Back in the faedrealii, her desires would wither, like her rarely used wings. Returning to a sylfana's carefree, thoughtless existence, she would forget everything she had felt. She would even forget how badly she had wanted to feel at all. Nor would she be bothered by the cruelty of Vaile's betrayal—cold comfort at that. "Just tear off my wings, and drop me in the ocean."

His breath was a warm sigh in her ear, and his bare chest almost scorched the damp folds of her wings trapped between

their bodies. “Olette—”

“Whatever you do to me, it will be no worse than what the queen has in mind.”

He tightened his grasp. “Even she is not so...well, she is that cruel, and you said you have seen worse from her, but you haven’t done anything that unforgivable. Yet.”

“I led that man not to his death but to the loss of everything that made him who he was, from his delights to his fears. I gave him to the queen, and she took all that from him. And worst of all?” Held against him so close, she could only speak the truth. “I told myself that I was running away to make his sacrifice meaningful, to make sure that even though he had been used up, I would never again be used to ensnare another man. But the truth is, when I saw those treasures of his emotions, I wanted to feel them too. Like our queen, I wanted to take that passion, all of it, and that is why I will never forgive myself.”

The wind of their flight nudged tears from her eyes—just salty water. There was no magic of emotion in them.

Although the tears seemed to sap Vaile’s power—because he dove toward the shore—he backwinged abruptly, in one leathery sweep, to land them with a knee-jarring thud. He kept a grip on her arm as he circled around in front of her. It wouldn’t take but a moment for the hounds to catch up. For that moment, though, they were alone.

But his expression wasn’t horrified. He looked pissed, his eyes sparking with the same light as the angry hounds. “What you saw the queen do to enhance her power is terrible, no doubt. But the illusions of the faedrealii must remain intact. If all the hunters had been killed the night the old lord came Undone and if all the fae were loosed of the queen’s restraints, do you think they would stay behind the walls of the court? No, they would take to the sunlit world with their havoc. We save two realms by holding ourselves apart.”

“At what cost?”

“It could be worse. It has been worse, though not since the Iron Wars. But now that I’ve found you, that is over. The faedrealii will take you back like nothing ever happened.”

“Exactly,” Olette whispered. “Like nothing.”

He growled, making her heart race faster than when the hounds were on her heels. “You. Aren’t. Nothing.”

“But I will be, once I’m back there.”

“At least you’ll be alive.”

She had come alive, one night in his arms. “Never again.”

His jaw worked, but he didn’t answer. He tightened his grip so she had no chance to flee as he reached into his back pocket and withdrew a narrow steel vial. The steel held just enough carbon to contain but not destroy the fae magic inside.

If only humans realized how much protection they had lost against the fae, purifying all their iron into steel. Then again, if they had known, she—silly little sylfana that she was—would never have been able to cross into their world. The steel-born fae were no longer kept at bay by the old charms.

But now Vaile was conjuring the way back. He uncorked the vial and sprinkled the contents in a circle around their feet. The dust drifted into the sand, and the spores sprouted with preternatural speed to mark the shifting boundary between realms. Button-sized caps spread like little golden wings, and Olette couldn’t help but breathe the whiff of honey that floated through the widening gateway.

The fragrance was another lie; there was nothing sweet about the faedrealii. Any human who stepped into the circle before the gate magic dissipated would awaken trapped in a realm that would probably destroy mind and soul if not body.

And if a human ate the spores... The phrase “magic mushroom” was more appropriate than mortals knew.

She closed her eyes as the gate magic encircled her, and she slipped into the dream.

Or, considering the darkly menacing fae hunter behind her, into her nightmare...

Chapter 6

Vaile hadn't caught even the briefest glimpse of Olette in... forever. In the sunlit world, only a couple of weeks had passed. But in the faedrealii court, the separation stretched like an eternity. That one night of fierce sensation had obviously skewed his perceptions.

The Lord Hunter—one of the hunters who had been away when the old lord had come Undone—had kept him busy since his return. His brethren's eyes were on him, watchful and wondering why he had taken a full cycle of the moon to find one missing sylfana. Since he couldn't admit he had found her on the very first day and then proceeded to run after her every day thereafter, on foot, without actually catching her, he bit his tongue and took the hounds' dung tasks the Lord Hunter slung at him. He had to be the unflinching hunter; if they thought he was losing his edge, they would turn on him quicker than the hounds. And then they would turn their vicious attention to Olette.

But a dozen more fae repatriations—most of them straightforward, though three had been lethal—couldn't keep his mind off one sweet sylfana. In fact, the captures had only made him think harder.

Just as his brethren were watching him, he was listening to them. The hunters were being called on more and more often to find wandering fae. The mood of the faedrealii, always mercurial and secretive, was changing, and the power of the queen's illusions—though holding for the moment—seemed to be thinning. He might not have even noticed the pattern except that Olette had forced him to open his eyes. What if the faedrealii deserters had wanted only what she wanted—a chance to feel, to live?

Ever since the old Lord Hunter had tried to unwing him as a whelp, he had believed in the queen's edict against the Undoing. More than believe in it, he had fought and killed to defend it.

What if he had been wrong?

Certainly the three delinquent fae he had confronted had been abroad with nefarious purposes. The crazed kobalt had been hacking down a ring of birch trees that marked the queen's permanent private gate into the sunlit world. When Vaile had tried to talk to him, the kobalt had cackled, "We must close the circles before we all run out."

Then he turned the ax on himself. Not a pleasant end, and frustrating too since it left many questions in Vaile's uneasy mind.

The very next night, he had found two missing undines at a human watering hole where they had been killing men in their cups—literally. They were crouched over an unconscious man, pouring the frothy contents of a beer can right up his nostrils.

"He was already drowning his sorrows," one of the willowy sprites told Vaile.

"We are granting their wishes when we drown them quicker," said the other.

The undines reminded him of Olette. They were too skinny and sinuous for his taste, lacking the sylfana's sleek flight muscles, but something about their winsome sideways smiles weakened him. So he followed them to their stream to see why they had left. And it was true, the humans had tossed enough empty beer bottles, snack bags, and cigarette butts along the reedy banks to make a path that led straight to their guilty lips.

"You know the queen won't interfere if you kill men," he reminded the undines. The memory of Olette agonizing over how she had been made to do worse roughened his voice. "But you can't leave your fae waters."

"We couldn't before," said one. "Not when horses crossed our bridges on iron-shod hooves, not when the miller's iron-bound wheel circled through our stream..." The other undine finished, "But now we can. And we will. This world will fall to the steel-born fae."

Then, without even counting to three, they pushed him into the stream.

What they lacked in muscle they made up for in ferocity, needle teeth, and the noxious slime that oozed from their skin when they were roused to a killing frenzy. They fought him past all reason, past the point where any of them could have stopped. As they coiled around him, dragging him down through the water—that was barely deeper than his waist, damn it—he had a moment where he thought maybe it would be better to let the last of the air bubbles past his gritted teeth. If they were so determined to be free, who was he to stop them? Did he really care that much about living?

Olette's blue eyes had flashed in his imagination. She hadn't been able to hide that brilliant color—it shone even through her human guise. She had risked everything to live.

As water poured into his mouth, he released the magic in the blue amber ring. The light—brighter than the sun—exploded through the roiling waves, and the grasping hands fell away from him. He shot to his feet, flailing and choking.

Water streamed from his eyes, and he clenched his wings close to hold them away from the undines, floating belly up beside him. Even as he watched, they started to unravel in strands of algae.

The amber sun was a weapon of last resort. Too many fae had been lost during the Iron Wars, and every passing weakened the queen's power. Although now that she was drawing magics from human collections, perhaps she would kill *him* in a fit of grand annoyance at his failure to bring the undines back alive.

He slogged out of the stream. By all that was dark and shining, why hadn't they yielded? As overwhelmed as the hunters were, the undines could have pretended compliance and returned to their killing as soon as his back was turned.

His boots slipped in the mud as his knees suddenly weakened. Was Olette planning exactly that? He had turned his back on her as soon as the gate had opened to the faedrealii. But he hadn't been able to stop himself from glancing around. Her sylfana sisters had bustled forward to

surround her, and he caught only a glimpse of her fire-touched hair when she averted her face without meeting his gaze.

If she did escape again, the Lord of the Hunt might send another hunter—one who would not hesitate to use the amber sun's fatal power against her.

He didn't understand what was happening in the queen's court, but he knew a certain sylfana who hadn't been afraid to step into the unknown.

In a small oxbow of the stream lay the broken circle of toadstools that had been the undines' gate to the faedrealii. He completed the circle with his vial of spores and stepped through.

There was only one more fae he needed to catch.

So when guard duty at the queen's next feast was tossed his way, he just bowed his head in acknowledgment while his brother hunters jeered, but this time he bit his cheek to hide his smile.

Surely Olette would be there.

Sometimes the queen led her courtiers out of the faedrealii to dance in the reflected sunlight of a full moon, but apparently she was loathe to risk any more runaways. For this gathering, the shifting walls of the court had drawn back far enough to resemble a poppy field at dusk. As if a summer sun had just set, a warm glow lingered across the illusory sky, but the scarlet blooms were already darkening toward purple.

The queen held her fae in concentric rings. Her attendants lingered nearby, with less privileged courtiers farther out. Her inner circle stood close at hand, her hobgnome chancellor hopping at her elbow while her current favorite—a whispered half-blood with rounded human ears and catlike ylvish eyes—solicitously guided her over the rolling grounds. Dozens of other fae drifted across the field in small groups, their laughter like distant bells. Someone had even procured a badminton set, and the soft *thwack* of rackets was as indolent as a lazy heartbeat.

Vaile took up a hunter's stance on the farthest edge of the court. From the small rise beside a spreading tree, he had an uninterrupted view across the crowd.

The vantage point also made him clearly face the fact—despite the idyllic picture—he was not protecting the faedrealii but imprisoning it.

He shifted restlessly, ruffling his wings to create a little breeze in the sultry air. He should curse Olette for making him realize how unhappy the fae were...and how unhappy he had become. But he couldn't close his eyes again; that was not a hunter's way. He was on the hunt, and his knack would find his answers.

The glow of the sky did not falter, held in stasis by the queen's magic, but will-o'-the-wisps emerged to dance among the poppies. Their glinting light brightened the crimson petals like the explosions of miniature fireworks, making the shadows beneath his tree seem darker by comparison. Through the heavy drape of leaves, probably no one would even notice him except for the wisps, and they would never tell anyone, except maybe...

The slow wave of his wings halted, but the breeze still swirled around him with a fragrance that haunted his waking dreams.

He turned just in time to catch a flutter of white.

“Olette.” His voice caught raggedly on her name.

She paused, though he had used no force to stop her, and glanced over her winged shoulder. “I didn't know anyone was here.”

He wondered if he should believe her. Without his skin against hers, he couldn't be sure. But when he took a step toward her, she sidled back. Her hands fisted in her gold spider silk skirts, whisking the long train away, as if she didn't want any part of her near him.

He stopped. “If you are looking for a place to hide, there's still room under here.”

“Is that what you were doing here? Hiding?”

“I was hoping to see you.”

She snapped out her wings in a *well, here I am* motion, but she pulled her arms close to tighten the spider silk around her like golden armor. “I have plenty of fae watching me. They make sure I don’t go anywhere alone, and I don’t have access to any gate spores. I suppose you can see me whenever you want since I’m going nowhere.”

The glitter in her blue eyes, sharp in the otherwise soft-focus setting, was a clear warning that he might see her, but he had better not touch. So he looked his greedy fill.

She was slighter than he remembered, as fragile as the young sylfana who had wished his wing whole. His fingers clenched, as if he could gauge the slenderness of her wrists without touching her. Barely any part of her was exposed to touch; her gold gown covered her almost entirely, from the long sleeves ending in deep scallops over the backs of her hands, to the high collar that flared out at the points of her jaw. The red-gold amber of her hair gleamed against the dress, which made her face more wan by comparison. But he supposed she hadn’t been out running lately. Even the intermittent sun on the rugged coast where he’d found her would have given her some color.

When she had said she would never feel alive again, he hadn’t believed her. Now he did. He had brought her back, but he had left something precious behind.

Remorse nipped him, a sharpness like accidentally sitting on an annoyed wisp. “Hunters are being sent out to retrieve more and more fugitive fae. You started something when you bolted.”

“There were always fae runaways. The only difference is no one noticed before.” She glanced down, and the aggressive spread of her wings wilted. “It is only because of me that anyone notices now.”

With her attention diverted, he took the opportunity to close the distance between them. When he caught her arm, his fingertips met. She *was* thinner, fading before his eyes.

As he tugged her into the shadow of the tree, the backs of his knuckles brushed the side of her breast through the silky weave of her gown, but he ignored the awareness that sizzled through his body. “If anybody is guilty of turning attention to the runaways, it is me. So go ahead and blame me.” He would rather face the bold, angry Olette than this pensive sylfana he barely recognized.

She finally raised her eyes. In place of the cold glitter, her gaze clouded, like the smoky occlusions in his blue amber. “I can’t blame you, not when I know why you are so afraid.”

“I am not—”

Avoiding his studded hunter collar, she lifted her hand toward his shoulder, where the knot of scar still twisted over the wing joint. “The Lord Hunter almost undid you, as he came Undone himself.”

Vaile stiffened at the almost imperceptible brush of her fingers. “It’s nothing. You wished me back together again.”

“What did you wish for? To fly? Yet here you are.” She shook her head. “I guess I was never strong enough to be a fairy princess.”

“Olette—”

She jerked her hand away. “Don’t say my name. It reminds me of...things.”

“I want to remind you.” He tightened his grip on her arm to draw her up against his bare chest. Sometimes he resented the hunters’ archaic garb—or lack thereof—but now he appreciated the absence of at least that barrier between them. “We don’t have to lose what we found out there. We can still have that, here, without the risk of the Undoing.”

In the imaginary warmth and faked shadows of the faedrealii, only the feel of her was real. When he pressed her close, her breasts were a softer heat through the gold gown, and the silky folds of the skirt fanned around his leather-clad legs. He slid one hand behind her neck, though the spider silk came between them.

“Hunter...” she murmured.

Her breathy sigh tightened the already-snug fit of his jeans. “Vaile,” he reminded her. “Whatever you might think, I am not still that nameless whelp.”

“If only you were, then I would still be the thoughtless sylfana, and I could forget.”

“Forget what?”

“Everything.”

He leaned down, angling his mouth above hers. “Even me?”

“Especially you.” She stared up at him without blinking. “If you kiss me, I will bite like one of your hounds.”

“I almost believe you.” He shifted his grip to cup her jaw, just at the edge of her high gold collar. “But not quite.”

The soft, shining silk was nothing like the studded hunter leash around his own neck, yet he thought perhaps they were both bound, in their own ways. He took a breath and ran his thumb over the hollow of her cheek to her lower lip.

“Skin to skin, we cannot lie,” he told her, as if she might have forgotten that.

And he covered her mouth with his own.

She did not bite, but her sharp inhalation seemed to yank the air from his body. For a dizzy heartbeat, he felt as if they had gone aloft; every muscle was tight with yearning, his breath and heart suspended. His wings spread in impulsive reaction, rattling the leaves above their heads.

Though he had meant to tease her with the touch, the sensation of her lips softening and opening under his caught him like a gale force wind and ripped away any intention and all thought.

With a groan, he buried his hands in her hair, tangling his fingers in the red-gold locks to tilt her head to his onslaught. He swept his tongue across the inner rim of her lip and sealed their breath between them as he locked his mouth over hers. The taste of her reminded him of their one night in her island cabin, how she had come apart so sweetly in his arms, how she

had whispered his name without hesitation, how she had told him she was happy.... His wings arched forward, like a raptor mantling its prey. He wanted that from her again, wanted everything, from her violent release to her sleepy smile.

The bone-deep force of the primal response stunned him into gentling the kiss. He lightened the pressure of his mouth and smoothed his hands down her arms—as much to soothe himself as to apologize for his ferocity. Not that she had ever been afraid of him, or of anything else for that matter.

Maybe she was right, and he was the one who had always been afraid.

Slowly, letting the slick moisture bind their lips until the last possible second, he lifted his head to look down into her dazed eyes.

He skimmed his hands up her gold sleeves to the too-sharp point of her shoulders. “You need chocolate.”

She took a shuddering breath—whether at his touch or the thought of chocolate, he wasn’t sure—and swayed toward him. “I need only one thing...”

His body yearned toward hers in answer. “Yeah?”

She leaned fractionally closer to him, so her nipples—peaked through the silky gold—grazed his bare chest. “I want you...”

He swallowed hard.

“To let. Me. Go.”

She put no magic in the words, but his hands sprang open as if gremlins had wrenched back his fingers.

She stood there a moment without fleeing, poised with her wings half spread. Her unflinching gaze pierced him like the devastating light of the blue-amber sun, shredding him inside. It was he who stepped back.

A faint, mocking breeze swirled between them, bearing a drift of poppy petals. In the shadow under the tree, the blossoms were dark as old blood. He had told her once that his

only fear had been not catching her. He had found her—it was his knack, after all—and yet somehow he had lost her too.

She finally averted her gaze, but her words seemed to pin him still. “If my wishes had any power, hunter, I would wish that I would never see you again.”

As she turned on her heel, the obliging breezes billowed the train of her long skirt out behind her as she walked away, leaving him with the withering petals and the wild-sweet taste of her turning bitter on his tongue.

Chapter 7

Out in the sunlit world, the moon was waning, thinning the barriers between the realms until the gate magic was accessible even to the weakest fae—not that Olette had seen sun or moon lately, since she lacked the spores to create even the smallest, shortest passage.

But the queen had summoned all her courtiers to her, which meant some agitation in the faedrealii. Perhaps the restlessness preceded a jaunt across some starlit moor or maybe a wild tear down some unsuspecting Main Street; the stables of the Steel-Born Court provided horsepower in many forms.

Whichever way the faedrealii went, Olette knew she would not be attending, not since she had declined the queen's command to procure another victim for her magical dissections.

Olette hadn't denied the queen to her face, but the hobgnome chancellor—who had relayed the command—looked as aghast as if she had.

“You must go.” The overbearing hobgnome slicked back his long, pointy ears in dismay. His sallow skin was ghoulish in the pale blue-green light of the stolen smart phones strung on a cord around his neck. The phones blinked on and off with the images of ghostly faces. The glass and precious metals could be spelled to hold various magics, but Olette didn't want to know if the faces were leftover avatars of the former owners...or perhaps the former owners themselves. “The queen says you seem to have a knack for bringing back the most expressively emotive subjects.” The hobgnome peered at her, his beady, jet-black eyes nothing like the jovial squint of the chipmunk-cheeked statuary she'd seen in human gardens.

No fae could force out the true nature of another fae's knack—not even the queen—though tricking, wheedling and guessing were considered acceptable tactics. But taboo or no, even the most obsequious courtier in the faedrealii would be reluctant to find his knack the sole focus of the queen's formidable attention.

Olette forced herself to remain impassive, her wings slack from her shoulders, while her mind whirled at the chancellor's evident interest on the queen's behalf.

Why had Queen Ankha even noticed her? Were the impulsive little breezes a manifestation of a stronger knack to have drawn royal interest? Olette let out a slow breath to calm her racing pulse. She had always thought merely being sylfana had attracted the poor humans who had followed her to their doom. Yet now she wondered... Once, before her wings had unfurled and before the sylfana allure and aphrodisiac had fully manifested, she had freed a nameless wounded whelp to fly.

The memory of the full-fledged hunter under her hands in the ruined cabin—his pulse and his cock rising to her touch—threatened her illusion of detachment. What else could she set free? For a moment, the possibilities diverted her. What if she was not as weak as she had always thought?

Just as quickly though, the truth broadsided her, knocking the breath from her lungs as easily as a tornado shred frail sylfana wings.

What she had most yearned for—*to feel, to live, to be free*—had run riot over the humans' caution, loosed their inhibitions, unfettered their emotions...and ultimately meant their magical dismemberment to feed the queen's pitiless curiosity and need for power. And Vaile had taken a bigger risk than he knew, using her knack against her to ensnare her senses and ultimately her body. If she had Undone his fae prohibition against true emotion, he might have become like the old, mad Lord Hunter himself—or another victim of Queen Ankha's gruesome thievery.

Discovering her own power to set spirits free, now, when she was most thoroughly imprisoned, made her laugh until her throat burned as if she had swallowed pure iron.

The chancellor perked his ears and gave her a peg-toothed smile. "So you will go?"

She leaned down to return the smile. "Never, ever again."

To her surprise, he had let her walk away, and the queen had not pursued the matter. No one was pursuing her anymore. Maybe she had finally become the nothing she had feared, less meaningful even than her errant breezes.

So while the rest of the courtiers made their way to the throne room, she went the opposite direction, down into corridors of the faedrealii she had never roamed. A few wisps accompanied her, and their tiny lights reflected off the old white tiles that lined the walls. When she trailed her fingers over the tiles, pieces flaked away to reveal packed earth. A red worm curved out of the dirt below her hand and plunged right back in, scattering dark crumbs on the cracked stone floor below.

The queen's illusions had not graced these halls for a very long time, perhaps not since iron ruled the sunlit world. For a moment, Olette almost understood the need to fill the halls again with fae power...until the old tiles gave way to iron doors, staggered at intervals down the corridor into the shadows.

The metal filled the hall with cold power, older than the fae, and the wisps whirled in agitation. But Olette crept to the first door.

It stood ajar, and the cell beyond was empty. She crossed the hall to the next door, two solid panels of embossed iron. She reached for the small wooden latch in the center of the door and then hesitated.

Even through the iron, she sensed silence waiting on the other side—a silence so vast, the mischievous wisps hung motionless.

Ice rimed the doorway a hands-breadth thick, and as she watched, words appeared, melting into the white frost to reveal the black iron underneath: *Touch. And die.*

She hurried on.

The next cell was closed with nothing more than a churchyard gate. The whitewash had chipped off the iron bars,

and the decorative spear points did not even reach the top of the door frame.

Not that this particular prisoner could escape...

In a rush of sick shock, Olette wondered why they had bothered to lock the man up when they had taken his second leg.

She must have gasped because he pushed himself up onto his hips to stare at her with his one remaining eye. His collared shirt hung open, framing the ruin of his chest where the queen had taken her prizes. "You. I remember you."

Hazel. His eye was hazel, and his hair was sandy; she hadn't remembered those details about him. Now she would never forget, although there was nothing of blame in his eye or the hatred she expected. He was empty—that hatred having been taken by Ankha for her magics.

Olette sank to her knees in front of the gate. The nearness of the iron made her skin prickle like the first burn she had gotten from the light of the sun and its reflection from the ocean, but the stone floor sucked the warmth from her palms. "I am so sorry. I didn't know..." She swallowed back the pointless excuses. Maybe she hadn't led this man astray, but others had followed her and she had no idea what became of them.

"I did." He pulled himself toward her and wrapped his fingers around the bars, immune as any human to the touch of iron. When he tipped his forehead into the gate, the metal rang with a hollow gong. "I knew better than to follow a pretty young girl into the alley. But it wasn't even you, was it? Just someone who looked a little like you."

"I'm sorry," she whispered again. "She wouldn't have known either about this...this terrible thing that was done to you." As if merely toying with him would have been better. But he might've escaped eventually, if memories of the human realm had won him back from the fancies and fantasies of the court.

“I thought of terrible things,” he murmured. “We’d danced together all night and I wanted to think I’d be getting something more than the tickle of her fingertips and her lips.” He made a sound—a laugh without humor or a cry without tears—that grated like the broken edges of carved stone. “She teased me with glimpses of what might be, but I never imagined *this*.”

For a minute, they sat in silence. The wisps floated between the iron bars without touching.

The man reached through to clamp his hand over hers. “Can you make this all a bad dream?”

At the clammy chill of his skin, a dozen red worms seemed to squirm down her spine. “This time, it isn’t an illusion.”

“I want to go.”

“I might be able to get you out of the cell, but you can’t leave the court.” She eased out of his grip. “The queen’s magic is the only thing...”

“The only thing holding me together?” He snatched at her wingtip instead, holding on with more force than should still remain in him. “I wish what is left of me would just fall apart, and then I’d be gone.”

The crumpled edge of her wing ached, but she was frozen by the tear that welled up in the man’s hazel eye. Apparently the queen hadn’t taken everything from him. But of course, who would ever want to steal regret?

The wounds, the tear, the wistful words... Though the white stone hallway was nothing like the blood-soaked hunter den where the old lord had come Undone, Olette stiffened against the intrusive memory.

Except... The wing-torn whelp who became her hunter had wanted to fly again, and her knack—not just a wayward breeze, but a powerful yearning—had knit fae magic and sylfana wishes into his wing, just as it had loosed him from his chain. Even though Vaile had betrayed her and brought her back to the court, she had never once regretted freeing the broken hunter boy.

Could she do it again?

Hesitantly, she closed her eyes. From nowhere, a faint draft ruffled her lashes, and her eyelids fluttered with the effort to restrain herself from the urge to run from this man who had been led to his doom by a sylfana's gossamer promises. At least this time he could not follow his wicked dreams. She tightened her hands into fists, as if she could hold herself in place.

"I just wanted..." he murmured.

Of course the poor man had wanted; a sylfana had made him want. Now she had to deliver something real, not illusion. And if he wanted to leave the faedrealii, well, she could certainly empathize with that.

She summoned up the sensations she had pursued in the sunlit world, how she had felt when she was free, the wind under her wings...

The gust that whirled down the hall whipped her face with dust and pebbles and the stinging ends of her hair, hard enough to rattle the iron gate. Her clenched fists—and her eyes—sprang open in surprise.

And so did the gate.

But...how? She was fae, her magics ended where iron began.

No, it wasn't the iron that failed. The crumbling mortar had yielded to her knock, stone etched away by her wish for freedom. The gate sagged wide, and with a wild smile, she reached toward the man.

The dead man.

As she sat back hard against the wall, her knuckles glanced off the iron. The bitter bite of the metal, as if it were furious at her victory, pierced her. She bit back a scream, but the smell of seared skin made her eyes water and she clutched her hand to her chest.

The man had been dead enough before, considering all Anka had stolen, but something had remained as a spark in

his hazel eye. Now that too was gone, leaving him just another pile of dust and dirt in the abandoned cell block. And she had forgotten to ask his name.

“Is this how you wished to be gone?” The whisper of her breath set the wisps dancing. “Because this is not how I meant to free you.”

Was she the first sylfana ever to kill a man with her own hands? The court had its share of murderous fae, but its fairy princesses would never dream of such mayhem. Though Vaile had told her she had launched an exodus with her escape, she had never wanted to change so much that she became a killer herself.

Her eyes burned with the wind-flung dust and tears she would not allow to fall. No one would share her horror and guilt—except maybe a hunter who had killed his own lord.

Of course, Vaile had conjured other feelings in her she wasn't sure the fae even had words for...

Thinking of him, the way he'd held her, triggered a hot rush of yearning, and she clamped her arms and wings tight as a cocoon around her, as if she could ward off her own wishes.

She didn't want to want—not anymore.

Though everything in her wanted to flinch away, she looked at the husk of the man slumped against the iron bars. The queen's magic, which had animated him, was gone, and already his remains were crumbling into the exposed dirt between the tiles and broken stone.

This was her other choice. The poor man had his emotions stripped from him by force, but if she backed down, she would be giving hers away for free.

No, she didn't want the burning in her throat, the sick churning in her stomach as she risked reaching between the bars to stroke her fingers over the dead man's lashes, closing his eye before the worms claimed him. To avoid such ugliness, the fae had relinquished their true feelings to the queen in return for sheltering under the power of her illusions. But their sanctuary had become a prison.

The man's emotions had been stolen. The fae had deliberately forgotten theirs. Was she deluding herself to believe she had any other choice besides these two?

She could sit here beside her last victim until she too moldered, or...

Olette snapped her wings wide, which yanked her to her feet.

She had run away once. Maybe the time for running had passed.

Chapter 8

The court was restless. It breathed out of time, and the languid glory that was its specialty seemed to have morphed into an uneasy blend of crouched to pounce and poised to flee. The vaulted crystalline walls—the illusion du jour in the faedrealii—resonated with the edgy mood, like a thinly blown glass goblet about to shatter.

Even the will-o'-the-wisps were jittery, their normally drifting flight patterns spiking like a seismograph predicting the end of the world.

Vaile stalked the outer edges of the throne room, equidistant from his brethren patrolling nearby. The nearness of the queen's magic stripped them of their camouflaging hunter mist, so he kept his wings folded in a high, tight arc behind his head. The intimidation factor added by the talon-tipped vanes was worth the tension in his shoulders from holding his wings in suspension.

Whispers spooled out around him as he walked toward the throne room doors.

“Hunters...” he heard, like graveyard toadstools humping up behind his footsteps, trying to knock him off his path. “Filthy, dangerous... Shouldn't be in here... After the sylfana...”

He refused to listen to more.

Filthy was justification enough to bar hunters from the potent beauty of court. As for dangerous, well, some were just better at hiding it.

But they were right; he was dirty. Before he had been abruptly recalled to service the queen's gathering, he had been tracking a manticore. The half lion, half scorpion had slipped out through an unwatched gate. Although the man-headed creature was clever enough to sneak away unnoticed, that particular gate was unwatched because it opened to an ice field in Greenland. Vaile had found the desert-born manticore half frozen, and only the scorching fire of the blue-amber sun had

melted the wretched beast out of the tundra. But he had refused to consider euthanizing the creature, not when it begged for a second chance. Instead, he used almost all his gate spores to sprout a circle of lichens large enough to drag the manticore back to the faedrealii. Who was he to condemn the creature's hopeless but heartfelt desire to run under the desert sun?

The reminder of his own failings stabbed at him like the manticore's scorpion tail. With his leathers still dripping from the ice and tracking muddy boot prints behind him, his mood was every bit as foul.

So dirty, yes, and dangerous too... The fae were wise to avert their gazes and step back from his impatient circuit.

From his position a quarter way around the hall from the Steel Throne, he had only a sharply angled view of the enormous double doors. At the moment, the doors were fashioned into two half circles of shining wood etched with steel filigree, closed tight together like an inescapable spiderweb. Within the throne room, the glimmering veins of steel grew ever thinner until they converged on the throne itself. Some other time, the queen might conjure another look, but this one was a classic. Maybe she too felt the restlessness and hoped to keep the rabble in line with a reminder of her abiding power.

Vaile ran one finger under the edge of his studded hunter collar and flicked out a chunk of ice that had been melting down his chest, unnoticed. When had he gotten so cold?

He cut a glance toward the throne where Queen Ankha sat at the center of all those steel threads, appearing to beam with silvery light. She posed with her head tilted to one side, listening to her favorite courtier, the ylf who seemed to be trying to compensate for his rounded human-looking ears with the pompously high points of his collar. Streaks of silver decorated the queen's black hair, but that too was illusion; her beauty was ageless and infinitely sharper than the ylf's collar, a match to the net of honed diamonds that ringed her bared neck.

As a powerfully attractive fae and as his liege, she should have won all his attention. Still, his gaze skipped past to the grouping of her attendants. Undines, dryads, nymphs and the squat hobgnome who served as her chancellor stood arrayed on the tiers of risers that spread out around the throne.

But no Olette.

As if the ache in his shoulders wasn't bad enough, his chest tightened with misgivings. He hadn't seen her since the poppy field when she had turned her white-winged back on him and walked away, with crimson petals drifting behind her. The memory still burned in his mind.

He touched the blue amber pendant through the front pocket of his leather jeans. Giving her the necklace had been madness when she could have turned its power upon him. He hadn't needed the touchstone on her person to track her; his knack didn't require help. But at least the amber warned other hunters to stay away, that she had been claimed by one of their own. When she had thrown the necklace back at him, she had lost that protection.

The weight of the steel in his pocket seemed heavier than it should, and he half turned to adjust the coil of links.

Which left him facing the throne room doors just as they blew open.

Heavy as they were, their wood warped with the force of the blow. The steel filigree screamed in the sudden distortion. The hunter guarding the entry was thrown aside, while the nearest dozen fae stumbled backward, hair and wings and tails streaming in a tempestuous wind. Vaile inhaled the scent of ocean touched with a wild sweetness, like some exotic bloom cresting a tsunami.

Olette. He did not speak her name aloud, not in the midst of the treacherous crowd, but his heart lingered on every syllable.

Slowed by the tangle of gawkers, he pushed between the fae who had recoiled from the newcomer with panicked cries.

Olette. He might not have recognized her if he hadn't spent one night memorizing her every detail. What had happened to

his flighty sylfana? The butterfly-winged spirit had left him and returned as something...else.

The wind prowled like an unseen beast to lift the red-gold curls of her hair in a blazing halo and plaster the wintry-blue shift around her curves. The princess in pink had remade herself in fire and ice. The will-o'-the-wisps knew her though and whirled around her in a joyful spiral.

She stared toward the Steel Throne, her eyes bluer than any sky Vaile had ever flown, and his wings flared, instinctively—ecstatically—seeking the storm she had brought. The nearest fae scattered from the hunter mist that spun from his dark vanes.

He cleared only a few steps before the queen's voice rang out from behind him. "Hunters, stop her! She is Undone!"

Ankha had risen from her throne to point across the room, sending the ylf-man reeling back.

The accusation halted Vaile in his tracks, all the momentum leaving his muscles as if the destructive power of an amber sun had gone off within his bones.

Undone? Like the old mad Lord of the Wild Hunt? The knotted scar behind his shoulder cramped, half folding his vanes.

At the same time, Olette spread her wings. Against the wide-flung doors with their steel spiderweb filigree, the butterfly scales looked soft and fragile—not dangerous, as the Undoing implied, but endangered.

At the queen's command, a half-dozen hunters converged from the far points of the throne room on the lone sylfana. Several of them were too young to have witnessed the old lord's Undoing, and the new Lord Hunter had been away at the time, but he led the phalanx of killers with a brittle smile.

The gathered fae scrambled to clear the way, getting more *in* the way. In their haste, slip-sliding on jeweled heels or cloven feet, a few stumbled into Vaile. He pushed them aside roughly to keep his gaze pinned on Olette.

The chaos churned in waves around her silent form—as if she were oblivious to the queen’s charge of coming Undone, not to mention the charging hunters.

Vaile’s chest burned with the compulsion to cry out her name. He had found her, and he had lost her.

But here she was. Was his knack giving him one last chance to find his way to her?

He had learned to fear the Undoing even before he had lost the whelp’s chain. He had taken up other chains since—the hunter’s collar, the hounds’ leashes, the steel links of the amber sun—but it was that first chain that bound him still, in knots thicker than the scar that would have kept him from flying if not for a sylfana’s fearless touch.

He could not let her get away again.

With a hard snap, he straightened the remembered twist to his wing and launched himself over the heads of the fleeing fae.

The throne room, large though it was, offered little room for maneuvering. His trailing boots made the fae below duck and squeal. But the awkward hop put him between the other hunters and Olette. He landed with a solid thud and angled himself toward the throne, arms and wings outstretched to ward them away from each other. The hunters slowed their rush, and their lord stared at him expectantly, waiting no doubt for the violent undoing of the Undone.

Vaile could not force himself to look at Olette, though his body yearned toward hers. “Wait.” His voice cracked.

“Hail, hunter.” Across the empty crystalline hall, the queen raised her hand in an elegant gesture. A few dozen of her courtiers lingered near the throne, their personal illusions flickering with their unease. “Once again, you bring us the troublesome sylfana.”

He inclined his head. “My queen, I bring you nothing this time. My hunt is over.” He took a deep breath. “I have found what I was looking for.”

Slowly, he pivoted to face Olette. The distance in her eyes almost felled him.

When he had first flown the nighttime coast, seeking her, he had for a few frantic heartbeats lost track of where midnight-dark sky and boundless ocean touched. He had spiraled, out of control, before he found his bearings and righted himself.

He did not think he would be so lucky this time.

He lowered his wings, leaving only one hand outstretched toward her. “You,” he said quietly. “I found you.”

Her voice was even quieter when she answered, “It would be best for you to pretend you never had.”

From her shadowed gaze, he knew she meant not just as a hunter finds a runaway fae but the way, together, they’d found sweet release.

“I can’t forget,” he told her. “Do you remember you told me once, long ago, that I wouldn’t always feel your touch as I did then? You were right. I feel more.”

So softly they spoke, and still the word *feel* echoed around them as if it had stolen magic from the very air. Across the room, Queen Ankha descended from the Steel Throne.

Olette lifted her chin, and her smile at Vaile was cold, colder than an undine’s grave water, colder than arctic snow under a manticore’s poisonous quills. “How could you feel anything? I couldn’t even see through your glamour, much less touch you.”

“Maybe you didn’t see that I am a hunter, but you saw something more. Something I’ve never shown anyone.” The furious pressure of the approaching queen almost knotted his tongue. “You saw a way to my heart, which had never been touched. Until you.”

“A heart can’t be touched.” At the icy cruelty of Olette’s smile, the nearest hunter sidled back. “Not unless it is removed from the chest first.” The faintest crack appeared in her cold look when she gazed at Vaile. “As for your so-called heart? It was a lie.”

“No. You didn’t see what I was. But you saw *who* I am. And who I could be.”

“And who is that, hunter?”

“Yours. I would be yours.”

The remaining courtiers—who had drifted closer, drawn by the sentiments they had shunned and feared—loosed a whisper of sound, a sigh that vibrated the silver threads of the walls into a single music tone.

“You did touch my heart,” he promised her. “You made me love you.”

The doubt that turned down the corners of her mouth nearly shattered him. If she escaped him again, this time he would die; like a hunter who lost his prey would be torn apart by his own hounds, so his heart would be shredded. She wavered, as if buffeted by winds that touched only her. But he felt them too, tearing through his veins. His arm, though honed as the rest of him from centuries of flying and fighting, burned with the effort of reaching out. Maybe it would be easier to tuck tight and dive until every sensation was stripped away.

But then he wouldn’t have Olette. He would give her what she wanted—these consuming, dangerous feelings—even if he had to spin them out of the nothingness of his heart into something real.

Slowly, with her gaze locked on his, Olette raised her hand.

“No!” Behind him, the queen’s growl was more sinister than any hunter’s hound.

But it was the sound of glass whistling through the air that made him whirl.

The Lord Hunter stumbled into his hunters’ arms as Ankha shoved him away. The three-sided glass sword of the Wild Hunt beamed in her hand.

She angled the sword toward Vaile and Olette. “This farce ceases to amuse me.”

“Not a farce, my queen.” Vaile took a sidelong step to cover Olette with his body, but he kept his voice steady. “This is

true.”

“True love?” The virulence of Ankha’s sneer melted the diamonds around her neck. The droplets fell like tears only to congeal again as the temperature in the throne room plummeted. “A figment of your imagination. We sacrificed that to be what we are—powerful, glorious, forever. Fae.”

Vaile shook his head. “If we lost it, then I have found it again. Here.”

Ankha raised the sword. Its prismatic edges captured light just as it captured magic, and sliced rainbows all around them. A low, ominous drone pulsed from the glass. “That is nothing. Nothing!”

Her hiss curled up in an icy plume, and the prism went dark. The rainbows winked out, sucked into the glass.

Surrounded by suddenly hungry shadows, Vaile reached for the blue amber necklace. Its power had turned a nameless whelp into a hunter. Without it, he would be...

Well, if he did this right, he and Olette would be alive.

The sword flared with stolen light just as he whipped the chain from his pocket. The pendant arced upward like a blue shooting star.

And the pyramid point of the sword—hungrily drawn to magics—tracked its flight.

Ankha cursed. The Lord Hunter launched himself to her side, reaching for her hands to change the sword’s attack.

But the sword had already chosen its prey, and the fire that licked from its tip was brighter than a thousand amber suns.

The pendant disintegrated in a blue mist, surrendering its magic to the entrapping prism, but Vaile was already whirling away, reaching for Olette. In the stark light, his shadow was blacker than his spread vanes. Her white wings flared as she slapped her palm into his.

A hard wind lifted both of them and spun them between the twisted wreckage of the double doors. He stumbled into her

with a distinct lack of fae grace, feeling like an awkward whelp again, still seeking his wings.

Until she pulled him into her arms and her lips found his...

This, this *was* everything, everything he wanted, everything he had dreamed.

And it would be the last thing he knew before the queen's magic blasted them into oblivion.

He deepened the kiss, a wild dance of tongues since he would never have the chance to dance with her to the pipes and bells of the fae. Instead, the wind sang around them, whistling through the broken filigree of the doors. The wind lifted their wings, his heart, the edge of her skirt up to her thigh... He clamped his hand on her bare skin and pulled her hard into his body.

His pulse sang louder than the wind, and his blood burned hotter than any amber sun. Olette's wisps joined the dance, whirled by her knack. Their little white lights glimmered in the soft facets of the melted diamonds that were caught in the helix winding around them. Between the ruin of the flung doors, Vaile and Olette were caged in a shine of wisps and diamond and twisted steel.

The queen's fury lashed out again, sharpened by the glass sword, but the delicate web—hardly more than nothingness—that had sprung up at their kiss caught and scattered the blast of magic in all directions.

And shattered the sword.

The courtiers screamed and fled from the deadly shrapnel. Anka's shriek was louder yet as the shards of the prism remaining in her hand burned with black flames.

The wisps danced on, free as always.

Olette raised her hand to Vaile's cheek. "Want to run?"

"Only with you." He yanked the vial of gate spores from his pocket and scattered a hasty circle.

For a desperate heartbeat, he feared he had used too many on returning the manticore, that the crystal floor was too slick,

too desolate, for the gate to bloom, but before his eyes sprang up a circle of ivy. The leafy tendrils wove into the steel lattice. Through the barrier, the queen's cries sounded far away.

Olette touched the heart-shaped leaves. "Where does the gate open?"

"Someplace we can make our own magic."

Olette slipped her hand into his. "Take me there, Vaile, my love."

He kissed her, hard and quick. "I've been dreaming of taking you again, ever since that night. But I have loved you far longer than that."

She touched the curve of his lower lip, and her blue eyes glinted with promises of passion. "As I am yours." But she looked back over her shoulder between the wrecked doors. "We fae have given up our dreams for illusion. Are they all as lost as I was?"

"You might have been lost, but you found me. You would make an excellent hunter. Or maybe savior."

"I doubt the queen will see it that way."

"Her lies and stolen power can't last. I fear it is the court of the steel-born fae that will come undone in the end."

He took Olette's hand and slipped his last piece of blue amber—the ring—over her finger. He raised her hand to his lips, soothing the iron burn across her knuckles; that story would have to wait until they found their new sanctuary.

When the gate magic flared, she raised herself up to kiss him. Her fingers brushed along his jaw and dropped to his neck. The studded collar, long welded in place, sprang open, and he caught his breath.

She half closed her eyes, and the wind of her knock spread his wings with a caress from shoulders to talons. A few wayward wisps tickled under the vanes like bubbles. He had to smile. "I felt that."

Her answering smile lifted his heart as she stepped into his arms and crossed with him into the gate. "You caught me,

hunter. Just as I wished.”

Court of the Steel-Born Fae: Book 2

Mountain Man's Muse

Chapter 1

“...For the crime of treason against the faedrealii, the Court of the Steel-Born Fae, the punishment is—and seriously, this should surprise no one—death.”

As the hobgnome chamberlain made the pronouncement, Adelyn stared down at her clasped hands where the iron chains burned. True enough, everyone knew the penalty for treason. It was easy enough to remember. The same sentence was meted out for sedition, insubordination, noncompliance, obstructionism, incompetence, various forms of folly, and—sometimes—yawning in the presence of Queen Ankha.

So, no, Adelyn wasn't surprised. But terror squeezed her heart. With each frantic beat, crimson welled from her blackened wrists to smoke against the manacles. Even looking at the dull metal brought tears to her fae eyes.

Fae blood in every rainbow color—red like her own, yellow, green, purple, even black—had been shed in the queen's court. But Adelyn never imagined she would be the one in chains. She was best beloved of all the musetta who served as inspiration to the faedrealii courtiers. How had she fallen so far?

Though she could not flee the iron agony, one tear did escape. She ducked her head to hide her emotion, but the droplet traced a cool path down her cheek. For a heartbeat, it trembled at the edge of her jaw, refracting shards of light. The sparkles danced across the nearest courtiers who leaped back, swatting at the unseemly display as if they could knock away her forbidden expression of feeling.

The tear fell. It struck the marble floor not with a splash but a chiming ping.

The faceted emerald teardrop bounced away from her gilded slippers—less gilded after what seemed like an eternity in her iron-clad prison cell. Cursing courtiers scrambled from the stone's path. No one wanted to be touched by her disgrace.

Between the fleeing bodies darted one of the chamberlain's imps, freakishly fast on three crabbed limbs. It snatched the rolling emerald between its rubbery lips. A single bulbous eye boggled at her before the imp tipped back its head and swallowed. Then the wretched little monster burped.

No shining proof of her innocence would be allowed. Not that Adelyn believed her guilt or innocence was at all relevant.

“Take her away.” The chamberlain's peg-toothed sneer reflected in the blank screens of stolen smart phones strung around his scaly neck. “She is nothing to us now.”

As one, the courtiers in all their fae glamour furled their wings or tightened the luxurious falls of their cloaks or closed their eyes. Shutting her out. Their whispers chased to the far edges of the hall like the distant hiss of a retreating tide.

As if the terror wasn't bad enough. For a musetta like her—desired for her power of inspiration that compelled thoughts and dreams to dizzying heights—such rejection burned worse than iron.

Hands reached for her, but she strained away, tearing the spider silk of her veils. She had wrapped herself in the fluttering scarves—an age ago, it seemed—to emphasize her dusky-skinned, dark-haired beauty. Now the pale veils only served as a stark backdrop for her blood. “You can't send me away!”

“Silence,” the hobgnome barked. Everyone knew the last words of the condemned held particular power.

Drawing in a deep breath, she forced down the pain of her scorched wrists and the humiliation of exposing her knack of jeweled tears. Every reluctant eye was on her now. Musetta inspired music and poetry, art and science, the wildest flights of fancy.

But she could also inspire fear.

Adelyn took no pleasure in the stark faces, but she would not let them pretend as she had pretended she was untouchable. She swept her gaze around the hall, slashing at

the fae with a glare as edged as a shattered jewel. “Any of you could be next.”

Adelyn had time for nothing else as she was pushed into the dark corridor that led to her death.

Her tears—mere water now, her knack drained—blinded her. Unbalanced by her bound hands, she stumbled. The rip in her veils dipped forward over her breasts. Stupid gilded slippers had no traction.

A sudden burst of illumination flared beyond her tears.

“Musetta.” The voice of her looming death—low and rough, as she might have guessed six feet deep would sound—froze her in her tracks.

The queen might be capricious and terrifying, and her hobgoblin chamberlain was petty and horrendous, but the queen’s vizier existed in a dark realm all his own.

Adelyn closed her eyes, hoping death took her quickly. The vizier’s grim countenance was known to send courtiers into fits of madness. And those were fae who weren’t convicted of treason.

“Musetta, look at me.” A note of compulsion forced her eyes open.

She clamped her tongue between her teeth to stop herself from begging for mercy. The queen had no mercy. And no mercy’s name—at least as it was screamed by hopeless fae in their last moments—was Raze.

Swathed in a gray samite robe, his hulking figure was a drear wall, his glare equally gray above cheekbones as whetted as the exposed steel of the athame hanging from his belt. Amongst beings who could conjure any masquerade, his stark—and, frankly, uninspired—presentation seemed a mockery, as if he had never left the Iron Age behind. It vexed Adelyn’s musetta power to no ends; a muse did not do gray.

Not that she would say so aloud, not to Raze the Ruiner.

A glint in his half-closed eyes made her think he read her thoughts, despite her determined silence.

“Musetta.” His voice sliced, slowly and dagger-cruel, through the word as if he might trick—or torture—her into sharing her real name. With such precious insight he could twist her into whatever he wished. “You find yourself in desperate straits.”

She lifted her chin to an angle between elegance and disdain. “Straight as an executioner’s blade.”

He laughed. “The queen’s death sentences are—like most words from fae lips—open to interpretation.”

Adelyn bit her tongue again. She would not beg. As inspiration personified, she could not be moved by necessity or entreaty.

Though she longed to let her wrecked golden slippers move her far, far away.

The Ruiner crossed his arms over his chest, his gray-gloved hands gripping his biceps with knuckles aimed her way. “Don’t you wish to hear your options?”

She scowled at his malicious teasing. “Musetta I am, but I will not incite you to more enthusiastic methods of murder. Specifically, my murder.”

Raze drummed his fingers. “The queen wants you out of her sight. Death would do. But exile accomplishes much the same results.”

Exile? Her heart twisted in her chest. “Exactly the same results for me. I cannot leave the faedrealii.”

Raze snorted. “Many musetta have journeyed out of court. Where do you think humans find their inspiration?”

His offhand reassurance gave her no comfort. “I never wanted to inspire humans.”

“And yet you’ve done it so well,” Raze purred. He fingered the torn neckline of her veils. “You are everything a man could want to inspire him.”

She leaned away, holding her breath against the stink of lightning that clung to him. Out from the gap of his sleeve, a hairy gray spider as big as his hand scuttled over her breast.

She gasped as it pattered across her skin, but Raze's grip trapped her.

The spider gathered the edges of the tear. With a few pumps of its spinneret, it laced the rip, then it vanished up Raze's sleeve. Adelyn sagged back, and this time the vizier let her go.

He glanced over his massive shoulder. "William, come. And bring the key."

A hysterical sob congealed in Adelyn's throat. "Why is he here?"

"He wanted to see you off. And to tell you—"

William elbowed Raze aside as only one of the queen's lovers would dare. "Sweet muse, I had no idea it would end like this."

"You are fucking our queen," she snapped. "Yet you wrote a poem to my eyes. How else would it end?"

William's cherubic blonde curls bobbed as he ducked his head, though his ravenous gaze on her was anything but saintly.

Raze tsked at her. "Poor boy, he just couldn't help himself. You are musetta. You inspired him."

She never bothered with humans. Why waste the breath of inspiration on creatures that breathed only a hundred years or so? Making her place in the faedrealii was hard enough since musetta had no real value themselves except what they inspired in others. Now she fastened her gaze on the iron key dangling from William's fingers. She pitched her voice as musetta did, echoing the smooth slide of rich fabric or fine wine. "Free me, William."

William hesitated. As a mere human, he shouldn't have been able to resist her voice. Shouldn't have wanted to. But her influence had waned under the shackles and the fear that pulsed like her iron-poisoned blood.

Raze chuckled. "William wants to keep you here. He forgets a musetta can't be imprisoned."

William scowled at the vizier, bold in his passionate idiocy the way the queen preferred her human lovers. Somehow they kept that callow foolishness, no matter how long she ensnared them. “I know she can’t stay. Ankha is so angry.” Awareness flickered behind his eyes, then vanished in a fae haze. “But I’ll make her forget.”

Raze waved one hand. “Everyone forgets. Makes it damn hard to get anything done around here. But before you tra-la-la along, unlock the musetta.”

Adelyn couldn’t hold back a moan of relief when William fumbled at her bindings and the manacles fell away. The fae who had survived the Iron Wars were resistant to more refined versions of the ore, but even the steel-born fae avoided raw iron. Tucking her burned wrists against her belly, she glared at William. “Thank you. If only these ode-worthy eyes of mine had never glimpsed you.”

His mouth twisted. “Sweet muse—”

“You doomed me. Also, your cadence was off and your rhyming sucked toads.” She put all the musetta force into her voice. “Go.”

He went with a wrenching sigh, as if she had torn the exhalation from him.

Raze laughed again. “You are unkind, musetta.”

She held out one wrist in mute evidence.

The Ruiner shrugged. “I have nothing against cruelty. It might help in the task I’m giving you.”

Adelyn stared down at her slippers. “I don’t suppose you want to write a poem?”

“Hardly. I need you to find a thief.”

“I am no hunter.”

“All the hunters I have sent have...not returned. This particular thief is a hunter himself. He took one of the queen’s sylfaniia and is hiding in the sunlit world. I want you to find them.”

Adelyn shuddered. “If he kills your hunters—”

“He won’t kill you. Quite the opposite. Your helplessness will inspire him to bring you closer. When you find him, contact me. Ankha wants words with the missing hunter and his sylfana. Perhaps words of a poetic nature, though I doubt it.” He smiled, inviting Adelyn to share his amusement.

She never wanted to hear another poem ever. “Why would I help you?”

“Because you must, to end your exile and return to the faedrealii which justifies your existence. Your choice, musetta.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

[Elsa Jade](#), author of sexy shapeshifting romances, also writes paranormal romance, urban fantasy romance, and science fiction romance as [Jessa Slade](#) and sexy contemporary romance as [Jenna Dales](#). In all her incarnations, she believes in the transformational power of love and is thrilled to share her stories with like-minded readers.

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